

MENDELSSOHN: *Trios*

Hamlet Trio—Channel 36415 [SACD] 58 minutes

Two issues ago (Jan/Feb 2016), I reviewed three recordings with this program, all favorably. This new one, with the four year-old Hamlet Trio in its recording debut, may be the best of the four. In a video trailer, pianist Paolo Giacometti says the group plays the Mendelssohn trios on “so-called period instruments”. He added that violinist Candida Thompson and cellist Xenia Jankovic use “gut strings and classical bows”, and that his own instrument is an 1837 Erard piano similar to one Mendelssohn had in his home. Giacometti says nothing more specific about the string instruments, and neither the booklet nor the group’s website elaborates.

The strings use a subtle vibrato but none of the swelling or other mannerisms typical of period groups. The piano tone is lighter than most modern pianos. The resulting sound is slightly smaller, crisper, and a good deal more evenly balanced than a “standard” trio.

Giacometti has amazing technique, and he produces a full sound that is powerful when it needs to be without sacrificing lightness and celerity. The cello tone is darker than usual, though not as full. The violin quality is small and slightly whiny, but not seriously, once you get used to it, and it is much easier to take than a violinist eschewing vibrato. The overall sound is clear, lively, well balanced, and much closer in ambiance to a “modern” piano trio than to a period group. If you are looking for something like the Festetics Quartet’s period performances of Haydn Quartets, these are not it.

Hamlet does a very good job of bringing out the different styles of the two works: youthful and energetic for No. 1 and darker with more cello presence and less violin in No. 2. Both performances flow like a bubbling river without sacrificing warmth and depth, and there are many nice touches. The first movements show plenty of fire but never go over the top doing so. The slow ones move along without indulgence and with a nice lift to the line in No. 2’s Andante. Scherzos are amazingly deft and quick, particularly the way Hamlet tosses off some tricky phrases in the second one. When the violin picks up the chorale theme near the end of No. 2, the effect is as eerie as I’ve heard it.

A good test of any performance is whether it pulls you in and holds your attention. On my first day of listening to this program, I played it twice straight through without being bored for an instant. It is that musical and compelling. I cannot say this is the best recorded pairing of these great works simply because it takes a different instrumental approach, but it is up there. Every lover of these pieces should at least investigate it. If these are period performances count me in! I will not part with Haydn Trio, Fontenay, and Sitkovetsky, my favorites up to now; but Hamlet has elbowed its way into that group with consummate grace. The sound is as good as the performances.

HECHT