

CD REVIEWS

Beethoven

The Complete Music for Piano Trio – 3

Piano Trio in E \flat op. 1 no. 1
Piano Trio in G op. 1 no. 2
Piano Trio in E \flat WoO 38

The Florestan Trio

Anthony Marwood *vn*, Richard Lester *vc*, Susan Tomes *pf*
Hyperion CDA67393 (72 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included. £13.99

To interpret and perform a great composer's op. 1 is not an easy task, especially not if it is Beethoven's. Almost automatically, one is inclined to underestimate compositions bearing the designation 'Opus 1' only because of our *post factum* awareness of the enormous stylistic evolution a composer has gone through in later decades. In many cases, indeed, 'Opus 1' compositions are not representative of the real qualities of their composers. Mozart's K1 for instance – an extremely simple minuet for pianoforte – has no other charms and merits than that it was written by a six-year-old boy. Haydn's op. 1 is somewhat more ambitious: stylistically and technically it is much more developed than Mozart's minuet but, even then, the importance of this cycle has less to do with its inherent artistic qualities than with Haydn's 'historical' contribution to the string quartet as a genre. Beethoven's op. 1, however, has a completely different status. All three piano trios have very high artistic standards and should by no means be considered as 'modest accomplishments' of an 'immature composer'. In contradistinction to Mozart and Haydn, Beethoven grew up in a cultural context in which a specific style – 'the classical style' – had almost reached its own apogee. Whereas Mozart's, and particularly Haydn's, early works emerged in a context of stylistic (and aesthetic) transformation, Beethoven's first compositions flourished in a period of cultural vigour. Therefore it is not surprising that all of Beethoven's Piano Trios op. 1 contain significant compositional characteristics that are handled with great mastery. A few examples can testify this: the launching of a main theme on a non-tonic function and the implications of this procedure for the retransition towards the 'double return' (op. 1/2, i); the beginning of a secondary theme on a dominant function (op. 1/2, iv); the substitution of more conventional harmonic patterns by unusual digressions in main theme structures (see the $\text{I}\flat^7 \rightarrow \text{IV}$ and subdominant-variants of the basic idea of op. 1/1, i); the sudden shift to an (enharmonic) flat submediant area in the context of a coda(-like) episode (op. 1/1, iv); the significant intensifying of the *gran espressione* character in the slow movements (including the elaboration of greater chord density) (op. 1/2, ii); the attenuation of the beginning of the recapitulation because of the

obsessive continuation of developmental motion (op. 1/2, iv); the considerable reworking of recapitulations (op. 1/1, iv; op. 1/2, iv) and the implied creation of structural ambiguity (op. 1/1, iv), and so on. All these characteristics are developed without mannerism and with great emotional power and impact. As such, they present a composer, that, at least from an eighteenth-century point of view (that is: without a notion of his later artistic 'maturation'), already represented the highest norms of compository creativity at its time. Especially fascinating is Beethoven's early feeling for structural ambiguity and its implications for the sensations of hearing. A magnificent example is the recapitulation of the Finale of the first trio. The secondary theme group is broken open at bar 313 to create an apparent coda-area, instead of going straight forward to the closing theme. This area, including a 'typical' excursion towards the Neapolitan \flat II-zone (bars 342–357), leads back to $E\flat$ and to a completely unexpected re-presentation of the secondary theme in bar 360. The re-entry of the secondary theme logically conflicts with the former and literally 'heard' hypothesis of a coda-zone. Thereafter, the restated secondary theme leads towards the closing zone, which seems to begin in bar 394. However, the beginning of the closing zone is not univocal: bar 394 is 'announced' as the restatement of the closing theme – because of the structural parallel of the preceding bars with the analogous episode in the exposition (bar 92) – but it does not restate this material properly and therefore rather seems to enlarge the secondary theme area once more. In bar 410, then, a new attempt to launch the closing theme is presented, this time paralleling the basic harmony and the characteristic jumping motif in the first violin from the exposition. The structural parallel is quite obvious, but at the same time the most melodic characteristic of the closing theme (originally in the cello) is still lacking. In the recapitulation, this element only comes in in bars 430ff., thus exposing the 'incompleteness' of the former beginnings of the closing theme and creating a kind of structural confusion between the 'proper ending' of the secondary theme zone and the 'proper beginning' of the closing theme area. After the final presentation of the closing theme, there is a rather restricted elaboration of the closing zone with coda-features, but these cadential additions do not counterbalance the coda-like expansion after the first presentation of the secondary theme in the recapitulation. Consequently, there is not only a fusion within the recapitulation section itself (secondary theme vs. closing theme) but also on a higher structural level, between the recapitulation and the coda!

In contrast to many other recordings of Beethoven's early piano trios, the Florestan Trio has deliberately opted for an approach that is not 'retrospective'. They do not attempt to interpret and perform the 'young Beethoven' through our knowledge of the later one, but present the music, as far as possible, within the 'actual' context from the end of the eighteenth century. Of course, the interpretation is 'retrospective' in as far as it is on modern instruments but, apart from that, it is (almost) completely free from any romanticism. Even in the slow movements, which sometimes show off explicit romantic inclinations (especially op. 1/2, ii), the players hold to a general aesthetic of clearness and strength. This strength of course engenders its own emotional logic and expression, and for listeners who are able to experience more subtle and introverted gradations of expression, this approach delivers a continuous stream of purified sensations. The Florestan Trio play music from within a very well circumscribed (though latent) stylistic perspective, which creates general unity and diversification within this unity at the same time. Moreover, they evince a great analytical awareness (or intuition) of Beethoven's score, more specifically its inherent motivic relationships.

Sometimes this comes to the fore in an almost explicit manner, though without pedantry. Most interesting are the transitions from the scherzo movements to the finales in both trios. The hesitating start of the Presto of op. 1/1 almost grows out of the *ritardando* of the coda of the foregoing Scherzo. To elucidate this quite Haydnesque way of ‘cranking up’ the Presto-theme, the Florestan Trio almost starts the final movement as an *attacca*. By doing so, they underscore, in a way, an ongoing interpretation of the (short) Scherzo as being at least as much an ‘introduction’ to the Presto as a movement in itself. (The motivic relationships between both movements (for example iv, bars 173ff. and iii, bar 2) in any case provides supplementary evidence to this analytical hypothesis.) In the second trio, the relatedness between the closing movements is even more explicit: the opening chords of the Presto are identical to those of the conclusion of the Scherzo. It is impossible of course to overlook this relationship, but the Florestan Trio adjusts the tempo of both movements in such a way that the Presto starts as a logical continuation of the Scherzo. These kinds of structural and motivic delicacies are characteristic and representative of the refinement of the Florestan Trio’s general approach. But also, on the surface of the interpretation, the listener’s attention is constantly sharpened by the lucidity of this performance. The clarity of the chromatic fill-ins of the descending scales in the op. 1/1 Presto, for instance, or the crystalline frenzy of the repeated-note motif in the finale of the second trio; the simple straightforwardness of the *cantabile* melodies, and so on: these are just a few examples of ‘choices’ that contribute to a performance equal to the music itself.

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Eichendorff Lieder

Lieder to texts by Joseph, Freiherr von Eichendorff (1788–1857) by Felix Mendelssohn, Robert Franz, Robert Schumann, Aribert Reimann, Hugo Wolf, Alexander von Zemlinsky, Erich Korngold, Hans Pfitzner and Othmar Schoeck.

Wolfgang Holmair *bar*, Imogen Cooper *pf*
Philips 464 991-2 (78 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included. £12.99

The art of lieder-singing might be said to require a sensibility that never fails to delight in a familiar stock of poetic images, but finds through each performance a new detail with which to move, surprise or even disturb us. By presenting a programme of songs all taken from Eichendorff’s poetry, Holmair and Cooper allow us to luxuriate in images of moonlit forests, deserted castles and haunting serenades. Such scenes are particularly suited to Holmair’s velvet tones at their lightest, and to Cooper’s astonishing range of pianistic nuances. Hearing some of the delicacies on offer here, such as the performance of Wolf’s ‘Verschwiegene Liebe’ or of Schumann’s ‘Mondnacht’, it is tempting to treat this CD like a rare box of chocolates, and to relish each song for its immediate evocation of mood. Eichendorff was probably the poet most responsible for establishing the ideals of