

SWISS PERSPECTIVE • Trio Nota Bene • CLAVES 502912 (56:31)

RAFF **Piano Trio in c**, op. 102. BLOCH **Three Nocturnes**. HONEGGER **Piano Trio in f**, H 214. MARTIN **Trio on Popular Irish Folk Tunes**

Though Switzerland managed to produce a number of outstanding composers, it has never produced a nationally identifiable music. What I mean by this is that there seems to be a readily recognizable uniqueness to musical vocabularies and dialects, often derived from native folk cultures that we instinctively grasp in the works of Austro-German, French, English, Russian, Scandinavian, and Slavic composers. We may not necessarily be able to single out the specifics, but even if we've never heard the piece before, we somehow seem to intuit that it sounds German or French. But what does Swiss music sound like?

The surprise here is that among the composers listed in the headnote, the one whose music possibly comes closest to sounding "Swiss"—whatever that might mean—is the one composer who wasn't born in Switzerland and who spent very little time there: Arthur Honegger (1892–1955). He was born to Swiss parents, albeit in France, where he lived most of his life and where he died. He became associated with *Les Six*, but a strain of Germanic seriousness and an interest in Bach's counterpoint tend to set him apart from his French cohorts.

The three remaining composers who *were* Swiss by birth did not remain long in their native country. Joachim Raff (1822–1882) followed his rainbow to Germany; the nomad, Frank Martin (1890–1974), ended up in the Netherlands by way of France, Italy, and Germany; and Ernest Bloch (1880–1959) emigrated to the U.S., as did many Jewish European composers.

In contrast to the works on this disc which are "Swiss" in rather the same way that the Kraft cheese with the holes in it in my refrigerator is Swiss, the Trio Nota Bene is the real deal. The members of the ensemble (Julien Zufferey, violin; Xavier Pignat, cello; and Lionel Monnet, piano) all hail from towns within the Canton of Valais and received their diplomas from the Lausanne Conservatory in 2000. Further coaching by the Trio Wanderer in Paris followed in 2003. The Trio participated in master classes with Roberto Szidon at the Sion Summer Academy and with Menahem Pressler of the Beaux-Arts Trio in Basel. The current recording is Trio Nota Bene's second for Claves. Their first album for the label was a disc of Russian piano trios by Arensky, Rachmaninoff, and Shostakovich.

Raff completed his C-Minor Piano Trio, the first of four to be published (he destroyed an earlier effort) in 1861. By then, the not-yet-40-year-old composer had already reached opus 102. But being both prolific and popular in his lifetime did not guarantee Raff future acclaim. And while recordings of his music are not in short supply (cpo, in particular, has devoted considerable attention to Raff's works), a full-blown revival has not materialized. The reason becomes clear listening to this trio. As a work of craftsmanship, it's a beautifully turned piece of musical furniture. Rushing cascades of notes press the angst-ridden *Rasch* movement forward in a Mendelssonian flume, but Mendelssohn's gift for melody and easeful turns of phrase are in short supply, as is his light-footed, mercurial touch in Raff's *Sehr Rasch* scherzo. Though a generation later and stylistically closer to Schumann, Raff somehow reminds me of another prolific composer who was highly celebrated in his lifetime but just as quickly forgotten: George Onslow. Both men shared a similar fate because ultimately, I think, their music just isn't that inspired or memorable. The Trio Nota Bene, however, give Raff's trio their all in a performance and recording superior to that by the Opus 8 Trio on cpo.

Three aspects of night are drawn in Bloch's Three Nocturnes. The first is a plaintive and somewhat sullen piece hovering on the edge between dreaming and waking. Second in the set is a sweet and gentle lullaby, while the third number is restive and troubled, like the pre-dawn

disturbing dream that wakes one from his slumber. The Trio Nota Bene are easily a match in the Bloch for the only other performance on record I know which is by the Kairos Piano Trio on Musicaphon [see review by Phillip Scott in 29:3].

It seems a bit of a stretch to call Honegger's 1914 Piano Trio a piano trio rather than a short piece lasting just under four minutes that happens to have been written for violin, cello, and piano. Influences of Max Reger and French Impressionism come together in this academic exercise by the 22-year-old Honegger, still a student at the time he wrote it.

Commissioned in 1925 by a wealthy Irish American to write a piece incorporating Irish melodies, Frank Martin, in Paris at the time, based his *Trio on Popular Irish Folk Tunes* on a collection of Irish songs and dances he found in the National Library, working them into a traditional three-movement piano trio. The composer's patron was nonetheless nonplussed, for Martin, being the assimilator of musical influences that he was, produced no medley of Irish jigs and reels. While the original melodies may still be recognizable, they are cocooned in modernist trappings that seem fashioned from bits and pieces of Debussy, Ravel, the jazz idioms of Stravinsky, and the neo-classicism of the Schola Cantorum. Of the four works on the disc, it's the Martin that poses the greatest competition in number of recordings, being also included on the aforementioned Kairos CD.

Overall, the Trio Nota Bene's performances are very satisfying. Their playing is warm and responsive, and they navigate the technical difficulties of these scores with ease and thoroughly polished execution. If I find the program of works more intellectually interesting than emotionally inspiring, that is not the fault of the players. With the possible exception of the Bloch, these are not pieces I just can't wait to hear again. The Claves recording is excellent and its presentation in an attractively produced package very appealing. Not the most urgent of recommendations, but recommended nonetheless. **Jerry Dubins**