

Vaughan Williams's Suite (also written for and premiered by Tertis) is contemporaneous (1934) with the Sonatas. It might therefore be imagined to be less significant: but – having no fewer than eight short movements, divided into three groups (3+2+3) – this is a genuine suite of short interconnected movements, each full of character, based upon dance-like models. Many of the movements may be folk-based but each is most excellently laid out for viola and piano; although the original was for viola and orchestra I do not recall ever hearing this work in the viola-and-piano version and I am unaware of an earlier recording. Euler and Rivinius capture the style admirably, playing the work with total conviction and understanding – the fifth movement (*Moto perpetuo*) especially. As the recording quality is also very fine, and the instruments splendidly balanced, this is a most impressive and recommendable release.

Robert Matthew-Walker

Beethoven

New

Complete String Trios.

String Trio in E flat, Op. 3. Serenade in D, Op. 8. String Trios, Op. 9 – No. 1 in G; No. 2 in D; No. 3 in C minor.

Lendvai String Trio (Nadia Wijzenbeek, violin; Ylvali Zilliacus, viola; Marie Macleod, cello).

Stone Records 5060192780239 (medium price, two discs, 2 hours 30 minutes). Website www.stone-records.co.uk **D** Producer John Fraser. Engineer Arne Akselberg. Dates February 11th–15th, 2012.

Comparisons:

Grumiaux Trio (Philips) 456 317-2 (1967-68, two discs)
Perلمان, Zukerman, Harrell
(EMI Classics) 7 54198-2 (1990, two discs)



Coming at the outset of his maturity, Beethoven's music for string trio has tended

to be the most overlooked of his major contributions to the chamber genre. Yet 'first period' though these works may be, there is nothing formative about them – the composer being manifestly in command of an exacting medium in terms of its balancing of parts or its integration of counterpoint – so that they stand as a benchmark for what came later. Understandable, then, that the Lendvai String Trio should have chosen them for its first recording.

The trio certainly makes the best possible case for the imposing Op. 3 String Trio (1795, though it may date from three years earlier), which has been taken to task for its formal indebtedness to Mozart's eponymous *Divertimento*, yet there can be no denying its individuality of expression: no less an

authority than Robert Simpson considered it a masterpiece. This ensemble has the measure of its initial *Allegro*, finding a perfect balance between energy and reflection which comes to a head in the intricate development before being resolved in a decisive coda. The wistful *Andante* and eloquent *Adagio* are finely rendered, with the *Menuettos* that follow evincing a deft elegance, then a more robust humour. The finale, with its hectic dialogue and questing modulations, is hardly less persuasive.

The Serenade (1797) is the least often heard of these works, yet its informal conception does not equate to lack of substance. The sturdy opening *Marcia* is followed by the most songful from among Beethoven's early *Adagios*, then an agile *Menuetto* makes way for an intriguing alternation of *Adagio* and *Scherzo* redolent of a 'dumka', its Slavic allusion furthered by the lively *Polacca* with the composer at his most disarming. The Lendvai's purposefulness in the ensuing *Theme and Variations* makes the *Marcia's* return the more decisive.

The Op. 9 String Trios (1798) are most often seen as a stage along the way to the Op. 18 String Quartets, yet as a sequence are more profitably compared to the Op. 1 Piano Trios. For all its extroversion, the G major is among the most wide-ranging of Beethoven's earlier works: not least in the grandly rhetorical introduction which launches the opening *Allegro*, its momentum finely sustained by the Lendvai, whose opting for the second-half repeat is justified by the emotional intensification prior to a bracing coda. Neither the effortlessly lyrical *Adagio* nor the *Scherzo's* teasing interplay with its strait-laced trio is at all under-characterized, while the finale's forthright alternating of skittishness and earnestness is insightfully delineated on the way to a coda uninhibited even by this composer's standards.

Easy to underestimate, the D major is notable for its understatement and its absence of extremes in tempo and expression, not least in the opening *Allegretto*, with its equably contrasted themes and a continual motivic interplay deftly conveyed by the Lendvai. Its successor anticipates the 'intermezzo' genre beloved of the next century – as plaintive and unassuming as the *Scherzo* is lithe and, in its trio, speculative – before the finale unfolds as a good-natured *Rondo* with an infectious delight in its own music-making.

Beethoven's string trio output reaches its culmination in the C minor work that, as with the last of the preceding piano trios, is among the most questing utterances of his early maturity. Thus the opening *Allegro* equivocates between anxious questioning and fiery rhetoric with a sure formal mastery, of which the Lendvai is assuredly aware, while ensuring the music's expressive intensity is maintained right through to the terse close. Nor does the ensemble hold back in the *Adagio's* central outburst, so making its rapt outer sections the more affecting, with the

Scherzo similarly polarized in those tonally combative portions that frame the ethereal dance of its trio. Ironic and ominous elements are seldom far beneath the surface in a finale whose resolution is of the most equivocal.

As to the comparisons, the Perlman/Zukerman/Harrell line-up brings an impulsive if at times overbearing manner, while the Grumiaux Trio opts for a close-knit and seamless approach ideally suited to the chamber domain. Anyone coming to these works afresh, however, should certainly consider investing in these accounts that, exceptionally well recorded and readably annotated, mark an auspicious debut for this impressive ensemble.

Richard Whitehouse

Beethoven Op. 18, Volume 1.

New

String Quartets, Op. 18 – No. 3 in D; No. 4 in C minor; No. 5 in A.

Allegri String Quartet (Ofer Falk, Rafael Todes, violins; Dorothea Vogel, viola; Vanessa Lucas-Smith, cello).

Vivat VIVAT103 (full price, 1 hour 19 minutes).

Website www.vivatmusic.com. Producer Robert King. Engineer Tony Faulkner. Dates April 1st–3rd, 2012.

The undertaking of a new recording of Beethoven's Op. 18 is not something to be entered into lightly, and I am certain that a great deal of preparation has gone into the performances of three of those six quartets ('Volume 1', as the cover says) we have on this new CD. However, in two areas – tempos and grasp of structure – I am not convinced that the Allegri String Quartet (not the same personnel as the ensemble with this name I recall from long ago and brought to mind by the recent death of its one-time leader, Hugh Maguire) is entirely convincing in these works.

The advantage for many music lovers will be the instruments chosen – the latest dating from around 1800, so this is just the kind of sound that the young Beethoven would have had in mind – and the recording quality is first-rate. Where I feel Beethoven might have parted company most frequently with these young players is in their choice of tempos, notably in the first movement, *Allegro ma non tanto*, of the C minor, for the tempo the Allegri adopts seems to discard the *non tanto* qualification: the fast tempo chosen does not permit the inner subtleties of Beethoven's writing to come through as they should, making the pulse more an *alla breve* than 4/4. The tempos adopted for the remaining three movements are excellent, but it is an additional pity that the tempo indications of the third and fourth movements are reversed in the accompanying booklet as well as on the cover.

The C minor opens the disc, and is followed by the D major, which does begin authentically with an *alla breve* movement: here, all is well, but the tempo for the succeeding slow movement *Andante con moto* is, conversely, far too slow: once again, the qualification of

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