

RÖNTGEN String Trios Nos. 1–4 • Lendvai Str Tr • CHAMPS HILL 068
(60:47)

RÖNTGEN String Trios Nos. 5–8 • Lendvai Str Tr • CHAMPS HILL 087
(69:09)

RÖNTGEN String Trios Nos. 13–16 • Offenburg Str Tr • NAXOS 8.573384
(73:07)

It wasn't too terribly long ago, in a review of string trios by Ernst Naumann and Wilhelm Berger in issue 35:3, that I found myself musing on the scarcity of 19th-century works for the conventional complement of violin, viola, and cello. But for a scattering of examples by Schubert, Herzogenberg, Reinecke, and Sibelius, I noted that there were no trios by Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, or Dvořák for that combination of instruments.

In one fell swoop, the simultaneous arrival of these three new CDs threatened to more than double the inventory of 19th-century string trios I'd identified, raising the fear that I'd once again stepped in it by advancing a grand fallacy. Surely, I would have to issue a retraction of my previous assertion. But no, it turns out that I don't have to recant what I said after all; for in perusing the composition dates of these 12 Röntgen trios, I found that not one of them, not even the earliest, was written prior to 1915, thus making them products of the 20th century, not the 19th. Their style and musical vocabulary, however, tell a different story, for Röntgen (1855–1932) was one of a number of "holdovers" or "holdouts" from the extended Brahms circle of late 19th- and early 20th-century German Romantic composers that remained largely uninfluenced by the Second Viennese School and other contemporary "isms" of the day. Ferdinand Thieriot, Theodor Kirchner, Wilhelm Berger, Robert Kahn, and Max Bruch were among those, along with Röntgen, who persevered in pursuing a rich, fully ripened, classically-oriented Romantic aesthetic into the 20th century.

Up until a decade or two ago, Julius Röntgen was a forgotten figure. If the family name was recognized at all, it was likely for Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen, a relative of Julius, who, working as a physicist at Munich University, discovered x-rays, a discovery that earned him the first Nobel Prize awarded for physics, in 1901. In recent years, however, *composer* Röntgen has resurfaced, and in a fairly big way. Many works from his extensive catalog of symphonies, concertos, and chamber music have been newly recorded, and quite a few of them have been reviewed in past issues of the magazine. As often happens though, the excitement of coming upon an untapped gold mine soon deflates when what shows up in the

pan turns out in large portion to be iron pyrite. A consensus began to emerge that, despite genuine nuggets here and there, Röntgen's natural talent was not of Mozart's protean endowment to enable him to write as much music, and apparently as quickly, as he did, and have it all, or even mostly, be of the highest quality.

Now and then, I've received Röntgen CDs for review that momentarily convinced me he was the real deal, an authentic genius. But then there came his Symphony No. 18, which I reviewed in 32:6, and which struck me as the musical equivalent of a whoopee-cushion with its flatulent blasts on the bass drum and cymbal-crashing pratfalls.

And now on three CDs—two of them labeled Volumes 1 and 2 on Champs Hill which are obviously the first in a complete survey, and one apparently a standalone on Naxos labeled *The Late Trios*—we have 12 of Röntgen's 16 surviving string trios. At first I couldn't help but wonder why any composer would write so many string trios (except Haydn, and *his* were mostly for baryton, viola, and cello), but after reading the liner notes to these new releases, I understood the reason. Fifteen of the trios (Nos. 2–16) were composed between 1918 and 1930, each of them in just a few days; recall my comment above about how quickly Röntgen wrote. In the finest sense of the word, the trios are *Hausmusik*, written to be played at home by Röntgen and his two sons. From this it should not be construed that these are slight or easy pieces. Frankly, they contain some of the most beautiful music by Röntgen I've heard, and based on some of the scores' technical demands, one would have to conclude that the Röntgen boys were quite accomplished players on their instruments.

Some of the trios bear referential sobriquets; for example, the Trio No. 2 in A Minor is nicknamed "Dvořák" for its quotation of the opening orchestral flourish of Dvořák's A-Minor Violin Concerto. Other trios, such as No. 15, sport fanciful movement titles, its fourth movement tagged, "Finale automobilistico," for the Fiat 509A Torpedo Röntgen's son Engelbert purchased while on European holiday with his wife. Engelbert at the time was principal cellist in the New York Metropolitan Opera. The company must have paid quite handsomely in 1929 to enable him and his wife to book a cruise to Europe, purchase an expensive high-performance vehicle, and then tool around Germany, France, Switzerland, and northern Italy with papa Julius and his wife in tow.

The Naxos disc claims world premiere recording status for the trios 13–16. Champs Hill makes a similar claim for the trios 2–8 in a foreword to the booklet note, signed by the Lendvai String Trio's members in which they say that "none of these works has been performed in public, let alone recorded." I won't take exception to either claim, since I find no other current listings for these works.

Again, I want to say that these by no means modest trios contain some of the most charming, captivating, and truly inspired writing I've heard from Röntgen's pen. Whether or not Naxos intends to produce further recordings of the trios with the Offenburg String Trio I don't know, but clearly Champs Hill and the Lendvai String

Trio have committed to doing so.

As for the performances, I find myself preferring the Lendvai's over the Offenburg's. The contrast is an interesting one. The Offenburg ensemble is comprised of three older-appearing gentlemen whose intonation is none too secure and whose playing becomes a bit ragged around the edges in technically taxing passages.

The Lendvai ensemble, on the other hand, is comprised of three youngish-looking ladies whose intonation is impeccable and who produce a clean, polished, well balanced, integrated sound. Moreover, the Lendvai has the advantage of recordings made in the Champs Hill Music Room, a venue the acoustic virtues of which I've extolled in past reviews. The Schüttbau in Rügheim, Germany, is not as friendly to the Offenburg Trio, lending the ensemble a bit of a hard edge.

Nevertheless, given cost considerations, you might want to purchase the budget-priced Naxos disc first to sample Röntgen's string trios, and then, if you think they're as lovely as I do, you can spring for the more expensive Champs Hill discs, which, so far, contain no duplications with the Naxos CD. **Jerry Dubins**

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Julius RÖNTGEN (1855-1932) - MusicWeb Review of Vol. 3

The String Trios - Volume 3

String Trio No. 9 in A flat Major [15:35]

String Trio No. 10 in F minor [13:16]

String Trio No. 11 in G minor [17:08]

String Trio No. 12 in A Major [14:13]

Lendvai String Trio - rec. Music Room, Champs Hill, West Sussex, England, 19-21 March 2014

CHAMPS HILL RECORDS CHRCD101 [61:12]

Although Julius Röntgen is regarded as a Dutch composer he did not become a citizen until 1919. He was actually German by birth being born in Leipzig on 9 May 1855. His music has recently seen signs of revival with CPO producing many fine discs. This is the second disc in this impressive series that I have, the other being Volume 2 on [CHRCD087](#). Reviews of volume 1 in the Lendvai's series can be found [here](#). I also have the fine recording of the last four String Trios by the Offenburg String Trio on Naxos 8.573384. The Offenburg are a real challenger to the Lendvai. It is a shame that Naxos has not as yet released any more discs in the series.

The music contained within the Trios presented on this disc, and in most of the composer's music that I have heard, is quite conservative in outlook. There's no hankering for the modern style. All four Trios were composed between 1923 and

1925, yet they show a romantic nature akin to the music of Röntgen's heroes Schumann and Brahms. Whilst this is not to be criticised, it could explain why only one of his sixteen Trios was published in the composer's lifetime. All the Trios that I have heard are beautifully crafted works in this somewhat outmoded idiom, one which seems to have fallen out of style since the romantics. They all include examples of wonderful short movements, with this present disc being no exception. In fact I am coming to regard this disc as my favourite of the three that I have. Yes, there are no outstanding tunes to get you whistling along but the music presented represents an hour of sheer enjoyment.

The playing of the Lendvai String Trio on this disc is stronger than in volume two and is better than that heard on the Offenburg String Trio's, at present, single disc of the Trios. The music has been captured in excellent sound and the booklet notes by Margaret Krill only serve to heighten the listener's enjoyment. Champs Hill Records should be applauded for championing this neglected music as well as this young ensemble.

Stuart Sillitoe

RÖNTGEN String Trios: No. 13 in A; No. 14 in c; No. 15 in c; No 16 in c# •
Lendvai Str Tr • CHAMPS HILL 122 (72:06)

Over the course of more than a decade now, I've been encountering a fairly steady stream of works—from symphonies, concertos, sonatas, piano trios, string trios, and other miscellaneous items—by German-Dutch composer Julius Röntgen (1855–1932). Though he lived long and prospered in his adopted home in the Netherlands, until recently, his memory was kept alive largely through the role he played in helping to establish Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra, and through his friendship and association with Brahms, rather than by his music. The reason for that may be that he wrote a lot of it—over 600 works—often quickly and indiscriminately, and much of it ... well ... to put it kindly, is of highly variable quality. Some of the first pieces by Röntgen I ever heard convinced me that a major discovery was underway, but the thrill soon wore off as exposure to more of his output revealed a composer whose limited inspiration waxed and waned with the moon.

This is the fourth and *final* volume in the Lendvai String Trio's traversal of Röntgen's 16 string trios. The first two volumes, containing the Trios 1–4 and 5–8, respectively, were previously reviewed by colleague James North in 38:2 and by me in 38:3. For some reason, we never received Volume 3, containing the Trios 9–12; but coincidentally, along with Volumes 1 and 2 of the Lendvai survey, I also received a single Naxos CD of the Trios 13–16, performed by the Offenburg String Trio. So, this Champs Hill release of the Trios 13–16 with the Lendvai Trio makes

the second time I'm reviewing the last four trios in Röntgen's contributions to the genre.

As noted in 38:3, all but the first of the trios were composed over a period of a dozen years between 1918 and 1930. Each was turned out quite quickly, which accounts for their unevenness in quality, and they seem to have been composed as *Hausmusik* to be played by the composer and his two sons. It should not be inferred from this, however, that his sons were still minors living at home. By the time Röntgen came to compose the last of these trios, Engelbert (1886–1958), the composer's second son by his first marriage, was himself married and quite a noted cellist who had studied with Julius Klengel and Pablo Casals.

In 1929, Engelbert took his wife, father, and stepmother on a motor trip of Italy. It was on this happy excursion through the Italian countryside that Röntgen composed the Trio No. 15 in the sad key of C Minor, which didn't deter his then second wife from playfully titling the piece the "Auto Trio." I was suspicious of Champs Hill's labeling of the key of the Trio No. 16 as C# Major on the back tray card. Röntgen may have been a bit quirky, even experimenting with bitonality in his Symphony No. 9, but it's not likely he'd have written a piece for three string instruments in a key with seven sharps. Indeed, he didn't. The piece is in C# Minor, which the booklet note, the score, and the ear all confirm.

All four trios seem to be well enough made, as well as idiomatically written for the three string instruments and technically challenging enough to keep the players occupied. I'm just not sure if the music itself is of sufficient interest to hold the attention of the listener. There's a good deal of noodling that doesn't really go anywhere, and Röntgen's idea of melody is decidedly untuneful. To be honest, I must have been in a more receptive mood when I reviewed the Offenburg's Naxos disc of these same works because I wrote that they contained "some of the most charming, captivating, and truly inspired writing I've heard from Röntgen's pen." Like anyone else, I'm allowed to change my mind, and hearing these trios again, I would have to say that the only one that didn't take me on a cruise through the doldrums was the concluding Trio in C# Minor. It begins with a moderately paced movement that's very reminiscent of the overlapping string entries in the opening strains of Schumann's String Quartet No. 1 in A Minor, and then moves on in subsequent movements to a musical content and style that's very evocative of Brahms.

In my review of the Offenburg's Naxos CD, I observed that intonation was none too secure and that the playing was a bit ragged around the edges in technically taxing passages. That is not the case here with the Lendvai. This fine ensemble, comprised of three relatively young-looking ladies, ends its survey of Röntgen's string trios as it began it, with spot-on intonation, no technical impediments, and richly textured tone, beautifully captured in the ideal acoustic space of the Champs Hill Music Room.

I'm not sure if a series of string trios by a composer whose industriousness and motivation often exceeded his natural talent will have strong appeal to those for

whom the genre is a bit esoteric. As Röntgen goes, I can say that these trios are neither the best nor the worst I've heard from him, but I think the Lendvai String Trio does as much to bring out the music's positive and attractive qualities as is humanly possible. **Jerry Dubins**

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