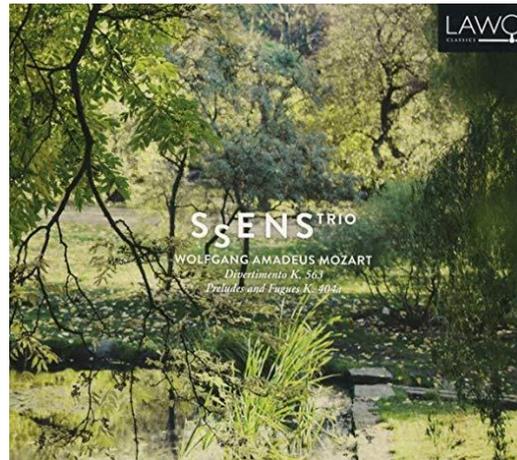


CD Review by Jerry Dubins

**MOZART Divertimento in Eb, K 563. Preludes and Fugues, K 404a: Nos. 1–3 • Ssens Trio - LAWO 1170 (66:44)
Divertimento K 563**

AUDIO CD - Lawo Classics

Going on two years ago now, in 41:3, I reviewed the debut album by a recently formed string trio from Norway with the stutter-inducing name Ssens, a too-cute affectation for how it's meant to be pronounced, "Ess-ence." That aside, the ensemble's performances of Beethoven's String Trio in Eb, op. 3, and Serenade in D, op. 8, earned an "imperative purchase" recommendation from me; it was that good. Paul Orgel reviewed the release in the same issue and had similarly positive things to say about it. I think we both expected that the Ssens Trio would follow up that first recording with a second one completing its run of Beethoven's string trios with the three trios of op. 9. Instead, for their second album, the players have given us Mozart's great Divertimento (String Trio) in Eb, K 563, filling out their disc with the six Preludes and Fugues after J. S. and W. F. Bach, K 404a.



Mozart's Divertimento for String Trio is quite likely the greatest work of its type in a genre that isn't exactly overflowing with masterpieces. It's a string trio by virtue of its instrumentation—violin, viola, and cello—and a divertimento by virtue of its form—six movements with two minuets occupying the third and fifth movements, respectively. It's important to understand the divertimento designation of this particular score in the context of its form rather than by its content, style, or performance objectives, for this divertimento is different from Mozart's many other similarly titled works. As Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein has written, "The composer's only completed string trio shares with most divertimenti the six-movement format, but from that no lightness of tone should be understood. Rather, it's a true chamber-music work, and grew to such large proportions only because it was intended to offer something special in the way of art, invention, and good spirits. Each instrument is *primus inter pares*, every note is significant, every note is a contribution to spiritual and sensuous fulfillment in sound."

Mozart composed the Divertimento in 1788, thus making it a late work, coeval with his last three symphonies and second to last piano concerto, No. 26, the "Coronation." He took the Divertimento with him on a tour of German cities, performing it in Dresden with Anton Teyber playing violin, Anton Kraft playing cello, and himself on viola. This suggests that Mozart considered the Divertimento a concert piece rather than the lightweight drawing-room entertainments generally expected of works bearing the divertimento title.

There's no need to beat around the bush. There are some really fine recordings of Mozart's String Divertimento. Among them are recent noteworthy accounts by the Trio Zimmermann (Frank Peter Zimmermann, violin; Antoine Tamestit, viola; and Christian Poltéra, cello) on BIS, and by the Hermitage String Trio on Chandos, also filled out, by the way, with the Preludes and Fugues, K 404a. For ageing but still highly valued versions, there's Gidon Kremer, Kim Kashkashian, and Yo-Yo Ma on Sony, and even older but still a keeper are Isaac Stern, Pinchas Zukerman, and Leonard Rose, also on Sony.

If you have any of those, or others I haven't mentioned, I wouldn't tell you to throw them away, but I will tell you that this new performance by Ssens is the best I've ever heard, period. Talk about each instrument being *primus inter pares*, about every note counting and making a significant contribution to spiritual and sensuous fulfillment, that's what you have in the Ssens's reading. I know this music inside out, not just from recordings of it, but because with fellow violists and cellists I've bumbled my way through it. Mozart could have made it easier to play had he written it in D Major instead of Eb Major, but he didn't, and it is what it is. Even the first two bars, with all three instruments moving in parallel octaves, are a test of perfect intonation. You can practice just those two bars over and over again to get the intonation so exact that it sounds like one instrument playing, and then in the performance, it goes sour. But not in this performance by the Ssens Trio. Every note is laid bare, every nuance of phrasing and dynamic fluctuation exposed, and it's all perfect and incredibly beautiful.

Here's the lowdown on the six Preludes and Fugues. Shortly after moving to Vienna in 1781, Mozart was befriended by the Baron van Swieten, and received a standing invitation to Sunday morning gatherings at the nobleman's home. The Baron, it seems, had a special love of Bach and Handel, and it was at these gatherings that Mozart was exposed to their works, which at the time were not heard often in a culture with a constant craving for the novel and new. It was a craze Beethoven recognized and would certainly capitalize on. Mozart studied the fugues he heard at the Baron's Sunday soirees and worked to assimilate techniques of counterpoint and voice-leading that were foreign to him into his writing of the six "Haydn" String Quartets.

To that end, Mozart transcribed for string trio five fugues by J. S. Bach and one by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, prefaced four of them with Preludes of his own composition, and two of them with Preludes by their own composers. Here's how they stack up:

Number	Prelude	Key	BWV	Fugue	Key	BWV
1	Mozart	d		J. S. Bach	e \flat	853
2	Mozart	g		J. S. Bach	f \sharp	883
3	Mozart	F		J. S. Bach	F \sharp	882
4	J. S. Bach	F	527/ii	J. S. Bach	d	1080
5	J. S. Bach	E \flat	526/ii	J. S. Bach	c	526/iii
6	Mozart	f		W. F. Bach	f	No. 8

I've set forth all six prelude and fugue couples in the above table, but Ssens plays only the first three couples (1, 2, and 3), in which all three preludes are by Mozart, and the three fugues all come from Bach's WTC. What I find a bit odd about Mozart's approach is that in each case he transposed Bach's fugue from its original key to a key that was both more compatible with the string instruments he was transcribing for, and that rendered Bach's fugue in the same key as Mozart's prelude. In other words, he transposed Bach's BWV 853 from E \flat Minor to D Minor, making it easier for the string players to play and to make it come out in the same key as his prelude. He transposed BWV 883 from F \sharp Minor to G Minor to match the key of his prelude, and so on. Why, I wonder, didn't he just pick a fugue from the WTC that was already in the same key as his prelude, so that he wouldn't have to transpose it? Maybe the transposing was part of the exercise.

The remaining three prelude and fugue couples would have added another 20 minutes to the disc, thereby probably exceeding its capacity. The Trio Fenix ran into the same problem with its recording of the Divertimento and all six prelude and fugue couples, which spilled over onto a second CD on a release I reviewed in 34:3. I wasn't terribly impressed by the Trio Fenix's performance of the Divertimento, or the selling price of over \$33 for a two-disc set with a combined running time of 85 and a half minutes. Perhaps it could have been squeezed onto a single disc. I'm not sure.

Anyway, I concluded that only the most insatiable of Mozart completists had to have these "practice" preludes and fugues. The half of them offered here by the Ssens Trio are a whole enough. The main business of the disc is the Divertimento, and for that I've not heard the Ssens Trio bettered, let alone equaled. Jerry Dubins

This article originally appeared in Issue 43:3 (Jan/Feb 2020) of Fanfare Magazine.