

JACQUES THIBAUD STRING TRIO

MILHAUD • MARTINŮ  
COMPLETE WORKS  
FOR STRING TRIO

audite



**DARIUS MILHAUD (1892-1974)**

**String Trio, Op. 274**

- I. Vif 2:42
- II. Modéré 4:41
- III. Sérénade. Alerte 2:23
- IV. Canons. Lent et très expressif 4:52
- V. Jeu Fugué. Vif 2:34

**Sonatine à trois, Op. 221b**

- I. Très Modéré 3:32
- II. Contrepoint. Lent 1:17
- III. Anime 2:02

**BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ (1890-1959)**

**String Trio No. 1, H 136**

- I. Allegro 6:18
- II. Andante 7:30
- III. Poco Allegro 5:16

**String Trio No. 2, H 238**

- I. Allegro 7:43
- II. Poco moderato – Vivo –  
Allegro ma non troppo 7:18

### Mediterranean Counterpoint

“I played enough chamber music during my childhood to retain a special inclination towards it”, Darius Milhaud remarked in his conversations with Claude Rostand, one of the most notable chroniclers of French musical modernism. As a youth, Milhaud came into close contact with his teacher’s string quartet: these defining experiences continued to have an effect when he decided to give up his violin studies at the Paris Conservatoire in favour of composition. “For chamber music is a genre with which one can express, using means that are limited to four bows, one’s deepest feelings. It may speak less directly, but, in its great strictness and absolute musical purity, it is most satisfactory. It is therefore two things: an intellectual discipline, and a melting pot of intensive emotions.”

Emphatic words from a composer who dedicated a major portion of his extensive oeuvre to chamber music. Alongside the impressive corpus of his eighteen string quartets, with which Milhaud exceeded even his industrious colleague Dmitri Shostakovich, the two string trios seem no more than occasional finger exercises. But even they are an authentic expression of his style, oscillating between rigour and playfulness. His Southern French heritage and character – he was born in Marseille and raised in Aix-en-Provence – play an important part in this. “My musical upbringing is exclusively defined by Latin-Mediterranean culture”, Milhaud writes in his autobiography, “which is already explained by the fact that I come from a very old Provençal-Jewish family. Latin, particularly Italian, music has always meant a lot to me, but German music has not. Wagner, for instance, I have never understood, and will never understand. Luckily I belong to a generation that has managed to escape him.”

Rejecting Wagner (whom Milhaud frequently likened to Hitler) and German music was, even before the Second World War, a cultural policy of the French avant-garde. Its most prominent association was the “Groupe des Six”, in which Milhaud, alongside Francis Poulenc and Arthur Honegger, was one of the young stars. Milhaud’s Mediterranean disposition, however, did not close his mind to other, entirely different, influences; from South American folklore to North American jazz through to – yes, indeed! – German music, which manifested itself primarily in a fondness for Bachian counterpoint.

Let us examine the string trio in five movements from 1947 which puts many facets of Milhaud’s music in a nutshell. The “absolute musical purity” which he mentioned to Rostand becomes apparent in the opening movement’s fine mesh of lines. The violin starts off with a light-hearted, completely tonal melody, airily accompanied by the lower parts, though in consistently extraneous keys. The “intensive emotion” which Milhaud commits to chamber music breaks through in hymn-like chords in the second movement: they seem like the first line of a chorale which, again and again, is interrupted by tender, almost supplicatory, interludes: Milhaud provides ample illustration of the rich sonorities which three string instruments are capable of producing.

In the ensuing “Sérénade”, the scherzo of the work, the three instruments perform capricious (and virtuosic) solos over mimicked guitar chords, whilst they sway gently and in chorus in the central section. After this dance-like, almost scenically conceived music, the fourth and fifth movements represent the aspect of the “intellectual discipline” which for Milhaud, who was well-versed in music history, was associated with Renaissance and baroque counterpoint. The theme played by the viola in the fourth movement (“Canons”) is repeated by the violin at the octave and developed into a canon between the two instruments. After the first run, the cello enters with the same theme – albeit with the course of the melody reversed and with much-extended note values, making it almost impossible to recognise the context. Such technical finesse is also present in the “Jeu fugué” (Fugal game) of the finale where Milhaud develops the coquettishly jagged fugue subject in radical polyphony – interrupted only once by expressive solo “recitatives” from the three instruments.

Milhaud composed the trio in 1947 at the request of a music-loving industrialist from Mexico who felt honoured to be driving the famous guest through his country; in his autobiography *Notes sans musique*, the composer remembers a wonderful journey to the neighbouring country of the USA which overwhelmed him with its “truly Latin atmosphere”, the “riotous markets of the natives and, particularly, the charm of the countryside”. As so often, Milhaud had used one of his numerous journeys to compose, for he liked to work on the move and on request: in noisy cafés, on the train, on an ocean liner. Musically as well as personally, Milhaud was constantly on the move: whilst in exile, he realised that his enforced homelessness also worked to his advantage. “I even go as far as to say that an artist should not just travel as a tourist – he also has to give up his entire way of life and immerse himself completely into the life of other peoples; he has, in the truest sense of the word, to be able to emigrate.”

The *Sonatine à trois* was probably not written on a train, but it was a memento of a journey that Milhaud made through the USA together with his wife Madeleine and their son Daniel. Inscribed “À Mody et Daniel”, this short work has an opening movement whose intimate, playful and yet strict part writing is reminiscent of the “Canons” in the string trio. The “Contrepoint” is explicitly mentioned in the central movement, an expressive melody set against two parts; during the course of the movement, the parts are interchanged between the instruments. The finale is – as the serenade movement of the later trio – a pizzicato study with filigree violin improvisations: overall a challenging piece of *Hausmusik* for the family circle.

### The stylistic chameleon

Milhaud’s path crossed several times with that of his contemporary Bohuslav Martinů, who hailed from the Moravian town of Polička and had trained in Prague – also both as violinist and composer. For seventeen years Martinů lived in Paris, where Milhaud celebrated his greatest successes during the years between the wars; in 1940 both of them – Milhaud on account of being a Jew and Martinů as a patriotic Czech in exile – were forced to leave France for the USA, where they lived for several years.

Whilst Milhaud only discovered the string trio in America, Martinů wrote his two trios whilst he was still in Paris – a city which both fascinated him and forced him into a permanent existential battle. Although he became (in)famous with cheerful modernist orchestral pieces such as *Half-time* or *La Bagarre*, Martinů was not able to succeed financially, mostly living off the earnings of his wife Charlotte, who worked as a seamstress in a clothing factory. Yet Paris being the hub of the avant-garde was an incomparable source of inspiration to Martinů, for which he accepted his modest living conditions. He had already come into contact with the music of Debussy and Ravel as a violinist in the Czech Philharmonic in Prague; now there were also the works of Stravinsky and Bartók, of Szymanowski, Hindemith and the “Groupe des Six” who in Paris fuelled the debate about the nature of modernism.

Martinů’s teacher in Paris was Albert Roussel who, as a composer, shares his student’s fate of being a shamefully underestimated grand master. From Roussel, Martinů learned perfect formal proportions, rhythmic concision and a vivid, but not sentimental, sense of colour; Stravinsky and Honegger, on the other hand, imparted the rapidly accelerated pulse of the years after the “Grande Guerre” which were characterised by workers’ uprisings, sports and psychoanalysis. At the beginning of this period, when a homeless Martinů still moved from one flat to another and went on endless walks along the banks of the Seine – he called them “the quays of optimism” – he composed his first string trio in 1924 under the watchful eye of Roussel.

Clearly his teacher liked the work, even if, according to Martinů, he shook his head in disapproval at a few passages – presumably these included the dissonant opening of the work where the three string instruments, following a violin fanfare, indulge in apparently oriental or Slavic melismas in a higher, garish register. But this violent outburst soon runs out of steam and, as if the swinging doors of a café had been opened, the first theme develops into a melancholy salon tune with stylised guitar accompaniment. Then the imaginary flâneur rushes out again into the boulevard, and as in the beginning, polyphonic lines cross each other. Another episode seems to lead into a music hall where an overwrought chanson is being performed. Then the proceedings gradually subside, as if paralysed, preparing for the dreamlike mood of the Andante.

Bohuslav Martinů has often been declared the legitimate successor to Dvořák and Janáček. This is down to the fact that even in foreign lands and amongst the most diverse influences which Martinů incorporated into his music, he nevertheless always had the inflection of the Czech language and the gestures of Czech folk music shine through. The romance of the string trio illustrates this: who, after that forceful first movement, would have expected this gushing melody, “sung” here by the violin (a type of melody, incidentally, which would feature increasingly in Martinů’s late American works)? In contrast to the effervescent outer movements, this Andante of 1924 already smacks of uprootedness. The staggering rhythm of the finale evokes a form of peasant dance which Martinů seasons with suggestions of the “Russian themes” from Beethoven’s “Razumovsky” Quartets, Op. 59 – classical tradition, coarse humour and irony blend into a turbulent ending.

One of the curiosities of Martinů's early Paris period is that his first string trio, after (presumably) three performances in Paris and Prague, was lost and then kept at the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen from the 1970s. It was not rediscovered until 2005, when the Czech musicologist Eva Velická came across it and then oversaw its publication. Martinů's second trio of 1934 was spared such a fate, even if its publication was delayed by the war and Martinů's emigration to the USA (1940): in 1951 the trio which Martinů had composed for one of the few constant trio formations – Trio Pasquier, founded in 1927 – was published.

The Paris music world had long since accepted Martinů, the erstwhile nobody, as one of its greats. The influential maestro Serge Koussevitzky conducted his orchestral works; for ballet, Martinů preferred scenarios typical of the time, right up to his *La revue de cuisine*; first operas were being staged, mainly in Czechoslovakia. Thanks to international performances and prizes, the 42-year-old composer had almost reached celebrity status. Composing came naturally to him, and he wrote work after work at the request of orchestras or musician friends. Martinů was a stylistic chameleon; in between Czech folk references, modernist bruitism and neo-baroque brittleness, however, his very own idiom always shines through – that is also the case in the second string trio.

In contrast to its predecessor, this work only comprises two movements of a similar length which is explained by the fact that Martinů incorporates a slow section into the opening movement. Once again, he opens the trio with an ascending and descending gesture – possibly an allusion to his first trio, which by this stage was already lost. Once again, agitated and contrapuntally dense passages alternate with a lyrical countersubject, which makes a reappearance in the development section as a grotesquely squeaking variant in violin harmonics. It also forms the basis for the inserted Largo section – a short intermezzo which despite its vocal, hymn-like tone still quivers under the unrest of the preceding music. A wild tremolo heralds the return of the Allegro.

The second movement opens with two introductory “recitatives” from the cello and the viola (an idea from Debussy's string quartet), after which Martinů begins a dense, contrasting game involving diverse themes and characters. Although his style had not changed significantly over the ten years since his first string trio, the second trio nonetheless unveils two role models who had previously lain dormant: Ludwig van Beethoven and Béla Bartók. Beethoven's technique of splitting and transforming motifs is brought to perfection, whilst the ruptured tonality, the rhythmic impetus, the harsh tone, through to effects such as glissando, are reminiscent of Bartók. The second trio is an energetic, sometimes even radical, work which does not join in with the neo-classical torpor displayed during the 1930s by some of his colleagues.

*Michael Struck-Schloen*

*Translation: Viola Scheffel*

JACQUES THIBAUD **STRING TRIO**

audite



Burkhard Maiß, violin • Hannah Strijbos, viola • Bogdan Jianu, cello

Prize-winners in the prestigious 1999 Bonn Chamber Music Competition (Deutscher Musikwettbewerb), the Jacques Thibaud String Trio was founded at the Hochschule der Künste Berlin (today: Universität der Künste) in 1994. In its early stages the ensemble was closely related to Laszlo Varga (solo cellist of the New York Philharmonic, cellist of the Borodin Trio) and the pianist Gyorgy Sebók. Later on important artistic impulses came from Adolphe Mandeau and Markus Nyikos. Today the trio consists of Burkhard Maiß (violin), Hannah Strijbos (viola) and Bogdan Jianu (cello).

For 20 years now the Jacques Thibaud String Trio has received tremendous acclaim from audiences and critics alike through their charm, their youthful exuberance and their astounding virtuosity. Regularly the trio tours throughout Europe, Japan and North America. The musicians appeared at London's Wigmore Hall and New York's Lincoln Center, toured throughout Germany, major Japanese cities, and through India; they followed invitations to some of Europe's most prestigious festivals including Belgium's Musica Mundi, Gidon Kremer's Echternach Festival in Luxembourg, and Denmark's Roskilde Schubert Festival. Robert Groslot dedicated his string trio „The Vigilant Quest“ to the Jacques Thibaud String Trio; it was premiered by the ensemble in 2017.

Center piece of the trio's concert activities is North America where the ensemble has appeared at hundreds of concert venues during their career including e.g. New York City's Alice Tully Hall, Washington DC's National Gallery, Stanford University, the Caramoor Festival, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and cities such as Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, San Diego, Dallas, Indianapolis and Honolulu. A special highlight was also the concert for Ban Ki-moon, former Secretary-General of the UN, in New York in 2016. As Ensemble-in-Residence at the 2001 Florida International Festival, they drew an audience of over two thousand to their final concert. They have also given successful residencies in settings ranging from conservatories to music camps to an Indian reservation in Arizona.

Alongside the numerous chamber music activities the Jacques Thibaud String Trio also performs as solo ensemble with Mozart's rare, unfinished *Sinfonia Concertante* for Violin, Viola, Cello and Orchestra.

The trio was named after the French violinist Jacques Thibaud who enjoyed a global reputation not only as solo violinist but also as a chamber musician. The existing recordings of Jacques Thibaud have been a constant source of inspiration for the Thibaud Trio, particularly in regard to nativeness and spiritedness of music playing.

*“There is nothing that is so enjoyable for the true artist as ensemble-playing with his peers. Solo playing seems quite unimportant beside it.” (J. Thibaud).*



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Jacques Thibaud String Trio

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