

FANFARE

BEETHOVEN String Trio in Eb, op. 3. Serenade in D, op. 8 • Ssens Trio • LAWO 1122 (71:34)

In the 1790s, Beethoven composed five works for string trio, the two delightful, rather infrequently performed pieces recorded here, and the set of three String Trios, op. 9. They're considered to be compositional exercises, in preparation for composing string quartets, but, despite their early opus numbers, they're works of complete mastery.

The String Trio, op. 3, in six movements, might well have been called a Serenade. It, and the seven-movement Serenade, op. 8, are clearly influenced by Mozart's Divertimento for String Trio, K 563, some of whose greatness may stem from Mozart's having composed it after, not before, he had mastered string quartet and quintet writing. As in the Mozart Divertimento, each movement of Beethoven's Trio, Op. 3, and Serenade establishes a basic character, ranging from mischievous to elegantly soothing, in the slower movements. The predominant mood is joyous and energetic, with tongue-in-cheek humor a main component.

My first encounter with Op. 3 was on an old RCA recording with Jascha Heifetz. Certainly, the violin, having the great majority of main melodic lines, must lead the ensemble, and is the focus of most of one's listening in this music, but there's something grotesque about the disparity in volume between Heifetz and his colleagues, William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky, due to the close miking of the violin. Heifetz's playing, on its own terms, is very dynamic, if a little rough sounding, but it represents a far from enlightened approach to chamber music.

The recording of these pieces that I know best is the enjoyable version by Anne-Sophie Mutter, Bruno Giuranna, and Mstislav Rostropovich. There's a variety of tone and nuance in the young Mutter's playing that gives her a featured role. (Giuranna and Rostropovich's playing is comparatively staid and deferential, yielding the spotlight to Mutter.) The changes in timbre that she creates with varied bow pressure, and vibrato, can be momentarily entrancing, but, over the course of a series of movements, ultimately— as with Heifetz—distracting.

This is the first recording by the Ssens Trio, a group formed in 2014, comprised of three Norwegian string players, each highly experienced in top level orchestras and chamber ensembles. I find their playing and interpretation ideal, though I can find no explanation of their peculiar name. They achieve a sense of close collaboration that's missing from the star ensembles mentioned above. Violinist Sølve Sigerland's pleasingly focused tone and deftly shaped phrasing draw attention, not to his technique, but to the direction and character of the music, with none of Heifetz's aggression, or Mutter's mannerisms. The trio has a finely blended sound, and they're given clear, warmly ambient sound, with an appropriate balance among the three instruments, by Lawo. I hope that they'll record Beethoven's op. 9 String Trios. **Paul Orgel**