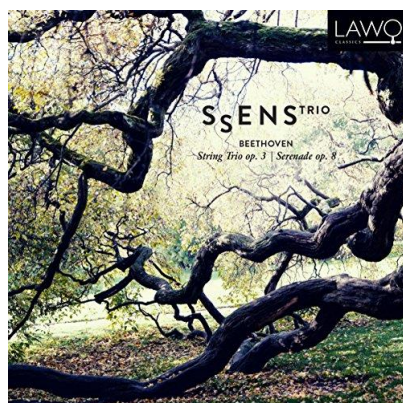


## BEETHOVEN String Trio in Eb, op. 3. Serenade in D, op. 8 • Ssens Tr • LAWO 1122 (71:23)



### String Trio 3 & Serenade 8

Among Beethoven's earliest published works are five string trios for violin, viola, and cello, "published" being the operative word, since there is a ton of juvenilia without opus numbers, and several not juvenile works with opus numbers, such as the three piano trios of op. 1, that predate the string trios. The Trio in Eb Major, op. 3, was composed between 1792 and 1794, but may have been sketched out earlier while Beethoven was still in Bonn. Its six-movement, divertimento-like layout, with two Menuetto movements enclosing a central *Adagio*, is an obvious nod to Mozart's great string trio, the Divertimento in Eb Major, K 563. The so-titled Serenade in D Major, op. 8, was Beethoven's second go at a string trio. Composed in 1796–97, it's a strange work, perhaps even unprecedented in terms of form. It's laid out in seven movements, but lacks the expected second Menuetto typical of serenade and divertimento-type works. Instead, it begins and ends with a short march, framing an *Adagio* and a Menuetto, followed by a movement that's almost a self-contained work within itself (*Adagio–Scherzo–Allegro molto–Adagio–Allegro molto–Adagio*), then an *Allegretto alla polacca*, and finally a theme and variations movement, before reprising the opening march.

These are the two trios on this disc. More than likely, the Ssens Trio will give us a follow-up release containing the three remaining string trios grouped together under op. 9. They were composed in 1797–98, and all three of them are in the expected "normal" Classical form, with a sonata-allegro first movement, a slow movement in second place, a scherzo or menuetto in third place, and a fast, high-spirited, concluding movement. Of the three, however, the Trio in C Minor, op. 9/3, in Beethoven's tragic-heroic key, is very agitated, foretelling the composer's *Sturm und Drang* mode to come. Even by the measure of recent chamber group hatchlings, the Norway-based Ssens Trio is a newborn, formed in 2014 by three veteran musicians whose names may be familiar in other contexts. Violinist Sølve Sigerland is a member of the Grieg Trio and has appeared as a soloist with leading Scandinavian orchestras. Henninge Landaas is co-principal viola of the Oslo Philharmonic and a former member of the internationally renowned Vertavo String Quartet. Cellist Ellen Margrete Flesjø was a founding member of the Grieg Trio in 1987. Constituted as the Ssens Trio—whose name I'm not sure how to pronounce—this is the players' debut album; and with absolutely no hesitation I will say that it goes right to the top of my Beethoven string trios list.

Heretofore, I've enjoyed listening to these works performed by the Leopold Trio on Hyperion, though I still reserve a special liking for a set of the trios on Denon not listed by ArkivMusic, performed by the Mozart String Trio (Jean-Jacques Kantorow, violin; Vladimir Mendelssohn, viola; and Mari Fujiwara, cello). The Mozart Trio's technical precision, combined with its bold and forthright readings, comes across as more sharply focused than the comparatively looser or laidback sound of the Leopold Trio. But the performances here by the Ssens Trio are something else. The beauty of tone, nuanced dynamics, sensitivity to the subtleties of phrasing, and rhythmic lift are really quite spellbinding.

There's always one passage in particular I zero in on as a test of an ensemble's expressive acumen, and that's the second half of the first Menuetto in the Eb-Major Trio. Here we encounter one of the earliest examples of what I call Beethoven's "music by suggestion." The first half of the Menuetto's Trio section contains a lovely and quite touching lyrical tune played by the violin. When the time comes for Beethoven to repeat it in the second half of the Trio section, he doesn't, at least not literally. Instead, he outlines and embroiders around it, so that the ear *thinks* it's hearing the tune as previously heard, even though it's not. It's an aural illusion, and it's one of the secrets of the powerful effect that Beethoven's music has on us. By manipulating us into hearing what we *want* to hear, we personalize the music and ascribe our own meaning to it, which pulls at and touches the heartstrings in a way that no other music does. Listen to Sølve Sigerland play this passage. Your heart will simultaneously ache and leap for joy.

When the performance history of this period is written, the chapter on string playing will be titled "The Golden Age." Do not wait for the companion disc with the three op. 9 Trios on it to arrive, as I'm sure it will in due time. This is an imperative purchase. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 41:3 (Jan/Feb 2018) of *Fanfare Magazine*.