

In recent issues, I’ve been extolling the virtues of the Trio *Élégiaque* for its five-disc Beethoven piano trios *intégrale* on Brilliant Classics, and not only for some of the best playing I’ve heard in these works, but for truly the most complete survey of the composer’s output for this combination of instruments.

Here now we have what is labeled “Beethoven Complete Works for Piano Trio, Volume 1” from the Swiss Piano Trio, another estimable ensemble I’ve had occasion to shower with praise—see reviews under Mendelssohn in 34:6, Tchaikovsky in 36:3, Schumann in 36:6, and Edward Franck in 38:1. It remains to be seen, however, if the Swiss Piano Trio’s Beethoven compilation will be as complete as the Trio *Élégiaque*’s, but considering that I’ve already acclaimed the Swiss Piano Trio one of the best currently active ensembles of its makeup on the planet, I expected nothing less than masterful performances of Beethoven’s first and last piano trios paired on this disc, and nothing less than that is what I got.

When it comes to the “Archduke” Trio, as regular readers are bound to know, I judge a performance based almost wholly on the closing moments of the *Andante* variations movement. For me, this is music in which the fingers of Adam and God reaching out to touch each other in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling panel actually meet. It’s one of those sublime Beethoven moments in which feelings of exultation, ecstasy, and awe come together to convey a sense of beatific bliss, as the veil parts and we’re permitted, if only for a brief moment, to know the unknowable. This, at least, is the effect the music has on me beginning in bar 141 at the *Tempo I* marking, continuing through that breathtaking cello crescendo in bar 172, to the right-hand piano octaves beginning in bar 178.

I know the initial movement marking is *Andante cantabile ma però con moto*, but the opening measures establish the mood, and they have to project a feeling of reverence and wonderment at the mystery that will be revealed at the end. Too slow isn’t good, but too *con moto* is worse, for it diminishes the sense of solemnity. Beethoven’s *ma però* instruction is syntactically strange, being an almost self-cancelling redundancy. *Ma* means “but,” *però* means “though.” Why not just *Andante cantabile ma con moto*, or *Andante cantabile però con moto*? Instead he writes “but though,” as if he’s a bit hesitant about the *con moto*: “But though...hmm...maybe I’m not so sure about the ‘with motion’ part after all.”

This is how I take it, and apparently so do the Swiss Piano Trio’s players, for their opening is quite broad and suffused with just the sort of reverence and wonderment I want to hear. Obviously, we’re on the same page when it comes to the interpretation of this movement. It remains only for the players to send a shiver up my spine in the movement’s concluding bars, and this they do with unerring musical instinct. Not surprisingly, the ensemble’s reading of the rest of the trio is equally perceptive and penetrating. I’d easily rate this as a great “Archduke,” surely the best since I stumbled upon the Trio Trieste’s 1959 recording, reviewed a year ago in 37:6.

Beethoven’s very first published piano trio, the EI-Major, op. 1/1, is not, of course, a work possessing anywhere near the same breadth of vision and depth of insight as does the “Archduke” Trio, but in terms of its technical demands on the players and its integration of the three instruments as more or less equal partners, it already represents an advance over the piano trios of Haydn and Mozart, at least in the exposition and working out of its materials, if not in its communicative power. The music, though, definitely makes a statement; it says, “I am Beethoven, and I’m here.” The themes, rhythmic patterns, and piano figuration are bold, masculine, commanding, and authoritative, and that’s how the Swiss Piano Trio plays the piece.

Put another one in the win column for this outstanding ensemble, which slowly but surely is making its way through the standard piano trio literature. Very strongly recommended.

Jerry Dubins