

ZOOMING IN ON BEETHOVEN

Trio con Brio Copenhagen is marking its 20th anniversary by recording the complete Beethoven piano trios. Andrew Mellor attends a session for the group's third volume, including the monumental 'Archduke'

There were two languages being spoken at this recording session in Copenhagen: Danish and German. There could have been a third if the sisters, violinist Soo-Jin and cellist Soo-Kyung Hong, had chosen to communicate in Korean. Trio con Brio Copenhagen embodies those three distinctive yet complementary traditions: the wave of rigorously trained instrumental talent to have emerged from the Far East, the blossoming of the Nordic classical music scene into a 21st-century powerhouse, and the deep-rooted musical tradition of central Europe.

How much does the last of those shape the group's series of Beethoven piano trios recorded for Orchid Classics? Beethoven's 'Archduke' Trio presents a good opportunity to investigate the question. And it's fitting that in the first days of 2019 – the ensemble's 20th-anniversary year – the trio is laying down a recording of that work, arguably the high point of the piano trio literature.

'If you ask me, the players have a very distinctive Viennese style,' the Berlin-based producer Bernhard Güttler half-whispers in my ear as the trio prepares for the penultimate session on a day of recording at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation's (DBC) headquarters in Copenhagen (both the string players are members of the corporation's symphony orchestra). 'You know the story, right?' he continues. 'The sisters moved with their mother to Vienna while they were still children; they wanted absolutely to get this Viennese instrumental education.'



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It was while studying in Vienna that the sisters met the Danish pianist Jens Elvekjaer, who eventually married Soo-Kyung. 'I would say our fingerprint – our musical identity – is very much of the central European school,' the cellist says. 'That is where we met and where most of our teachers come from.'

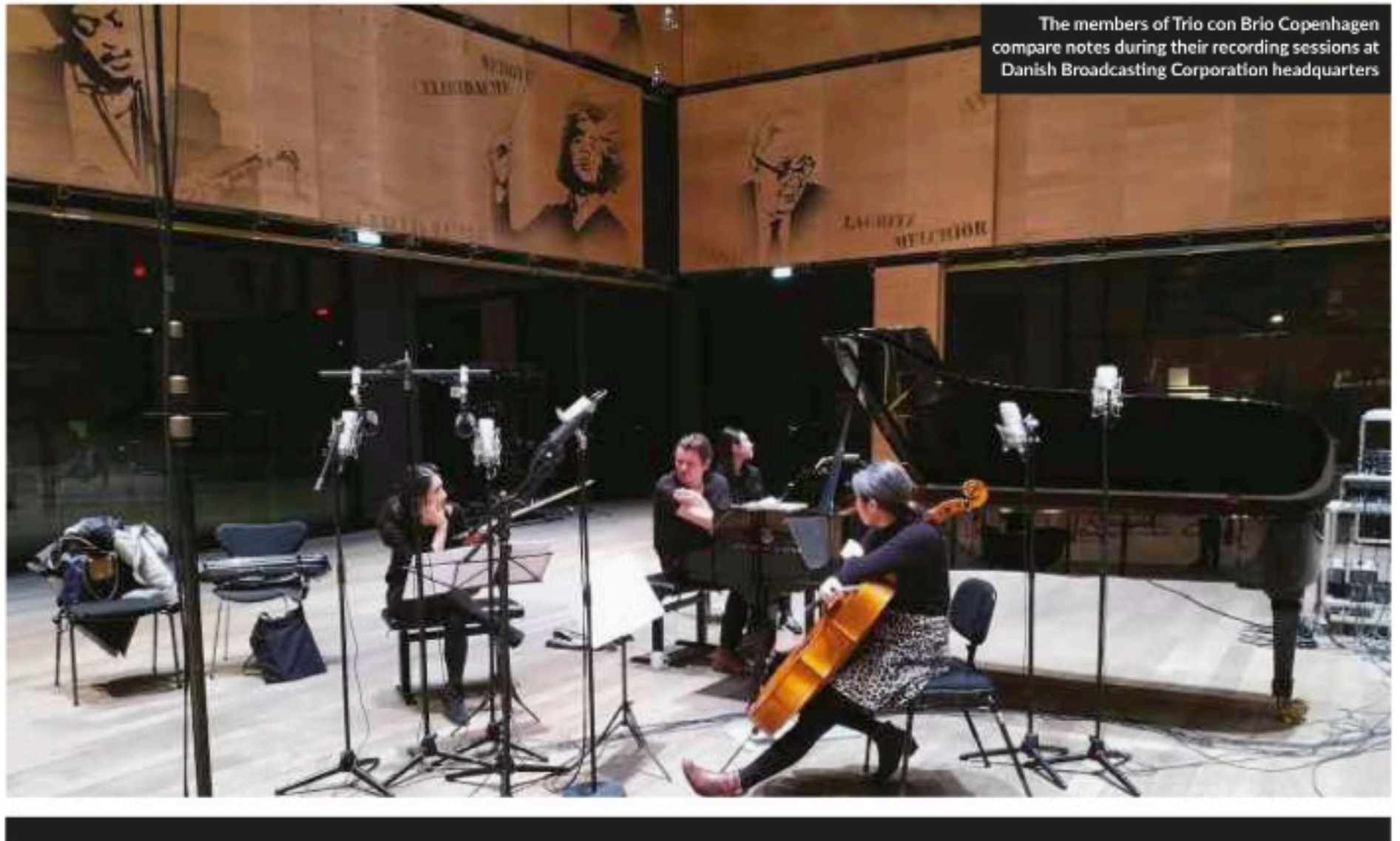
It's easy to hear that assertion borne out in the elegance and stylistic ease with which the ensemble takes on Beethoven's trios. But there are elements in their

performances that feel entirely modern: an exceptionally tight, light-footed and elastic blend and a panther-like agility in which you can never quite be sure of the direction of the next pounce.

'Our background in Vienna gives us a certain grounding in style,' says Elvekjaer, 'but personally I am a big fan of this lightness of spirit that we have in Scandinavia. By that I mean the joy of playing. This region is rather obsessed with chamber music and there are chamber music festivals and societies all over the place. It's incredible how much people love chamber music here. When you have the chance to form yourselves as an ensemble in front of these audiences... well, that support can't help but transform itself into joy.'

Another precious Nordic commodity had a hand in forming this ensemble: time. 'It's such a long, long time before you really feel at home in these works,' says Elvekjaer of the Beethoven. 'The fascinating thing is how it develops. I think only now we have a clear idea of what we want to do, and the process of getting there has been revealing. When you're ready, you feel it physically.' Soo-Kyung chips in: 'It's like suddenly wearing clothes that are the right size, that fit perfectly.'

Does that make the recording sessions a walk in the park? Not entirely. The ensemble spends more than 40 minutes on the second half of the Scherzo of the 'Archduke', questioning multiple aspects of Beethoven's teasing stop-start structure and abrupt ending. 'It's not so much technical difficulty,' says Elvekjaer. 'It's more that in the middle part of the Scherzo we're trying to zoom in on some



The members of Trio con Brio Copenhagen compare notes during their recording sessions at Danish Broadcasting Corporation headquarters

of the weirder elements and make them even more weird – to toy around with the timing, delaying slightly or pushing forwards slightly, so that there is an element of surprise in the performance.’ Isn’t it a little late to be making interpretative decisions like that – in the last of the scherzo’s sessions? ‘I’d say it’s more about making an existing interpretation fresh,’ says Elvekjaer. ‘It’s also something we do to benefit the editing process, so that when we sit down two months from now to knit the takes together, we have a selection to choose from.’

The public will be afforded a unique insight into that process courtesy of Trio con Brio Copenhagen’s ‘Beethoven Zoom’ project, spawned in collaboration with the DBC’s classical radio station P2. Elvekjaer explains: ‘It’s an interactive web document involving not all of Beethoven’s trios but some of the big ones including the “Ghost” and the “Archduke”. You’ll be able to listen to us playing them complete, but at certain key points the user will be able to stop and watch us on video exploring – in a

sort of laboratory setting – what the music is doing and why we’re taking the decisions we’re taking. We hope it will help people understand some of the key moments in these works and to dig into the pieces a little more, whether they’re chamber music lovers or potential chamber music lovers.’

The Beethoven Zoom project will be published by the DBC later this year, in English and in Danish and on the corporation’s borderless website. In the meantime, there is one more day of sessions to go for the CD. Late into the evening of the penultimate day, the score’s description as an ‘Everest’ has never felt more appropriate. ‘It works best if we imagine we’re playing in front of an audience,’ says Soo-Jin, ‘but that’s more easily said than done, and it’s easy to slip into something that lacks the tension of a concert performance.’

‘We like long takes,’ her sister adds. ‘They help especially in music like the opening movement of the “Archduke”, where the language is completely different from that of the earlier trios. You really need to feel every corner of it.’

With all the marital, familial and professional proximity flying around in this particular ensemble, the producer’s position of neutrality can be of human value as much as technical value. ‘When we’re not enjoying something or we get stuck, Bernhard has a great way of relaxing us and reminding us to enjoy it,’ says Soo-Jin. ‘He’s a great producer. We’ve made five records with him now,’ says Elvekjaer. ‘But I will always remember when we were working on the “Kakadu” Variations, and we really couldn’t make that last slow variation happen, and Bernhard’s voice came over the speaker and put a picture in our minds of a bar in Berlin full of people drinking beer dressed in leather. We opened up pretty quickly after that.’ ●

WORKS Beethoven: ‘Archduke’ Piano Trio op.97; Piano Trio in C minor op.1 no.3
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