

Beethoven**Piano Trios, Volume 1.**

No. 5 in D, Op. 70 No. 1, 'Ghost'. No. 6 in E flat, Op. 70 No. 2. Variations in E flat, Op. 44.

Xyrion Trio (Ida Bieler, violin; Maria Kliegel, cello; Nina Tichman, piano).

Naxos 8.557723 (super-budget price, 1 hour 12 minutes). Website www.naxos.com. Producer/Engineer Teije van Geest. Dates October 2004.

Comparisons:

Piano Trios Nos. 5 and 6:

Florestan Trio (Hyperion) CDA67327

(2001-02, rev. April 2003)

Trio Parnassus (Dabringhaus und Grimm) MDG303 1053-2

Titled 'Volume 1', this is evidently the beginning of what will evolve into a cycle of the Beethoven piano trios. The recorded competition in this repertory is formidable, but the considerably lesser cost of this super-budget version makes it a strong contender in such a market.

In the main, the Xyrion Trio offer stylish, sympathetic readings that project the essence of these two markedly contrasted trios – the *Ghost* brashly eruptive and motivic in its outer movements, hauntingly intense in its inner one; its companion is more elusive, with sly harmonic ambiguities and a gentle lyricism that are as much a part of Beethoven's creative personality as the more explosive outbursts in the *Ghost*. In both works tempos are well judged, the opening of the *Ghost* rightly crackling with energy and drive; its middle movement having an apt breadth that never stagnates, its finale a welcome thrust and abandon. In Op. 70 No. 2 the group proves especially adept at projecting the spookiness of harmonic progressions that make some of the work's passages as ghostly as anything in Op. 70 No. 1. And throughout both scores, the Xyrion's tempos are similar to those in the admirable accounts by the Parnassus and Florestan Trios.

Where this release falls somewhat short of those two is in its sound. In general the tone of Nina Tichman's piano is coarser and harsher than that of her counterparts in the other two accounts. And it seems rooted in the kind of edginess that may well be as much attributable to the engineering as to the performer, especially as the piano is sometimes a bit clangorous and overly prominent in the very close perspective of the recording. But this is not a major fault given the overall merits in both of these readings. Indeed, the major limitation here may be that both string players lack the polish and nuance of their counterparts in the Parnassus and Florestan ensembles. All the same, the Xyrion's feel for the quintessential Beethoven often carries the day. With their fine account of the Op. 44 *Variations* (an early work, despite its comparatively high opus number) this release has much to recommend it, especially at its price. In both trios, all repeats are observed.

Mortimer H. Frank