



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Trios Op. 3, 8 & 9

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This download unfortunately came with no accompanying booklet, which led understandably to some confusion on my part. To begin with, not initially knowing the names of the players, I wondered if these might be historical recordings by once famous violinist Jacques Thibaud teaming up with cellist Pablo Casals, as he often did, and as he sometimes did with Fritz Kreisler on viola. But that didn't seem to square with these very modern-sounding performances and recordings. For my next point of confusion I have ArkivMusic to thank, which lists a 2004 recording on this same label of Beethoven's three op. 9 Trios by an ensemble named Jacques Thibaud Trio. So, was Audite repackaging the earlier recording, along with a new one of the op. 3 Trio and Serenade, as a two-disc set (in its physical form), or were these all new recordings? To muddy the waters further, ArkivMusic, under a separate entry for Jacques Thibaud Trio Berlin, lists this new 2015 release containing all five works.

It's highly unlikely that there are two different string trios, one calling itself Jacques Thibaud Trio and the other calling itself Jacques Thibaud Trio Berlin; I'm quite sure they're one and the same. After poking about on the Internet for a while, I found the ensemble's web site, jttrio.com/string-trio/about, and learned that the group was formed in 1994 at the Berlin School of Art and is currently comprised by Burkhard Maiss, violin; Hannah Strijbos, viola; and Bogdan Jianu, cello. Moreover, the web site's media link indicates that these performances were recorded live at Dixon Hall in New Orleans during December 2012. The players are a long way from home, but at least that puts to rest the question as to whether the op. 9 Trios might be a reissue of an older recording by this same group. They're not.

Beethoven's five works for string trio—four formally designated as trios for violin, viola, and cello, and one designated a serenade—are even more astonishing than they might otherwise be by virtue of being such early works. All were composed between 1795 and 1797–98. The Trio in C Minor, op. 9/3, is especially shocking for its convulsive violence, interrupted phrases, lurching rhythms, and compressed gestures—a foretelling of the “Serioso” String Quartet to come over 10 years later.

I can appreciate the Jacques Thibaud Trio wanting to play the hell out of the piece and strike fear into the hearts of the audience in the process, but the risks the players take in this live performance to achieve their end, I'm sorry to say, result in some really bad and scrappy playing. It's not simply an out-of-tune note violinist Maiss hits on his second sf chord (G-E-C) in measure 18, it's the wrong note. Anticipating the jump to C in the following measure, he misses the C and hits what sounds like a C in the chord instead. Granted, stuff happens in a live performance that wouldn't necessarily happen in a studio recording, or that would be fixed in a retake or in the editing booth if it did. These are fine musicians, and they're commended for wanting to give their all to these performances; but for my taste, there's just a bit too much

roughness around the edges in these readings—too many instances of “scrunched” chords, shrill high notes, gruff tone, and “smooshed” runs.

It was much the same overly aggressive approach by the Trio Zimmermann that elicited some criticism from me in a review of that ensemble’s second volume of Beethoven’s string trios in 38:2, and the Zimmermann’s players sound tame compared to the Jacques Thibaud Trio. Part of the problem is the too up-close recording, but physical distance would only lessen the impact of wrong notes and abrasive bowing, not magically right them. I continue to prefer the Grumiaux and Leopold String Trios in these works, but my favorite—still listed at Amazon but not at ArkivMusic—are the recordings on Denon by the Mozart String Trio with Jean-Jacques Kantorow, violin; Vladimir Mendelssohn, viola; and Mari Fujiwara, cello. They seem to find just the right balance between tonal grace and refinement in the lyrical passages and intensity of expression in the agitated passages. Some may like the Jacques Thibaud Trio’s Beethoven for its unvarnished bluntness and bareknuckle approach, but my preference is for greater civility.