

THE MENDELSSOHN PIANO TRIO



Centaur Records

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

The Complete Piano Trios, Volumes I and II



Volume I

Haydn's voluminous output alone does not explain his powerful musical and cultural influence. His some forty-five piano trios, though daunting in number, are also overwhelming in their stylistic breadth and ingenuity. They move across the boundaries of the Baroque and the Classical and even lick the edges of Romanticism. The move to a freer, more emotional expression came with the end of Haydn's 29-year tenure (1761-1795) as *Kapellmeister* in the court of the Hungarian Prince Paul Anton Esterházy and his two highly successful visits to London between 1791 and 1795.

Members of the Mendelssohn Piano Trio have noted that the works on each disc of their recording of the complete Haydn piano trios were chosen not to honor chronological order but to create an effective concert program.

Piano Trio in B-Flat Major, Hoboken XV: 8

We are warmly welcomed into this recording by the brave and cheerful opening statement of the *Allegro moderato* of Hob. XV: No. 8. Typical of Haydn, however, we take a dark minor turn before a return to the happy mood with its skipping rhythms. This return also reflects Haydn's major contribution to the development of sonata form.

Haydn keeps his 18th century wig and pantaloons in place for the elegant and gracious *Menuetto* but not at the expense of his creativity or his continuing exploration of the keyboard which here, as in the first movement, is assigned the most elaborate part. Certainly Haydn was tempted by the new developments of the pianoforte which would lead to the modern piano as we know it today. He also teases us with repeated phrases displaying the art of repetition and with syncopation, one of his favorite devices.

Hob. XV: 8, composed between 1784 and 1785, was the last of three trios dedicated to Countess Grassalkovic, niece of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy.

Piano Trio in F Minor, Hoboken XV: f1

This elaborately beautiful work, composed probably before 1760 and listed as No. 14 in H.C. Robbins Landon's chronological listing, is an early example of Haydn's genius with the piano trio form. Beneath its decorations lie darker implications, indicated by his choice of the key in which he would write his profound and masterful F Minor Variations for piano of 1793.

In the first and longest of the three movements, *Allegro moderato*, the piano offers ornamentations and variations on a motto, a daring feat in its own right. These variations coupled with a persistent return of the motto give the whole movement at once both a variety and a consistency remarkable in its sophistication and beauty. The second movement *Menuet* honors the traditional dance form but is not slave to it. The minor key persists, giving the elegant dance a certain solemnity. The mood brightens in the Trio section before a gentle conclusion. Haydn's gift for the Gypsy spirit, identified in his famous Hob. XV: 25 Trio, is clearly heard in the final *Allegro* of this much earlier work.

Piano Trio in E-Flat Major, Hoboken XV: 36

Despite its higher Hoboken number, the E-Flat Trio of about 1760 is considered the twelfth in Haydn's magnificent exploration of the form. Nothing, however, is behind the times in its musical concepts. In fact, much about the work is elusively modern, as first indicated by the free-form opening piano statement. Haydn further challenges us with startling harmonic shifts and a remarkable use of repeated notes that form a motto throughout the movement. The vibrant *Polonese* expands the notion of the traditional dance form, putting it somewhere between a dance and a march with strong unison playing that somehow does not negate the conversational quality we associate with Haydn. The *Finale* continues the spirit of the *Polonese* but with development and a suggestion of the variation form in which Haydn so excelled.

Piano Trio in D Major, Hoboken XV: 24

The D Major Trio of 1795 is one of three dedicated to the young widow, Rebecca Schroeter, with whom Haydn fell in love during his London visits. To view this relationship as affecting the G Major Trio is irresistible since the work is fraught with both tenderness and tension.

The first movement *Allegro* opens in typically bright Haydensque fashion, but beneath that lies a tension which becomes increasingly evident. Sudden harmonic shifts, descending chromaticisms, and dramatic pauses mark the movement, but perhaps more important than any of those devices is Haydn's insistent use of a motto and his brilliant conclusion.

The brief second movement *Andante* doubles the tension with its sad, almost funereal, sense. Here is music well ahead of its time in its expression of emotion. Technically it is advanced in both its balance of instruments and the virtuosic light in which the piano is cast. After a dramatic long note, the movement ends inconclusively in mid-air.

The "sweetness" of the *Allegro ma dolce* lies in its gently fugal quality with the three voices closely bound together. Sweetness abates, however, when Haydn turns forceful and almost angry in tone. After a brilliant section with staccato playing by the piano, the gentleness returns before the movement ends abruptly—much like Haydn's romance with Rebecca Schroeter when he left London in 1795 and returned to Vienna.

Piano Trio in A Major, Hoboken XV: 35

Before members of the Mendelssohn Piano Trio plunge into Haydn's famous "Gypsy" Trio of 1795, they turn to a much earlier one, Hob. XV: 35, composed somewhere between 1755 and 1760 when Haydn was still in his twenties. Chronologically, Hob. XV: 35 is listed as No. 10 in Haydn's forty-five piano trios composed over a period of some thirty-five years. By this choice we experience a trio that gives momentary relief from the complexities of the later trios. Complexity, however, is relative in Haydn, and to view the A Major Trio as simple is foolish. It is both as sophisticated and technically challenging as Mozart's piano trios and anticipates Beethoven's.

The first movement, for example, is much more than cheerful. It is a thorough exploration of sonata form, the use of kernel phrases or mottos, and a study in harmonic shifts. The second movement *Menuet* is an elegant example of Haydn's ability to take that dance form to new heights, and the energetic third movement marks an historic development in the balance of instruments.

If this Trio does not have the anguish of later ones, it is only because it is a brilliant example of a young and relatively untroubled spirit whisking his way through a piece with great ease. This Trio can give so much pleasure that one is tempted to overlook its complexities.

Piano Trio in G Major, Hoboken XV: 25

Variation form dominates both the opening *Andante*, with its many elaborations on a theme, and the *Finale* of Haydn's most famous piano trio of 1795 dedicated to Rebecca Schroeter. Its subtitle, "Gypsy," comes from the rousing *Rondo all' Ongarese* (Gypsy Rondo) of the last movement which employs the spirit of Magyar folk music. Brahms, Dvořák, and Bartók would also bow to this spirit but never in the sense of imitation. Those composers all put the individual stamp of their complex compositional techniques on the folk music that inspired them, but, again, it was Haydn who led the way to that process. Despite the fame of the last movement with its exciting minor episodes, it is the second movement, *Poco adagio*, that might most move a listener. Here the piano, despite the beauty of its part, allows the soloistic violin and the supportive cello their moments in the sun.

Placing this famous trio as the final work on this recording is another gesture in the Mendelssohn Piano Trio's effort to honor effective programming rather than chronological order.

Volume II

The five works included on this second volume of the Mendelssohn Piano Trio's recordings of the complete Haydn piano trios span some forty years of the master's compositional life and provide a full taste of his genius. Numbers 40 and 38, despite their higher numbers, were written probably before 1760 when Haydn was still in his twenties. No. 9 came in his fifties while he was still in his long service as Kapellmeister at the Esterházy court (1761-1790). Numbers 23 and 28 were composed in his sixties after he was freed of the Esterházy constraints and enjoyed two productive visits to London in 1791-1792 and 1794-95. Corresponding to all of this were the development of the piano which, after 1767, replaced Haydn's earlier use of the harpsichord in his trios, and, perhaps more important, Haydn's growing freedom of expression that did not bow to popular expectations.

Trio in F Major, Hoboken XV: 40

The gracious *Moderato* opening of this early Trio should not be perceived as merely simple. Haydn's so-called simplicity is a complex matter as evidenced in this brief work. The complexity grows in the second movement *Menuet* with its elaborations for the keyboard, its gently surprising shifts to the minor, and its echoing between violin and keyboard. The energetic *Finale* again reminds us of Haydn's complexities with its ravishing scales for the keyboard, its use of artful repetition, and its subtle chromatic ascents and descents.

The early date of this Trio (c. 1760) suggests that it was composed for harpsichord rather than pianoforte. If so, the harpsichordist was a mighty one since the keyboard part already suggests a freedom not widely evident in Haydn's time.

Trio in B-flat Major, Hoboken XV: 38

Once again, graciousness prevails in the first movement *Allegro* of XV: 38, but complexity comes soon in this second early trio (c. 1760) included on the disc. Although the piano and violin predominate, there is an increasing balance among the instruments despite the violin's many moments in the sun. A deceptive simplicity marks the second movement *Menuet* countered by increasingly dramatic minor shifts. Haydn does not hold back in the *Finale* with its fast tempo, wealth of surprises, and sharp chromatic descents. So, too, does the cello make its imprint in this movement that is nothing short of brilliant.

Trio in D Minor, Hoboken XV: 23

In Hob. XV: 23 we leap to a trio written during the first of Haydn's important stays in London (1794-95). No longer restrained by court demands, his emotional expression abounded. If we see a new face of Haydn in this work, it might well be a reflection of his life experiences including his love for the young widow Rebecca Schroeter. That love brings both joys and sorrows is clearly expressed in this Trio.

While elegance and propriety mark the opening *Molto andante*, so does serious intention. Sonata form is treated in its strongest sense with a lively development section contrasting to the opening minor statement. The resounding chords demanded of the pianist suggest an instrument more powerful than the harpsichord. After a curious outbreak of joyfulness, Haydn returns to the serious mood of the opening.

With the second movement we experience the first Haydn *adagio* on this recording with a moving violin solo under a solemn piano accompaniment. The cello grounds the ensemble.

Any hint of sadness is dispelled in the Finale with its *vivace* tempo and its virtuosic challenges. Those challenges might have surprised an 18th century audience looking for mere entertainment in this elaborate and complex work.

The D Minor Trio of 1794 was one of three dedicated to Princess Maria Josepha, wife of Prince Nicolas Esterházy. All three are noted by Charles Rosen in his *Classical Style* as "powerful, imaginative works," and the D Minor as "having the most brilliant finale full of rhythmic ingenuity."

Trio in A Major, Hoboken XV: 9

With Haydn's A Major Trio, Mozart comes to mind. Indeed, by its composition date, 1785, Haydn and Mozart had met and become admiring friends. In a letter, Mozart said of Haydn, "No one else can do everything—be flirtatious and be unsettling, move to laughter and move to tears—as well as Joseph Haydn." Such is the case in the A Major Trio.

The "move to tears" certainly applies to the beautiful *Adagio* with its dramatic opening that soon transitions into a beautiful song for the violin. A solo moment is given to the piano, and the cello goes well beyond its traditional accompaniment role. New ground is established also in terms of lyrical expression and dramatic gestures by all three instruments.

"Flirtatious" and "unsettling" might well refer to the second movement *Vivace* with its bright mood, strength, and virtuosic demands. The contrast it offers to the *Adagio* is, in itself, a compositional stroke of genius.

Trio in E Major, Hoboken XV: 28

In the E Major Trio of 1797, we are again reminded of Mozart's comment that Haydn could be "unsettling." Surely it is the many innovations employed in the Trio that cause this. In the first movement, we are surprised by the opening plucking of the strings and then by the virtuosic showcase offered by the piano. Furthermore, the rhythmic eccentricities, riveting chromaticisms, and inventive exploration of the main theme are astonishing.

The second movement *Allegretto* is no less disturbing with its solemn tempo established by the piano's left hand while the right hand explores a beautiful melody in many permutations. Even the length of the opening piano solo is a surprise. Haydn is no imitator, but if he looked to Mozart in his Hob. XV: 28 Trio, it is Bach to whom he bows in this movement with its strong contrapuntal writing.

The quick pace of the Finale brightens the mood but does not alleviate the "unsettling" qualities of the work with its minor shifts, dramatic pauses, and continuing exploration of a single motif. To all these disturbances, Haydn gives a definitive conclusion, but we remain in amazement.

The E Major Trio was probably conceived during Haydn's second visit to London. With its companion pieces, Hob. XV: 27 and 29, it was dedicated to Theresa Jansen, the virtuosic London pianist for whom he also wrote his last three piano sonatas. Charles Rosen speaks of these three trios as "the most difficult Haydn ever wrote and a formidable and intellectual achievement." The E Major Trio he singles out as "even more extraordinary, in some ways the strangest of all Haydn's late works."