

Mendelssohn: Piano Trios Nos. 1 & 2

The two Mendelssohn piano trios are often seen in recital—they are beloved by both performers and audiences alike—and are often paired on recordings. They remain, even today, two of the most popular piano trios of all time and rightfully so; they are perhaps the two most important works composed in their genre in the first half of the 19th century, between those by Beethoven and Schubert on one end and Brahms on the other. In a sense they are wholly representative of the best of Mendelssohn's style as well: They are filled with passages of strict counterpoint; they use chorale tunes, bridging the sacred and secular genres; they make use of instrumental song-without-word types for their slow movements; and their respective scherzos contain some of the composer's finest elfin music. Certainly among the composer's later works these are some of the finest.

Perhaps this is why I had high hopes for the Leibniz Trio, an ensemble that made a huge impression on me with its previous recording of works by Dvorák, Martin, and Finlay. In certain respects the group does not disappoint: the members breathe well together, they meticulously shape the musical lines, and they are ever-careful in their close attention to details, especially of articulation. Where the group truly impressed me in its previous recording, however, was with how well it captured the spirit of the music. Their Martin and Dvorák, in particular, were emotionally riveting, but the Mendelssohn seems to be a bit more restrained in character. Does the ensemble view the composer more in the vein of a Victorian-era Classicist than a full-blown Romantic artist? Perhaps so. The sometimes cool approach is not always misplaced; the simple and mellifluous character of the lyrical sections—I'm thinking of the opening of the beautiful slow movement of the D-Minor Trio, for example—are more welcome than the overly saccharine versions of some groups. What I miss, however, is the drive in the outer movements and the lucidity and playfulness in the scherzi. I miss the energy that the Rubinstein/Heifetz/Piatigorsky Trio brings to the D-Minor's stormier passages and the sparkling clarity and elfin grace they bring to the scherzo movement. The C-Minor Trio fares better overall in its serious yet subdued style, but even here there is room for more—more tension, more release, more intensity, and more contrast. If one is looking for a spectacular performance of the D-Minor Trio, stick with the aforementioned Rubinstein/Heifetz/Piatigorsky recording; if one is looking for fine performances of both, I still prefer the Florestan Trio's or the Vienna Piano Trio's recordings.

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