

Concert review: TonTrio at the Panjim church

September 14, 2010 by Luis Dias



TonTrio at rehearsal before the concert

TonTrio, the twenty-something piano trio from Germany ended their concert tour of India in the glorious setting of the Panjim church on 6 September evening, staking their claim to being one of today's brightest emerging young chamber ensembles on the musical horizon.

Beethoven Piano Trio no. 6 in E flat major, op. 70 no. 2: The very opening searching melancholic solo cello line (Haverkamp), answered first by violin (Schmied) and then joined by the piano (Kraus), betrayed TonTrio's genuine heartfelt feeling for chamber music playing. This movement perhaps best illustrates what Donald Francis Tovey meant when he noted that Beethoven had achieved in this composition an "integration of Mozart's and Haydn's resources, with results that transcend all possibility of resemblance to the style of their origins...." The opening introduction re-appears several times in the movement, each time leading the impetus along new bylanes, which TonTrio skilfully negotiated with practised ease, and with spellbinding vitality and integrity.

The inner movements, in their tender *jugalbandi* conversation between the three instruments, especially between the strings, were laden with the fruit of TonTrio's apprenticeship with more seasoned ensembles, notably the Alban Berg Quartet. This was apparent in the players' seamless, instinctive level of co-ordination, their comfortable camaraderie, the frequent eye contact, the way every corner was turned as a threesome, and their palpable delight in the music.

The last movement (*Allegro*) was vintage Beethoven, and crackled with energy, full of abrupt dynamic contrasts, with bravura passages for all, reminiscent of the Triple Concerto, albeit in a much more cheerful, almost ecstatic vein.

Dmitri Shostakovich Trio no. 1 in C major, op. 8: Although written at age sixteen in 1923, and devoid of Stalin's menacing shadow (although Stalin would rise to power just a year later), it already bears Shostakovich's unmistakable fingerprint. He had a turbulent adolescence, to say the least. Following on the death of his father the preceding year, Dmitri was compelled to support his mother and sisters by working as a cinema pianist. Sent to a sanatorium to recuperate from tuberculosis, he met Tatyana Glivenko, his first love and his *idée fixe* for well over a decade. It is interesting to note that a Google search of this work yields it listed as both C major and as C minor, and the very opening bars make clear why this is so. The descending string melodic line glides glassily over a surface of tonal ambiguity, with an ostinato repeated note in the piano. Haverkamp's soliloquy in the central *Andante* over a rocking piano accompaniment is the soul of the work, an almost balletic love theme in the great tradition of compatriots Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Rachmaninov. It is an oasis of calm before a storm of grotesque, frenetic force is unleashed, only to reprise the introduction, and then the "love" theme, followed by a furious race to the finishing post culminating in a triumphant, definitely major chord. Schmied's violin played out with full-rounded tone when required, but was sensitively unobtrusive when the score demanded it. Haverkamp's rich deep timbre shone in the central theme, against the counterfoil of Kraus' tender filigree piano accompaniment. Chamber music does not get much better than this. The work seems to have fired the imagination of many in the audience.

Robert Schumann Piano Trio in F major, op. 80: This work was obviously chosen as homage to Schumann in this his bicentenary year. It began with a burst of vigour. The ensemble ebbed and flowed with the tide of Schumann's music, alternately restraining themselves and surging forward with the natural

contour of the music, with utmost care over grading of dynamics and shapes of phrases. Right through the work, there was absolute accord of purpose, attention to tonal balance, and coherence of sound.

The encore piece was the Finale (*Rondo a l'Ongarese: Presto*) of **Haydn's Piano trio no. 39 in G major, Hob. XV/25**, nicknamed the "Gypsy" after the "Hungarian" flavour of this movement. Haydn spent a lot of his life in Esterházy and Eisenstadt, in close proximity to the Hungarian plain, so he was very conversant with the regional folk music. TonTrio took this piece at an invigorating, breakneck tempo that would have done Roby Lakatos proud, and perhaps made Papa Haydn smile benevolently as well. The spirited work careened dangerously at the brink of a precipice, like a gypsy wagon at full tilt. The sense of gay abandon in the central footstomping syncopated variation was underpinned by the admirable control that this gifted ensemble have over their instrument, and their musicmaking.

Famed Bombay violin pedagogue Melbourne Halloween used to describe music-making as the "highest form of yoga". TonTrio that evening seemed to have attained nirvana, transporting their audience to this spiritual plane as well.

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