

GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

## A BEETHOVEN TRIO

**Richard Bratby** never ceases to wonder at the genius of Beethoven, and the rewards reaped by different approaches to his chamber music



Trio Con Brio, here with their producer Bernhard Güttler (standing), bring a feeling of space to Beethoven

Imagine being at one of Beethoven's chamber music premieres, like Ignaz von Seyfried in 1799. 'Now his playing tore along like a wildly foaming cataract, and the conjuror constrained his instrument to an utterance so forceful that the stoutest structure was scarcely able to withstand it; anon he sank down, exhausted, exhaling gentle plaints, dissolving in melancholy ...' Critics don't often get to write like that in 2019, but with the 2020 Beethoven anniversary approaching perhaps we need to rediscover that sense of astonishment, of disbelief; of being overwhelmed by an imagination that leaves mere words sprawling in the dust. Because – make no mistake – there'll be a steady supply of commentators trying to shrink his genius to something relative; to tell us that we're bored of Beethoven.

Happily, it seems that performers haven't received that particular memo, and nor have record labels. I predicted back in January that **Trio Con Brio's** *Archduke* Trio was going to be worth a listen; well, here it is, and if it isn't quite what I expected, that's intended as a compliment. First up comes the Piano Trio Op 1 No 3 – the work which Haydn, famously, feared would be too advanced for the Viennese public – and I was struck not just by the lucid, unforced balance and sense of conversation (a characteristic of their series so far), but by the feeling of improvisation;

of three players moving forwards together into a strange and wonderful new world.

That carries over, on an epic scale, into the *Archduke*. It's unmistakably chamber music, but pianist Jens Elvekjaer unfolds the opening melody with a glorious feeling of space. The whole piece has an atmosphere of sunlit lyricism; its meaning lying not so much in big climaxes (the *valse brillante* episode of the Scherzo initially sounds almost reticent) as in, say, the quiet glow of the *Andante* and the way the witty, brightly articulated dance rhythms of the finale feel as if they're merely a foreground detail in a much vaster landscape.

That's one way of renewing Beethoven. In their 'Beethoven Plus' series on Somm, violinist **Kryisia Osostowicz** and pianist **Daniel Tong** have found another – commissioning companion pieces from living composers for each of the Beethoven violin sonatas. So before their expansive, lived-in reading of Beethoven's Op 96, there's a Sonatina by David Matthews that shrinks Beethoven's gestures to haiku proportions. The A major sonata, Op 30 No 1, is preceded by a touching journey from anguish to tranquillity by Kurt Schwertsik (apparently he was inspired by the Heiligenstadt Testament) and the *Kreutzer* Sonata gets an encore: a *Tarantella furiosa* by Matthew Taylor that starts where Beethoven's finale leaves off before heading off in wholly unexpected directions.

By and large, the idea works well. Osostowicz and Tong sound just as much at home in the new works as in the Beethoven – perhaps more so, in the case of a rather restrained-sounding *Kreutzer*. Op 96 is the pick of the Beethoven interpretations here: broad and reflective, with occasional flashes of something more fierce from Osostowicz. A sophisticated reading to conclude a fascinating and often rewarding pair of discs.

But the **Eybler Quartet**, in their journey through the Op 18 String Quartets, propose the most radical idea of all: taking Beethoven at his word. They attempt, as far as is humanly or musically possible, to follow his precise metronome markings, and that the result is so disconcerting is itself a reflection on modern performance conventions. The slightly underpowered violin tone and drab recorded sound rapidly cease to matter as the first movement of the C minor Quartet (No 4) hurdles forwards (no C minor-mood emoting on the G string here), the Scherzo unwinds like clockwork and the Minuet positively rockets away. There's a hint of a let-up in the finale – and indeed the A major Quartet (No 5) seems to fit these leaping tempos a lot more comfortably. Perhaps that's just my post-Romantic prejudices showing.

In any case, while the B flat Quartet (No 6) initially sounds like an *opera buffa* patter-song (with all the energy and sparkle that implies), the *Adagio* probes real depths; lovely, profound playing that also – what do you know? – sets up to perfection the relationship between the slow *Malinconia* sections of the finale and its skittering *Allegretto quasi allegro*. I've been playing and listening to this quartet since I was a teenager and I've rarely heard quite such a persuasive QED. So there's a thought to take into the big anniversary year: there's still nothing more surprising than playing exactly what Beethoven wrote. **G**

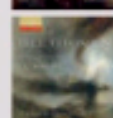
## THE RECORDINGS



**Beethoven** Piano Trios, Vol 3  
Trio Con Brio  
Orchid **ORC100101**



**Various Composers** 'Beethoven Plus, Vol 2'  
Kryisia Osostowicz, Daniel Tong  
Somm **SOMMCD0197-2**



**Beethoven** Strg Qts, Op 18 Nos 4-6  
Eybler Quartet  
Coro **COR16174**