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Felix Mendelssohn: Piano Trios

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 2011.05.01)

My first reaction to receiving this release for review was, “Oh no, not another recording of Mendelssohn’s piano trios!” This now makes 22 versions I can lay claim to, at least three or four of which I’ve had occasion to review in these pages. I must cede pride of place, however, to Burton Rothleder who claims to have reviewed no fewer than 10 versions. Of those I have in my collection which he happens to have covered, I find myself in agreement with his conclusions about 90-percent of the time. I was favorably impressed and still am, for example, with the Wanderer Trio’s performances on Harmonia Mundi, and I’ve also found much to enjoy in recordings by the Mendelssohn Piano Trio on Centaur and the Amsterdam Piano Trio on Brilliant Classics. To this list, but reviewed by others, I would add the Florestan Trio on Hyperion and the Nash Ensemble on Onyx. With regard to one recent release, however, Burton and I will have to agree to disagree, and that is the Sony recording with Perlman, Ma, and Ax, which made Rothleder’s 2010 Want List. I found these performances to be 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.

I wasn’t quite sure what to expect from the Swiss Piano Trio, an ensemble I’d not previously encountered, though to confess, I did begin my listening with the difficult-to-dislodge idea in my head that Mendelssohn’s piano trios did not need another recording, no matter how good it might be. Imagine then my shock to have all of my doubts and reservations instantly swept away by the most captivating performances of these works I think I’ve ever heard.

Swift in tempo and fleet of foot, but not rushed or breathless; leggiero in bowing and phrasing, but not lightweight or thin in tone; rascally but not roguish in the Scherzo movements; emotionally expressive but not cloying in the Andantes; and strongly persuasive without making over-earnest pie of Mendelssohn’s opening Allegros, the Swiss ensemble plays these works with surpassing elegance, beauty, and absolute technical control and perfection.

In no small measure, this gorgeously recorded hybrid surround-sound Audite SACD is a glory to modern recording technology. The instruments are perfectly placed and perfectly balanced, and the sound is state-of-the-art. I’m not usually one to say, “Throw out all other recordings you have of these works,” but if I were so inclined, this new release would come perilously close to prompting me to say it. These magnificently recorded fantastic performances are urgently recommended.

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