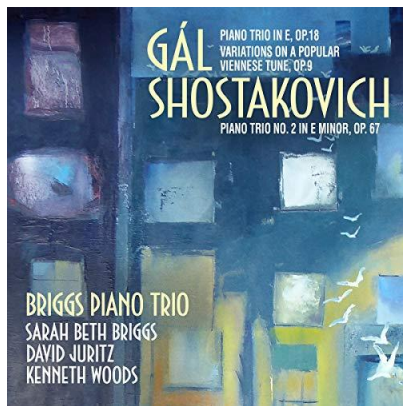


 **GÁL Piano Trio in E, op. 18. Variations on a Viennese “Heurigen” Melody, op.**

9. SHOSTAKOVICH Piano Trio No. 2 • Briggs Pn Tr • AVIE 2390 (63:05)



[Gal: Piano Trio in E, Op.18; Variations on a Popular Viennese Tune, Op.9; Shostakovich: Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67](#)

[Audio CD](#)

[AVIE Records](#)



In issue 36:2, I reviewed a later Piano Trio in G Major by Hans Gál (1890–1987), neglecting to give its opus number, 49b. That trio was commissioned by the Austrian Federal Publishing House in 1949, but its date of composition is uncertain. One thing that is certain is that its style looks back to a much earlier time, influenced perhaps by Brahms, whose works Gál had edited 10 volumes of for the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde back in the 1920s, long before Gál fled Austria for England in 1938, and eventually settled in Scotland. The Piano Trio in E Major we have here dates from 1923, and in some ways it’s more modern-sounding, or at least more of its own time, than is the G-Major Trio from a quarter of a century later. I would hasten to add, however, that for its time and place—1920s Vienna—this E-Major Trio remains more centered in tonality than do the works written around this same time by Schoenberg and Zemlinsky.

Gál’s muse is essentially a Romantic one, overlaid but not overtaken by the total chromaticism and breakdown in harmonic relations of his better-known contemporaries. Still, the piece is an unmistakable product of Viennese musical culture during the first two decades of the 20th century. It has all the earmarks of the voluptuous melodic heaving and nostalgic indulgence that came to characterize the music of this milieu. I can almost guarantee that if you like the music of Korngold, especially the works he was writing around the same time that Gál was composing this trio—works such as the Piano Quintet in E Major, op. 15 (1920–21), the String Quartet No. 1 in A Major, op. 16 (1923), and the Piano Concerto in C# Minor for the Left Hand, op. 17 (1923)—you are bound to respond positively to the Gál. It’s a beautiful score that strives to stroke the ears with sensual melodic and harmonic swells and surges.

I’m aware of only one other recording of Gál’s E-Major Piano Trio. It’s performed by Doris and Karin Adam and Christoph Stradner on a Camerata album that includes the later G-Major Piano Trio and the Variations on a Viennese “Heurigen” Melody. The latter piece is also included on the present disc. I didn’t understand the “heurigen” reference at first, “heurigen” being the German word for a winery. A more understandable translation of the title would be “Variations on a folk song overheard in a Viennese wine bar.”

Composed in 1914, the Variations is one of Gál's earliest published works. The bar song on which the piece is based is about as loopy as you would expect, but just as Beethoven found extraordinary potential in the most seemingly unpromising ditties, Gál spins the most charming and truly beautiful variations you can imagine from this tipsy little tune. At one point, he turns it into an almost surreal-sounding Viennese ballroom dance, both gay and sad at the same time.

Shostakovich's Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor is one of the composer's most oft-recorded and frequently programmed chamber music concert works, where it's always a hit with audiences for its special effects and *Fiddler on the Roof*-like moments. Surely, it's one of the composer's more immediately accessible works. Yet, for all that, it's pretty much in character for Shostakovich overall: the first and third movements grim with tragedy beyond any telling of it, frozen in the moment by unspeakable horror happening in slow motion; the burlesque-like second movement, filled with biting parody and grotesquerie; and then the finale, a Klezmer band playing a *danse macabre* for the victims forced by their executioners to dance beside their own graves before they were shot.

Beneath the notes that make Shostakovich's E-Minor Piano Trio so popular and that give it such appeal lies a bitter and baleful work. It was composed, after all, in the early months of 1944, a very dark period for Russia and for Shostakovich personally. Over a million had died in the German siege of Leningrad, and in February of that year, one of the composer's nearest and dearest friends and confidantes, Ivan Sollertinsky, had died of a heart attack. It was a time of devastation and demoralization for Shostakovich himself and for the country as a whole.

At least insofar as *Fanfare* is concerned, this is the Briggs Piano Trio's first appearance in these pages, though for three reasons I believe that Kenneth Woods, cellist of the ensemble, is the same Kenneth Woods as the conductor who has led numerous recordings reviewed in previous issues. Reason #1, as conductor, he seems to have made somewhat of a specialty of Hans Gál's music, recording the composer's four symphonies, Piano Concerto, and Violin Concerto. So, there's the Woods/Gál connection with the present disc. Reason #2, Sarah Beth Briggs, pianist and namesake of the ensemble, was the soloist under Woods in the recording of Gál's Piano Concerto. So, conductor and pianist have worked together before. And Reason #3, which offers the most direct evidence of all, is to be found in Woods's biography, which states, "Cellist and conductor Kenneth Woods is fast becoming recognized as a musician of rare versatility, equally at home as conductor, recitalist, chamber musician and soloist." So, there you have it, the coming together of pianist Sarah Beth Briggs, violinist David Juritz, and Kenneth Woods as cellist in what I take to be the very recently formed Briggs Piano Trio. The ensemble's website lists no prior recordings by these artists as a threesome, so it seems safe to say that this is their debut album as such.

The Gál Trio, as noted above, has one other recording I'm aware of. Perhaps there are others; I don't know. When it comes to the Shostakovich, however, recorded competition is crushing, and many of those performances are in the exceptionally good category. The last one, I think, that stood out for me as truly special was the account by a young Italian ensemble calling itself the David Trio (see review in 35:3). But that was in 2012, ancient history by now in our accelerated pace of commerce.

The Shostakovich opens with Woods's cello harmonics, distant, cold, and eerie, as they should be. It's like some timeless elemental vibration that left the recesses of deep space eons and eons ago, only now to reach our cosmic shores. The players capture the increasing tension and eventual frenzy of the movement with excellent control, allowing the buildup to come slowly and naturally.

Unfortunately, I'm not able to render a positive opinion about the ensemble's performance of the second movement. I've commented before that it's possible for string players to generate a great

deal of frenetic commotion and dramatic conflict without scoring their strings or tearing the hair out of their bows. But that isn't the way of the Briggs Piano Trio. This second movement is almost all scratch and no tone. Some may like this super-aggressive, sand-blasting approach, but for me, it's one demerit against the Briggs's performance.

Somber and bleak in mood, the Passacaglia (third movement) unfolds in a sequence of variations that differ only in degree of hopelessness and desperation. I really like the way in which violinist David Juritz modulates his tone to simulate a pained wail. For much of the movement, it sounds as if he's playing with his bow rotated so that only half of the hairs contact the strings. The feeling of anguish and despondency is palpable. If only this could make up for the grinding, grating, and grit of the second movement.

The Briggs's players do an even better job in the finale than most I've heard at simulating the tart and twangy sound of a band of broken down shtetl survivors, squeezing what notes they can from their broken-down instruments. Once again, violinist Juritz has to be singled out for projecting a poignant picture postcard of three Jews, clad in shmatas and grinning through missing teeth, looking for all the world like pathetic Polish hillbillies. You have to hear Juritz's part-sneering/part-simpering, half-glissando/half-portamento slides to really appreciate Shostakovich's satirizing indictment of ethnic stereotyping.

I wish the Briggs's playing in the second movement weren't so abrasive, but execution and musical acumen in the first, third, and fourth movements are of a qualifying merit to make this performance of Shostakovich's E-Minor Piano Trio a top contender. Add to that the two compelling Gál works, and the case for this release just went from "strongly" to "urgently" recommended. **Jerry Dubins**