

Piano Trios by Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn

By Daniel Felsenfeld

The Atlantis Trio gives a thoroughly exciting performance — and an additional explanatory CD that's equally informative.

(insert CD cover here)

Felix Mendelssohn: Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66
Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 11

The Atlantis Trio

Jaap Schröder (violin)
Enid Sutherland (cello)
Penelope Crawford (fortepiano)

Musica Omnia MO 0105

"Historically informed" Mendelssohn on period instruments, accompanied by an explanatory CD - it sounds like something only musicologists or audiophiles (that is, record nerds) can love. The Atlantis Trio's recording of Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn's piano trios, however, is anything but dull, pedantic or mannered: these are moving, forceful, and extremely well-thought-out renderings of two electrifying pieces of chamber music.

The opening Allegro of Felix's Trio has roller-coaster-like intensity, and the group skillfully navigates its labyrinthine turns. They never miss a chance to storm the climaxes, emphasize the quick musical shifts or even infuse aching tension into their playing of the lilting and lyrical. Overall this performance is so stimulating that a lack of levity (more like unabated intensity) in moments like Felix's humorous scherzo is completely forgivable.

They perform Fanny's lesser-known, but every bit as deft, trio with as much care and enthusiasm as they do Felix's repertoire staple, if not a bit more - the fact that this work is neglected gives them extra motivation. In this performance one can hear the ensemble at its best, with sensitive responses to one another (the strings as a unit react to the piano with all the subtlety and care that good chamber music playing ought to have), a real sense of purpose without being mannered and a willingness to enjoy the music together. If there were nothing on this record except Fanny's alluring (and almost sexy) finale it would still be worth having.

The accompanying CD offers an exegesis by the musicians of everything from the music to the actual performance to their (historically accurate) instruments. This is not a new idea - pedagogical recordings to accompany music recordings have been made by everyone from the charming and never-condescending Leonard Bernstein to the droll and uptight Benjamin Zander. In their discussion, the Atlantis Trio sidesteps musical jargon and offers interesting details - e.g., the fortepiano has something called a "moderator" pedal which Penelope Crawford uses in the first movement of Fanny's Trio to give her instrument a cimbalom-like sound. (Sadly, they have used their performance as background - not uncommon, and difficult to avoid, but it gives the wrong message as to the purpose of the music.) They teach without patronizing or using musical "doublespeak" to dazzle the listener - and it is refreshing that their discussions of the music's "passion" are genuine, rather than aping Hollywood's charmingly old-fashioned notion of the artiste.

What the Atlantis Trio offers here is a historically informed recording which is instructive and gives a clear sense of what the music sounded like in its time, but does not neglect the fact that its audience will be listening today, on a CD, and will want what every music lover wants - an excellent performance.

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