



Eduard Franck: Piano Trios

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RECORD REVIEW E. Franck

Piano Trios – E minor, Op. 11; D, Op. 58

Entirely unrelated to César Franck, the German composer Eduard Franck (born in Breslau in 1817, died in Berlin in 1893) was a pupil of Mendelssohn, a friend of Schumann, taught from 1851 in Cologne and was moderately successful in his day but seems to have been virtually forgotten for a century after his death. A revival of interest began with a biography written by two of his descendants, published in 1993, that dealt both with Eduard Franck and with his son Richard, also a composer. Since then the Audite label has been issuing a series of discs of Eduard Franck's orchestral and chamber music, though this disc of piano trios is the first to have come my way.

Franck composed a substantial amount of chamber music, including five piano trios; the two on this SACD are the first and last of the three that were published, and apparently Nos. 2 and 5 in order of composition, though in fact the dates of some of these works are not fully established. The E minor Trio at least was published in Berlin in 1848, and the D major exactly 50 years later – posthumously – under the editorship of Franck's son. Despite the wide divergence in their opus numbers they do not manifest any huge stylistic development, though the D major is clearly the later and better work. It would be true to say that the E minor, clearly post-Classical in its ambience, was a rather conservative utterance for 1848, while the D major would clearly be downright old-fashioned for the late 1880s or early 1890s, if that is when it was composed.

There is a great deal of attractive music here, but I did not feel I was discovering the work of a forgotten master. Franck was a much more than competent composer whose basic idiom, redolent of Mendelssohn, Schubert and Schumann, reveals occasional touches of originality and yields some charming melodic ideas. These works (especially the D major) would certainly merit occasional revival but they hardly prompt the idea that the history of nineteenth-century music, even nineteenth-century chamber music, is in urgent need of revision. In the first two movements of the E minor one notes an over-reliance on sequence and phrase repetition, and a use of passing chromaticism for purposes of sentimental pathos that comes to seem a recurrent trait. However, matters improve greatly with a lively Scherzo, which has a folk dance/drone trio, and the finale.

I have a sort of theory that, in a sonata-based genre, it's often in the finales – frequently viewed by critics as the quick movement tacked on to the rest because the piece has to end somehow – that minor composers of the romantic era are better

able to show their quality and individuality than elsewhere. It takes real mastery to handle a sonata-form first movement effectively, and genius to do something really original with it. Yet in finales the range of acceptable forms and strategies is much larger even than in slow movements, and elements of fantasy and caprice are positively encouraged; thus the composer feels correspondingly more relaxed, less constrained by history, and can do his own thing without looking over his shoulder at how Beethoven or Mozart did it. Anyway, Franck's finale starts with an ebullient violin cadenza and develops a fine surging, optimistic motion of its own, with the violin emerging at more reflective points as a kind of soloist. Franck makes effective use of sonorous pedalpoints and witty dialogic inversions to create a thoroughly enjoyable movement.

The D major Trio is a broader, more genial, more relaxed work, and one altogether richer in Affekt. Franck seems to have had the Schubert Trios in mind, especially in the ample first movement, which wears its sonata architecture lightly and has pastoral, countrydance touches. In this work the Scherzo comes second and is a splendid one, in hunting style – one thinks of the Scherzo of the Brahms Horn Trio – with a hymn-like trio. If the slow movement strays into the realm of the salon or the palm court, it does so in rather gorgeous terms, the violin and cello raptly participating in a romantic, operetta-ish duet. The finale sets off as a kind of zany country dance with drone fifths and is so obviously humorously intended – Franck extending the tradition of Haydn's 'alla Zingaresca' finales – that it's difficult to be sure if a couple of seeming infelicities are intentional, or simple miscalculations. For instance, one of the principal 'folk-like' tunes rounds itself off with a wildly over-elaborate quasi-cadential flourish of semiquavers (or they could be demisemiquavers; I haven't seen a score) which may be intended to sound inebriated or cheeky but, especially when presented as it usually is by the cello, just sounds awkward to play. Even if this is a blemish, the movement as a whole has considerable charm and raffish panache.

The SACD recording is top-notch, and the players, among whom Christiane Edinger is probably the best known, of high quality. I certainly cannot imagine these pieces better performed. This is one for those interested in exploring the forgotten byways; if your expectations are not too high, you're unlikely to be disappointed.