

≈ **BEETHOVEN Piano Trios Nos. 1–6. *Kakadu Variations*. 14 Variations in E♭, op. 44 • Weiss Kaplan Stumpf Tr • BRIDGE 9505 (Streaming audio: 229:49)**  
<https://www.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=BCD9505>

This is a thought-provoking set of Beethoven’s complete piano trios, which you can’t often say about standard repertoire. **The performances are superb in a way that speaks to a deep rapport with the composer**, and I can’t help but wonder how such empathy came about—it seems like a quality that emanates from a seasoned Viennese ensemble, while the Weiss Kaplan Stumpf Trio is made up of three faculty members at Indiana University’s music school who are either American or Israeli-American.

In lieu of conventional program notes, each member of the group offers personal reflections about Beethoven in the booklet, and violinist Mark Kaplan makes a remark that rings true for the exceptional quality of these performances. In a recording session, he notes, the usual practice is to do a few takes of a movement and then immediately listen a playback in order to find ways of improving the next take. With most pieces, the performers go back and add more expression.

“However, with Beethoven and Bach — with this very pure music,” Kaplan writes, “such an approach ultimately doesn’t work. Here, the only thing that can make a performance more compelling is to have a deeper understanding of the inner truth of the music, an understanding that cannot be simulated merely by playing the music in a juicier way.”

I find that a moving statement of the kind one expects from a musician of the stature of Yehudi Menuhin or Wilhelm Furtwängler. You hope, in our time of efficient, technically brilliant but impersonal performers, that the quest for musical depth has been passed on somehow. I don’t know by what means Kaplan reaches his aims, or how he shares them with pianist Yael Weiss and cellist Peter Stumpf, but the results speak for themselves—the **spirit of Beethoven’s music comes through with profound understanding**.

**I’d say without a doubt that this is the best set of the six numbered piano trios since the classic set on EMI with the young Daniel Barenboim, Pinchas Zukerman, and Jacqueline du Pré.** It is generously filled out with the *Kakadu Variations* and the Variations in E-flat, op. 44 (a lesser work, thought to come from the 22-year-old Beethoven just before he left Bonn). **The recorded sound is superb, capturing each instrument in perfect balance. No previous recordings I’ve heard, including Barenboim-Zukerman-du Pré, can match it sonically.**

The reason I’ve waited late in this review to mention any musical details is that these are the kind of performances that barely need commentary. Start with the two masterpieces that everyone knows, the “Ghost” and “Archduke” Trios, and **you are immersed in totally engrossing interpretations that evoke every mood the score contains. From bravura to introspection, nothing is slighted, and the phrase-shaping brings out countless gestures that are beautiful, touching, and insightful.**

The gorgeous tone of Kaplan’s violin and Stumpf’s cello is matched by the richness of Weiss’s pianism. Each member of the trio stands out as an individual voice

with soloist presence. As much as I admire the ensemble playing here, Beethoven's instrument was the piano, and without someone who plays the piano part as if it was a solo sonata, these scores don't reach the heights Beethoven intended. In that regard, Weiss is all but ideal.

I want to scotch any impression that these are weighty or sober readings, because the lightness of the three op. 1 trios is vivaciously conveyed. The performers add a degree of nuanced elegance that gives these early works an extra dimension without making them too cultivated for their own good.

There's every reason to give this release the strongest recommendation. It is rare to add to standard repertoire with performances that come from a joyous source of inspiration, but that has happened here. **Huntley Dent**

*Five stars: An inspiring set, the best in decades*