

A Survey of the Piano Trio Repertoire: Joseph Haydn by David Barker

Haydn is generally regarded as the father of the genre. While he wasn't the first to write for the combination, he certainly was the one to establish the genre with a substantial body of quality works. Even he didn't call them trios; they were published generally as keyboard sonatas with accompaniment, and even in the late works, a quick look at the score shows how much more work the piano does compared to the strings. Nevertheless, they have come down to us as piano trios, and as such, they are included here.

How many did he write? This is something of a moot point. The conventional wisdom is 45, but three of these were originally scored for flute instead of violin (Hob. XV/15-17), the provenance of some is not entirely certain, some early ones are transcriptions of other works and two are lost (Hob. XV/33 & D1). Nor does the numbering make life easier. The Hoboken catalogue has all but two in the fifteenth "section" (Hob. XV), but two are found in XIV: 6 & C1 (Nos 3 & 16). The Hoboken numbers do not correspond at all to the commonly used Robbins Landon (RL) numbering scheme, which is chronological. I refer you to [the relevant Wikipedia page](#) to allow you to cross-reference the two systems.

To complicate matters, a number of Naxos releases among other others have non-standard numbering, in that they simply use the Hoboken number, not the RL one. For example, Hob. XV/27 is called No. 27, when almost everyone else numbers it No. 43. This system is also used in the Naxos Music Library.

There is yet another numbering "system" used by at least two labels (Chandos & Hänssler), where, for example Hob. XV/27 (43, as per RL) is given the number 25. I don't know the basis for this, but it certainly makes for a good deal of confusion.

The basis for comparison

As before with Beethoven and Brahms, I don't intend to even attempt a comprehensive survey of the available recordings. To do so would mean I would never finish! Nor do I see it as very useful to pick recordings at random; rather it seems that the best approach is to pick one of the better known and oft-recorded works and compare as many recordings as I can find, as this will cover most of the major players in the market. While the Gypsy Rondo trio (No. 39) is probably the best known, I have chosen Trio No. 43 (Hob. XV/27), my personal favourite. It is in three movements (Allegro - Andante - Presto), and usually takes between 17 and 20 minutes; the Beaux Arts Trio's recording takes 17:34. There are in excess of 30 recordings.

Complete sets

One of the jewels of the recorded music era is the Beaux Arts Trio's survey of Haydn's complete piano trios from the 1970s. Though Philips is long gone, it is still available. Not only is it a glorious set musically, but with 43 trios, it is the only true complete one (ignoring for obvious reasons the two lost works). There are four other "projects" that claim completeness but have fewer works than the Beaux Arts set: Trio 1790 (CPO), Haydn Trio Eisenstadt (Phoenix Edition), Mendelssohn Piano Trio (Centaur) and Trio van Swieten (Brilliant Classics). Their complete sets range from 36 to 39 trios. It should be said that none of the missing works can be described as indispensable.

I think we can take it as read that the Beaux Arts set is self-recommending, so what about its competitors?

If your preference is an authentic instrument ensemble, then your choice is between Trio 1790 and Trio van Swieten. I am not on the same wavelength as the former, either in sound – a very tinkly keyboard and shrill violin – or the performance, which has slower than normal outer movements, and

a slow movement among the quickest. [Our reviewer](#) has kinder things to say. The sound of the Swieten instruments is better, but I wasn't greatly enthused by the short samples I could track down (there is an availability issue – see below).

Moving to modern instruments, I was impressed by the playing of the Haydn Trio Eisenstadt, which has all the grace and vivacity that I associate with Haydn, and [our reviewer](#) made it a Recording of the Month. There is, however, again an availability problem. The Mendelssohn Piano Trio seems rather stolid by comparison, and the rather poor impression I have gained of Centaur's recorded sound from other releases is reinforced here.

In terms of availability, there are problems with two of the five sets. The Phoenix set is no longer in print: there are some copies floating around, but good as it is, I don't think anyone is likely to pay the £400+ I saw one being offered for on Amazon Marketplace! However, it can be bought as a download, and is available on some of the streaming services. The Brilliant Classics set has been subsumed into a "complete" Haydn set of 160 CDs: you'd need to be very keen. Similarly, CPO now only offers theirs as a reduced price 8 CD set. By contrast, the Centaur is only available as individual CDs, though at full-price. However, the boxset of the Beaux Arts remains available through a Decca reissue, and is by far the cheapest option, so is there really much of a choice?

Late trio "sets"

Most ensembles and/or labels have concentrated on the later trios, which makes sense as these are where you find the best music. By late, I mean those written in the 1790s, which means Nos 32-45.

The two best will not surprise: the Florestan Trio (Hyperion) and Trio Wanderer (Harmonia Mundi). Their approaches differ quite markedly, the former elegant and refined in the same way as the Beaux Arts, the latter more dramatic and very swift. Indeed I needed to listen a couple of times to Trio Wanderer before I was convinced by their approach. There was no such issue with the Florestans – their style of playing would seem to suit the soundworld of Haydn absolutely perfectly. It is sad that they disbanded before giving us at least the remainder of the late trios; we will have to be content with the last eight. I would put the Beaux Arts just below these two.

The very fine and highly praised Kungsbacka Trio have released three CDs of the late trios on Naxos, Trio 43 being on Volume 2 (not reviewed on MWI). I certainly place them up towards the Florestan and Wanderer performances. Among our reviews of the other volumes, there has been a little disagreement. One reviewer awarded a Recording of the Month ([review](#)), another described them as "excellent" ([review](#)) but a third suggested they were only "sometimes successful" ([review](#)). There has been a fourth Naxos release with the Bartolozzi Trio, covering some of the earlier trios, and they too have been praised by both [our reviewers](#).

I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the performance given by the ensemble led by András Schiff (Eloquence, originally Decca) as I've never been a great admirer of his.

Of the recordings that were satisfactory, but lacking a certain spark to lift them up to the best were the Gryphon Trio (Analekta) Trio Opus 8 (Profil – [review](#)), Trio Jean Paul (CAvi Music) which is surprising as I'm usually more impressed by their playing, Grieg Trio (Simax – [review](#)) and Trio Viennarte (Campanella – [review](#)).

I mentioned in my original introduction to this survey that a concert by the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio provided my entrée into the world of the piano trio. As I have worked my way through the alphabet, I have encountered a number of their recordings, and I'm sad to say that none has greatly enthused me. The same applies here (Dorian): there is a lack of vitality and energy that is really essential in Haydn. Much the same can be said about the Munich Piano Trio (Orfeo).

If someone was to twist my arm and insist that I recommend an authentic instrument recording, it would be that by Robert Levin, Vera Beths and Anner Byslma (Sony). As would be expected by such eminent musicians, the playing is exceptional, they catch Haydn's moods beautifully and the instruments produce a very listenable sound. Comprising Haydn's last four trios, this is a very fine release. The trio of Patrick Cohen, Erich Höbarth and Christophe Coin (Harmonia Mundi) provide formidable opposition in the authentic market, and have recorded at least five Haydn volumes. However, I feel that in Trio 43 at the very least, they are not as good as the Levin trio.

Another Harmonia Mundi release - Berner/Schröder/Dieltens - elects to intersperse the trio's movements with some of Haydn's Scottish songs (yes, I realise that one can program whatever playing mechanism one is using to avoid this). There is probably a good historical reason for this, but since I was listening for the trio only, it wasn't an approach that worked for me. The performance and sound are good, but the songs are not my thing anyway, regardless of where they are placed. Trio Goya (Chandos) give us a fortepiano which sounds almost harpsichord-like. [Our reviewer](#) quite enjoyed their performances, so I will leave you with his thoughts.

Of the other authentic instrument performances, the Franz Joseph Trio (Atma Classique) adopts slow tempos throughout, and is a non-starter. Similarly, I don't think even the most ardent authentic instrument fan would enjoy the sound produced by the Cristofiori Trio (Hungaroton), and the reading is rather four-square. The "prize" for the worst version goes to The Queen's Chamber Trio (Lyricord), who actually do employ a harpsichord, and adopt the most absurdly slow tempo in the opening Allegro so that it takes almost 10 minutes (even Trio 1790 is under 9, and the Beaux Arts just over 7). I was gratified to find that I wasn't alone in this: [our reviewer](#) is well versed in authentic instrument practice and thought it "most disappointing and unsatisfying". He also pointed out that while Haydn did use the harpsichord much later than most composers, by the time Trio 43 was written in the 1790s, he had moved to the fortepiano as well, so the keyboardist's choice here is not even historically accurate.

Others

Trio Chausson (Mirare) take a rather different approach to their programming, with early and middle works coupled with No. 43, as well as a Hummel. Their performance takes a little getting used to; the opening Allegro has a quite Romantic feel that doesn't entirely work, but the remaining movements are considerably better.

Three recordings deserve a mention, even though they are not really relevant to a survey of Haydn trios in general, since each only includes my chosen "sample" trio.

I was totally charmed by two live festival performances. The older, from the 2003 Heimbach Festival (Warner Classics, originally on EMI) with the very distinguished ensemble of Lars Vogt, Antje Weithaas and Alban Gerhardt, is absolutely exemplary in all regards. The audience is very quiet except for an unfortunate interruption in the finale when some took a pause before a repeat to be the end. Sadly, as far as I can tell, these players have not recorded anything else together. The rest of the disc is given over to Mozart – a bassoon and cello sonata and a divertimento – with other performers. For trio aficionados, this is perhaps one for streaming, and my pick as the best performance of Trio 43. From the 2011 Lugano Festival recording, but without Martha Argerich, the lesser-known threesome of Cristina Marton, Alissa Margulis and Julian Steckel give a marvellous performance, which must have been quite thrilling to hear live. It is by far the quickest at 16:18, and I suspect, might tire a little in the comfort of one's home on repeated listening. Finally, the main interest in Trio Sono's release ([Genuine - review](#)) is to be found in trios of two unsung composers, Schneider and Klughardt, but their Haydn is very fine indeed.

Historical recordings of the Haydn trios are fairly scarce. The only Trio 43 I could track down to hear is in an 8-CD set celebrating the centenary of violinist Szymon Goldberg. It was, as you would expect, a little "old-fashioned" and with a lot of hiss and rumble, so it is for admirers of the performer mainly.

Trio Fontenay is probably the most important ensemble which has not recorded Trio No. 43, but have a significant body of Haydn trios: 25 in all which forms the bulk of Volume 2 of Warner's Haydn Edition. Their Gypsy Rondo trio is not sufficiently impressive for me to push them into the "must have" category.

Acknowledgements

The following recordings were obtained for this survey as downloads:

eClassical: [Haydn & Hummel \(Mirare\)](#)

Hyperion: [Haydn Vol. 1](#) ~ [Haydn Vol. 2](#)