

Piano Trios with Andsnes & Tetzlaffs - numerous reviews

SCHUMANN Piano Trios: Nos. 1–3. 6 Canonic Etudes, op. 56.
Fantasiestücke, op. 88 • Christian Tetzlaff (vn); Tanja Tetzlaff (vc);
 Leif Ove Andsnes (pn) • EMI 94180 (2 CDs: 121:56) - Fanfare -
 Dubins

Assuming my review of Schumann's trios with Ilya Gringolts, Dmitry Kouzov, and Peter Laul on Onyx made it into the last issue (Fanfare 35:1), you'll already know the verdict on that set vs. this one with the Tetzlaff siblings and Leif Ove Andsnes. Even though I had the current EMI release in hand at the time, I didn't review it directly because I'd acquired it on my own. Still, I used it for comparison purposes and in doing so found the Onyx set wanting on a number of counts. Chief among them was that Onyx took two discs to give us the three trios and nothing else for a total of 83 minutes of music and at twice the cost of the EMI set, which fills out its two discs with nearly 40 minutes more of material and was selling, when I checked, for half the price. Go figure.

Now that the EMI set has been officially sent for review, I will offer some additional thoughts. In a strange reversal of the guilty-by-association construct, when it comes to less than top-drawer works written by great composers, we tend to indulge in the innocent-by-association syndrome. If the piece has a name like Mozart or Beethoven attached to it, we accord it undue attention and deference, even if it's a mere scrap or a scribble on a napkin. If the same piece had been composed by Fluffernutter (we have subscriber David English to thank for naming one of music history's neglected anonymities), we would dismiss it as unworthy of a second hearing. Never has this been demonstrated more clearly than by a work recently reviewed in these pages, the "Jena" Symphony by Friedrich Witt. Between the time it was believed to be by Beethoven and the time its true composer was revealed, not a single note in the score changed. But what did change was critical opinion, which plummeted, simply because Witt wasn't Beethoven. If the work had in fact turned out to be by Beethoven, no one would have dared to badmouth it, and there might well be 100 recordings of it to choose from.

This idea of how authorship affects our judgment of musical works kept coming back to me as I listened again to Robert Schumann's three piano trios. As works of their type go, they're really not on the same level of emotional communicativeness as Beethoven's "Archduke" Trio, Schubert's great E^b-Major Trio, Brahms's B-Major Trio, or Shostakovich's E-Minor Trio; nor are they as cleverly crafted and tuneful as Mendelssohn's D-Minor Trio or as imaginatively original as Dvořák's "Dumky" Trio. To my ear, there's something effortful about Schumann's trios, as if he's trying to summon inspiration instead of inspiration summoning him. There's also an

awkwardness in the writing that thickens the textures and doesn't allow the instruments to sing naturally.

To be sure, there are moments of exquisite beauty, as in the slow movements of the D-Minor and F-Major Trios. The latter, in fact, recalls not only in mood but in actual contour of its melody the breathtaking slow movement of the E^b-Major Piano Quartet, op. 47. But the intensity and continuity of the musical argument are not maintained. Everything about these trios causes me to think that Schumann was laboring to recapture the spontaneity and natural inspiration of his chamber-music miracle year, 1842, which produced the three string quartets, the *Fantasiestücke* for piano trio included in the present set, the Piano Quintet, and the Piano Quartet. By the time he came to compose the first of his two numbered piano trios just five years later, one already detects signs of decline in his creative powers.

It wasn't a steady downhill ride from there by any means. Flashes of inspiration were still to come—*Waldszenen* (1848–49), the *Konzertstück* for four horns and orchestra (1849), the “Rhenish” Symphony (1850), the Cello Concerto (1850). But turning again to the medium in 1851 to write his Piano Trio No. 3 in G Minor, Schumann produced a work that has been criticized for its “discursive structure and paucity of invention, an artifact of a composer experiencing creative exhaustion.” Note author David Threasher, however, defends the work as “perhaps the most intricately contrapuntal of the three trios, with a rich web of unifying motifs spread out within and between its four movements.”

I would not wish anyone to think I'm saying that Schumann's piano trios are third-rate works, but I am saying that neither are they first-rate based on what we know Schumann was capable of, nor would we likely be seeing two brand-new sets of them by major artists released almost simultaneously if they'd been written by *Fluffernutter*.

The more I listen to the two versions side by side, the more I like this Tetzlaff/Andsnes effort and the less I like the Gringolts/Kouzov/Laul set, which confirms the opinion expressed in my prior review. It seems to me that the Gringolts/Kouzov/Laul readings play to the very weaknesses in these scores by taking an episodic, loosely organized approach to Schumann's musical discourse, while the Tetzlaffs and Andsnes play to the strengths of Schumann's writing by adopting a more tightly organized and coherent approach to the architecting of the music's structure and formal points of articulation. Also, I find the Tetzlaffs and Andsnes better disciplined in their technical execution, more vibrant in tone, more touchingly throbbing in passages of heightened emotional passion, and overall better recorded.

Add to these merits the inclusion of Schumann's gorgeous *Fantasiestücke* from the earlier miracle year of 1842 and his *Six Pieces in Canonic Form*, originally for pedal piano or organ, arranged for piano trio by Theodor Kirchner—all for practically half the price of the stingily filled and less well-recorded Onyx set—and methinks it's a no-brainer. Schumann's piano trio music has been well served in the past by the Beaux Arts and Florestan trios, but I doubt they'll be any better

served in the near future than by Tetzlaff, Tetzlaff, and Andsnes. Jerry Dubins
This article originally appeared in Issue 35:2 (Nov/Dec 2011) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

AllMusic Review Rating: 4 1/2*/5*

Schumann: Complete Works for Piano Trio Review by Mike D. Brownell

Though often maligned as being less inventive examples of the composer's output, Schumann's piano trios are nonetheless important steps in his chamber music development and shining examples for his endless penchant for incorporating song-like melodies into any medium. Schumann did not turn to the genre until relatively late in his career -- 1842 -- and even then only in a set of four miniatures that he later revised and published as Op. 88. The first formal piano trio did not emerge until 1847, after the two famous trios of Mendelssohn and the increasingly popular trio of his wife, Clara. In total, Schumann turned to the piano trio three times. This EMI disc features the three formal trios along with the Op. 88 *Fantasiestücke* and the Theodor Kirchner piano trio arrangement of the Op. 56 *Études*; performing are pianist Leif Ove Andsnes and siblings Christian (violin) and Tanja (cello) Tetzlaff. Unlike some unions of prominent solo performers for the occasional chamber music collaboration, Andsnes and the Tetzlaffs form a satisfyingly cohesive ensemble that could rival many long-standing trios. Schumann's trios thrive on energetic, driven performances and that is precisely what is offered here. Even the slow movements are pushed ahead to avoid even a hint of stagnation. Besides brilliantly matching technical components such as pitch, articulation, and dynamics, trio members also blend well musically; pacing and phrasing are organic and unified throughout. The only possible negative here is one of balance; surprisingly, the violin is sometimes a bit domineering, at times obscuring the cello.

Robert SCHUMANN (1810-1856) - MusicWeb Review Complete Works for Piano Trio

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 63 (1847) [31:16]

Piano Trio No. 2 in F major, Op. 80 (1847) [25:47]

Six Études in Canonic Form, Op. 56 (arr. Theodor Kirchner) (1845)
[17:58] Piano Trio No. 3 in G major, Op. 110 (1851) [28:06]

Fantasiestücke for piano, violin and cello, Op.88 (1842) [18:26]

Leif Ove Andsnes (piano); Christian Tetzlaff (violin); Tanja Tetzlaff (cello)

rec. 24-26 September 2009, 15-18 May 2010, Østre Fredrikstad

Kirke, Gamlebyen, Fredrikstad, Norway
EMI CLASSICS 0941802 [75:15 + 46:41]

This double CD set of Schumann's *Complete Works for Piano Trio* is a welcome addition to the chamber music catalogue. The trio prove to be fine ensemble giving both stirring and satisfying performances. There is a something very natural about the musicianship on show here.

Schumann's works for Piano Trio were greatly inspired by the chamber works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Schubert - all great masters that he passionately revered. Composed in 1842 the little suite of *Four Character Pieces* was Schumann's earliest work in the genre. He later revised it for publication in 1850 as his *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 88. It is an appealing and rewarding score, light and melodic in texture. The first piece is the shortest - a tender yet rather serious *Romanze*. A far lengthier piece, the *Humoreske* is light-hearted and buoyant with a touch of seriousness. Like a gentle dialogue the violin and cello play a delicate *Duet* over sensitive piano accompaniment. I enjoyed the joyous reverie and march-like rhythms of the *Finale*.

For a library version of the *Fantasiestücke* I can enthusiastically propose the 2002 Berlin account from Martha Argerich, Gidon Kremer and Mischa Maisky. The starry cast performs with spontaneity, swiftness and great zeal on Deutsche Grammophon 463 700-2. (c/w Brahms *Piano Quartet No. 1*, Op. 25 with Yuri Bashmet, viola)

In 1845 Schumann composed his *Six Études (Studies) in the Form of Canons for Organ or Pedal Piano*, Op. 56. Schumann's friend Theodor Kirchner later arranged these for piano trio. Light, varied and enjoyable pieces the breezy first is quite lovely. *Étude two* is tender, a touch demure and the contrasting *third* is melodic and expressive with a distinct sighing quality. The *fourth* is a charming romantic song, the highly rhythmic *fifth* piece is dance-like followed by the *sixth*, a heart-breaking elegy heavy with loneliness.

Schumann composed his four movement *Piano Trio No. 1* in 1847. He gave his wife Clara the score as a present for her twenty-eighth birthday. This is the longest, most symphonic and most reflective in character. It is regarded by many as the greatest of the three. Clara recorded in her diary that, "*The first movement is one of the most beautiful that I know.*" The appealing opening feels symphonic in texture with a windswept and restless ambience. The *Scherzo* swells with forward momentum. Its relatively calm centre soon gives way to the return of the surging writing. Like an extended lament the third movement exudes a deeply aching melancholy. The boldly resolute *Finale* is more positive and ebullient.

It was typical of Schumann to follow one successful work with another in the same genre. He began preliminary work on his four movement *Piano Trio No. 2* before he had finished the *D minor*, Op. 63. In her diary Clara noted, "*I love it passionately and keep on wanting to play it!*" The high-spirited opening evokes a sense of summer and open spaces. The rapturous slow movement is highly appealing. Agreeable and somewhat delicate the music feels rather too slow for a *Scherzo*

more in the manner of a *Minuet*. A breezy *Finale* with a curious hesitancy increases in speed but is soon reined back in.

Following the *F major Piano Trio* it was four years before Schumann in 1851 wrote his four movement *Piano Trio No. 3*, Op. 110. The amiable and high-spirited score made quite an impression on Clara who commented that, "*It is unique, full of passion, through and through...*" Schumann dedicated it to his friend the composer Niels Gade. In the opening movement the highly passionate, sweeping lines carry the burden of anxiety. Refined and sensitive the second movement has a stormy central section that rudely interrupts the mood before the gentle dance returns. A curiously paced and agitated *Scherzo* contains swiftly changing tempi and moods. The *Finale* overflows with joy and uplifting bursts of energy, however a certain restlessness is never far away.

For alternative accounts of Schumann's three *Piano Trios* I can recommend the exceptional set from the eminent Beaux Arts Trio. Recorded in 1971 at La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland the polished trio play with remarkable liveliness and refinement. Now over forty years old these evergreens belie their age with the recording remaining extremely impressive (Philips 456 323-2 c/w *Piano Quintet*, Op. 44 and *Piano Quartet*, Op. 7).

The accompanying booklet contains a fine essay from David Threasher.

It is pleasing to have such fine accounts from the Andsnes-Tetzlaff trio but they do not replace some of the more established versions. Even so the music is closely recorded, warm with a well balanced sound quality.

Michael Cookson