

Mendelssohn: Piano Trios Nos. 1 & 2

Unlike revenge, humble pie is a dish best served warm, and one of my more recently baked pies—a review of Mendelssohn’s over-recorded piano trios by the Atos Trio on CPO (Fanfare 35:3)—is not long out of the oven. In it, I said, “Appealing as Mendelssohn’s trios are, they’re not the sort of profound masterworks that invite or admit of much presentational latitude. In fact, most performances I’m familiar with split hairs when it comes to tempos and general interpretive approach. In other words, they all sound pretty much alike. Translation? Close your eyes, pick a recording at random, and it’s virtually guaranteed to be not only a good one but one that’s very similar to just about any other one you might have picked.”

I honestly didn’t think another ensemble could put a spin on these two works so fresh and exciting that I would have to retract that statement, but here comes the not yet 10-year-old Leibniz Trio—Hwa-Won Pyun, violin; Lena Wignjosaputro, cello; and Nicholas Rimmer, piano—to make me eat my words. Formed in Hannover in 2005, the ensemble takes its name from German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who worked in Hannover and is buried there. This is only the ensemble’s third album and it’s a stunner.

I’ve mentioned before that more than 20 versions of Mendelssohn two trios are sitting on my shelf and that just between Burton Rothleder and me, we’ve probably reviewed nearly that many. In most instances, I’ve found myself in agreement with Rothleder’s assessments, but there was one notable exception, and I call attention to it now because it’s relevant to the performances at hand. Rothleder included the recent Perlman/Ma/Ax Sony CD on his 2010 Want List, claiming for it “not just outstanding but truly astounding results.” Having acquired the disc on my own, I noted in another review of the trios by the Swiss Piano Trio in 34:6 that in comparing a number of versions, I found the Perlman/Ma/Ax performances “sluggish, lumpish, and heavy-handed, their slowness in comparison to others quite easily proved by the timings. For me, they miss Mendelssohn’s quicksilver pulse and puckish humor.”

In contrast, the Leibniz Trio sounds absolutely winged. I am simply astonished at how fast the ensemble takes these works. The players polish off the first movement of the D-Minor Trio a full minute faster, and the first movement of the C-Minor Trio a minute and a half faster, than Perlman, Ma, and Ax, in each case taking Mendelssohn’s “agitato” and “con fuoco” markings quite literally.

As I browsed through the timings of other versions, I discovered that indeed the Leibniz Trio comes very close to setting a speed record in the D-Minor Trio’s first movement, being bested by the Wanderer Trio and the Amsterdam Trio, both by exactly five seconds; at 9:45, the Leibniz Trio comes within 22 seconds of the aptly named Trio Con Brio’s speed record of 9:23 for the first movement of the C-Minor Trio among versions I have.

But what makes the Leibniz Trio’s performances sound as fleet as they do is, in large part, the result of how the players articulate phrasing and dynamic swells and attenuations. Playing this fast is impressive, as long as you hit all the right notes, but playing this fast, while hitting all the right notes, and still finding time to breathe with the natural flow of the melody, and to inflect and shape phrases according to the rising and falling crescendos and decrescendos of Mendelssohn’s flumes and flurries of notes is nothing less than a remarkable achievement. And yet the Leibniz Trio isn’t satisfied with remarkable; the players sweep right on to the miraculous. Not a bow change, let alone an abrasive sound, is to be heard. Execution is swift and as mercurial, gossamer, and elfin as Mendelssohn could have asked for in the trios’

scherzo movements.

Not to be overlooked either is that Genuin's engineers have managed to balance the recording so that the piano doesn't overwhelm the violin and cello, as it often does in these two scores. The recording is perfectly blended yet at the same time somehow absolutely transparent.

I'd have thought before receiving this release for review that 20-plus versions of Mendelssohn's piano trios were more than enough, and that there was little likelihood of yet another one that could possibly have anything new to say. I was wrong. This one is special and urgently recommended.

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