

Saint Michael Trio: DEBUT on PRESENTATION PARTNERS

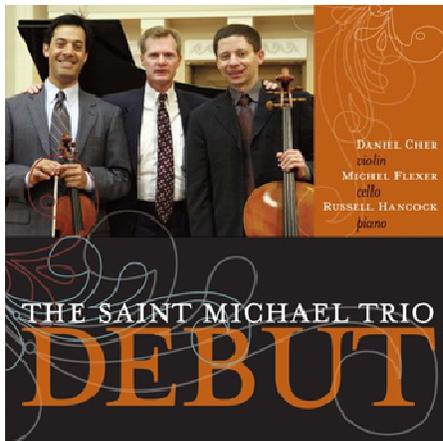
Classical Reviews - Ensemble

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DEBUT • Saint Michael Trio • PRESENTATION PARTNERS 3348 (52:20)

CHAMINADE Piano Trio in g: Scherzo. DEBUSSY Piano Trio in G: Andantino. MENDELSSOHN Piano Trio in c: Allegro energico. ARENSKY Piano Trio in d: Elegia. MENDELSSOHN Piano Trio in d: Leggiero e vivace. BRAHMS Piano Trio in c: Presto non assai. MENDELSSOHN Piano Trio in d: Andante con moto. J. WILLIAMS Theme from Schindler's List. PIAZZOLLA Primavera Porteña



Three Silicon Valley musicians—Daniel Cher, violin; Michel Flexer, cello; and Russell Hancock, piano—joined in 2007 to form a new ensemble. Calling themselves the Saint Michael Trio (the choice of name is not elucidated), they are all professionally trained, seasoned players. Cher won the undergraduate music prize at Stanford University, and appeared as soloist with Orchestra New England and the New Haven Symphony. Flexer, while a student at Harvard, studied with Bernard Greenhouse of Beaux Arts Trio fame at the New England Conservatory. Hancock has appeared as a soloist with the Redwood Symphony, Ohlone Chamber Orchestra, and Saratoga Symphony, among others.

But then their life stories took an interesting turn. Each of the three men came independently to the decision that “music would be even more satisfying if it weren’t the only thing.” And thus what we have in the Saint Michael Trio are three thoroughly polished players for whom music is an “avocation,” defined by the dictionary as an activity outside the profession by which one earns a living but which is one’s true passion in life. By day, Cher is a medical doctor who leads clinical trials for Chestnut Medical Technologies. Flexer is a software engineer who has worked most recently for Gain Technologies and Siebel Systems. Hancock is president and CEO of Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network. As the title of the CD indicates, this is the ensemble’s first album.

The question that immediately arises is, “Can one man serve two masters?” There are, after all, only so many hours in a day, and it would seem that with high-pressure, time-consuming, important day jobs, sooner or later one pursuit or the other is likely to suffer neglect. Already, the Saint Michael Trio has been named artists in residence at Menlo College, and has been promoted in concert by the Steinway Society. Will increasing demands for concert appearances and recordings compromise professional careers? A

second question sure to be asked is, “Can three part-time musicians, good as they are, compete in the same arena with those for whom music is a full-time calling?”

The first question can only be answered by the individual members of the group. But based on evidence of the performances on this disc, I can answer the second question with a resounding YES. There is no way you would know listening to these three players that they were anything but a top-flight professional ensemble that had been playing together for many years; they are that good. I listened very hard to see if I could detect telltale signs of anything less than impeccable technical execution or anything less than musically immaculate conception, but of these I heard none. To the contrary, what I heard was playing that equaled, and in some cases surpassed, what I’ve heard from a number of celebrated piano trios.

Intonation is dead-on-center; bowing is clean and smooth, without any coarseness or grittiness; tone production across the entire range is perfectly weighted, balanced, and refined; and articulation of phrasing is carefully calibrated and beautifully matched. In fact, one of the more impressive characteristics on display by the Saint Michael Trio is the close mirroring of expression through bow pressure and vibrato, with the result that the exchange between voices dovetails seamlessly.

As for the program, I’d have preferred to hear two works given complete, but I understand the desire to showcase the Saint Michael Trio in a sampler album drawn from its performing repertoire. All but one or two of the pieces should be familiar to chamber-music mavens, for they are movements from frequently recorded, well-known works. The two Mendelssohn trios and the Brahms trio, in particular, have received abundant exposure on record.

Perhaps less widely known is the gorgeous Trio in G Minor by the long-lived French composer Cécile Chaminade (1857–1944), of which currently listed recordings are few. She was approximately contemporary with the much shorter-lived Ernest Chausson (1855–1899) and the even longer-lived Gustave Charpentier (1860–1956), but much of her music is for solo piano, and in the vein of the supple salon style of another near contemporary, Reynaldo Hahn (1874–1947). Her G-Minor Trio, however, one of two she wrote, is a serious and radiant work that deserves greater attention than it has received. A fine recording of it on Dorian with the Rembrandt Trio from 1993 is still available for those who wish to hear the piece in its entirety. The Saint Michael Trio tantalizes us with just its Scherzo.

Listening to John Williams’s Theme from Schindler’s List , a guaranteed tear-jerker, I was struck by how closely related its melodic, harmonic, and gestural language is to Brahms when heard out of its motion-picture context.

I readily admit to an almost total lack of familiarity with the music of Astor Piazzolla, but what I learned of Primavera Porteña —no thanks to the enclosed note by San Jose Mercury News writer Sal Pizarro that says nothing about the music, and reads like the casual jargon of the pop music press (“It’s so quaint it’s cool”)—is that the piece is the first movement of a four-movement tango suite entitled Cuatro estaciones porteñas , Piazzolla’s answer to Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. Primavera is of course “spring,” and it’s a spiky, rhythmically complex number that the Saint Michael Trio tosses off quite deftly.

This is a wonderful debut album, one that whets the appetite for more, and not just in the form of a buffet, from this outstanding new ensemble. Jerry Dubins

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