

Feature Article by Lynn René Bayley

Stringing Along With Trio Voce

As a critic, I have become so inured to piano trios and their recordings that at times it almost seems like the Endless Succession of the Cookie-Cutters. At least, that's the impression that so many of them make nowadays, when musical interpretation has become generic and even formulaic. When you hear a modern-day chamber group—especially a young one—that pushes the boundaries of the music they perform, it almost seems like a throwback to the 1950s and '60s when such groups proliferated. Such a group is Trio Voce. Made up of three young women, pianist Patricia Tao, violinist Jasmine Lin, and cellist Marina Hoover, all of whom have played as soloists in various venues with other major musicians (and who have recorded on various labels separately), they came together to form this trio in 2008 and have made a strong and immediate impression on the chamber music scene. Their first CD, consisting of works by Shostakovich and Weinberg, was highly praised in *Fanfare 36:3* by Art Lange, who raved of their “deeply committed and passionate performances,” adding that “really dig in, always allowing the contrapuntal lines equal prominence.” But of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and I am sure there are readers scanning this article who are skeptical of just how good is good.

Well, I am here to tell you, Trio Voce is VERY good. How good? As good as the Colorado String Quartet, another all-woman ensemble that has garnered consistently superb reviews for their work and yet have managed to fly a bit under the radar. We didn't have a lot of time to formulate questions or get answers for this interview, but in this case I found that compiling the questions came easily, so impressed was I with their work. It's easy to be enthusiastic about your subject when they impress you so greatly. But first, some quick professional background info on them (culled from their website). Violinist Lin has performed as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony as well as orchestras from Taiwan, Singapore, Uruguay, and Brazil, and has played chamber music at both the Marlboro Music Festival and the Steans Institute for Young Artists at Ravinia. She is also a founding member of the Formosa Quartet. Pianist Tao, whose bio I had to find on her own website, was also previously involved with a chamber group, in her case the Guild Trio which she played in from 1988-1998, as well as touring the U.S. for Columbia Artists' Community Concerts series. She has also won numerous awards and has played at summer festivals in Rutgers, Cape May, and Apple Hill among others, and has had her live performances broadcast by NPR. Cellist Hoover has also been busy: She was the founding cellist of the famed St. Lawrence String Quartet, with which group she played for 13 years. She recorded several works with St. Lawrence and has also recorded a duo recital with pianist Tao for the Centaur label. She was also artist-in-residence at Stanford University, and later visiting professor at the University of Toronto and a distinguished visitor at the University of Alberta. Thus, as you can see, the three musicians who make up this remarkable trio are no tyros. They bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their task, which (to me) explains their brilliance in playing this music.

What is always harder to explain is why they work so well together...but you can be sure that this will be one of the top questions on my list!

For the sake of clarity, I have dispensed with the usual Q and A designations below to indicate which of the three members of the group is answering at given times by using my initials as well as theirs (PT, JL, and MH).

LRB: I suppose we should start at the beginning. How did you three meet each other, and at what point did you decide to form a permanent chamber trio? And, before we get too much further, I'd like to ask how on earth you find time to practice and play together with your very busy solo schedules?

PT: After I moved to Edmonton, Alberta, it had been a few years since I had played with a formed group, and I missed the kind of intensive work one does as part of an ongoing group. I met Marina's brother, who is a professor at the same university where I teach, and he mentioned that she had been a member of the St. Lawrence String Quartet, which immediately sounded promising. I invited her to collaborate on cello/piano repertoire, and we began working regularly together for a few years.

JL: Patty and I had each worked with Marina in other contexts. It was really Marina who had the idea of bringing us three together. Finding time is difficult, but we meet at least a few days before a concert or project and embark on marathon-rehearsals.

MH: I had the opportunity to play several concerts with Jasmine in the Chicago Chamber Musicians string quartet. I really enjoyed the experience and mentioned to Patty that I knew a terrific violinist that I thought she would like as a person as well. So we played a bit together and then decided to pursue more concerts as a formed trio.

LRB: Obviously, the three of you have a common idea about music and an approach to style. I think this prompts two questions. Firstly, was this approach something that had to be worked out in the trio format, or were you all just sort of instinctively drawn to the same approach beforehand?

PT: I think what we have in common is a desire to arrive at a convincing and unified conception of a work. Although we are all quite different in personality and style, we are all open to trying someone else's idea, and we trust each other's musical opinions.

JL: We often feel specific things in the music differently. But because we strive for the same essentials, there is always a common ground and an openness to each other's perspectives.

MH: The fact that we are very different can make our rehearsals challenging at times but it can also make the end result very satisfying when we can arrive at a unified conception.

LRB: Secondly, when you are working on a new piece, do any of the three of you assume leadership in regards to interpretation—for instance, does Patty or Marina say something like, "I believe this piece should be played so-and-so?" Or do you have a meeting over the score, discuss alternatives and try to determine how certain passages should be played?

PT: We generally work on our own parts and bring to the rehearsal our own ideas about tempos, character, etc. We will read it together and work from there. Sometimes it is quite apparent if someone has a different interpretive approach, so we work from there, discussing different options and ideas.

JL: It's quite a democratic process. Each person has an equal voice. Sometimes Patty is the first to speak, only because she has the score in front of her and sees everything at a glance.

MH: We often speak on the phone about general tempo markings of a work if we have never played it together.

LRB: Regarding rehearsals: I've seen some chamber groups where the individuals work like the devil on their own parts, only gaining consensus with the first group rehearsal. Do any of you three "woodshed" alone like that, or is it a group rehearsal from the very first?

PT: Well, there is a certain amount of work that a pianist has to do prior to rehearsal! I generally do not sight-read the piece at the first rehearsal, but I must know my part well enough to be flexible and able to react to what Jasmine and Marina might decide to do.

JL: Some pieces or parts may not require as much "woodshedding" as others, but it's critical for each to have studied his/her part and the score before coming to the first rehearsal.

MH: I come to the rehearsals with an open mind. For me personally, the "woodshedding" begins after the trio has had a chance to read and explore the work. Often the cello part is not the melody and it plays a different role in the music-making, whether it is supporting the melody harmonically or rhythmically or whether it is doubling the left hand of the piano. I prefer to learn the piece together with two extra sets of ears.

LRB: Regarding repertoire, so far in your first two CDs as a trio you seem to be concentrating on Russian (and Eastern European, in the cases of Suk and Weinberg) works that have a strong emotional content. Apparently, then, this style of music suits your individual tastes and styles? In your live performances, do you sometimes include later and more modern works?

PT: Yes, we do try to program works from all periods, but personally, I have the most affinity for works of the Romantic period, probably German romantic. However, there are many contemporary trios that I would love to learn.

JL: Yes, we commissioned a piece by Jonathan Berger and performed it several times. We've also played works by Tower and Schoenfield. We do love the romantic Russian stuff, though.

MH: We worked with Stanford University composer Jonathan Berger on his trio titled Memory Slips. This was inspired by his mother's last phases of dementia. He discovered that the tune she was chronically hearing was the hit song the year Jonathan's brother was born. This was a very technically challenging piece to play and put together. However, it was extremely satisfying to bring to an audience. We had several outreach opportunities at various medical facilities as well as at the Brain Symposium at Stanford University. We don't often have the luxury of working with a living composer. Not only can we arrive at a clearer picture of the piece, but we can also use how the composer clarifies his ideas and relate that to a Beethoven or Brahms work.

LRB: If I may, I'd like to talk a little about how you are doing in terms of public exposure and creating a following. As I mention in my review of your CD, it seems to me that nowadays there are so many piano trios around, and no matter how good you may be, everyone's technical proficiency seems to be at a high level. On the other hand, I was deeply impressed by the fact that your performances seem to go for the jugular in terms of emotional energy. Can you give us a glimpse as to how Trio Voce is trying to sell themselves in such a crowded field and make new listeners sit up and notice that you are considerably different in approach from the norm?

PT: Actually, I think you've just "branded us" very well! We are not yet so involved with social media, which seems to be one way that many groups are spreading the word about themselves. We have work to do as far as marketing and selling ourselves.

JL: Everyone these days seems to be rushing around, doing a lot of things simultaneously. So when you have a group of musicians that takes the time and psychic energy to delve deeply into the music, and to ultimately create a certain peace around the experience of listening, I think that's something that never fails to be noticed.

LRB: It always seems to me that involving young people, particularly those who are not necessarily from privileged backgrounds, in listening to classical chamber music is extremely difficult nowadays, at least in America. I've even seen where local libraries will play classical recordings loudly through outdoor speakers to chase young people away from loitering outside the building. Do you, or will you, or can you do some outreach work to young listeners to try to broaden the listener base for chamber music?

PT: We have visited many elementary schools, and I agree so much that it is up to artists to try and expose young kids to this great music. The schools are not doing this anymore and everyone is inundated with pop culture. Even if it is just one child that is moved by what you do, it's worth the effort.

JL: Yes, we've done a fair bit of outreach over the years. It is extremely important. But in order for the kids to become receptive, their parents need to take away their computers...

MH: It is interesting to see what moves kids these days. From our trio outreach, it seems the kids can relate to contemporary music if there is a pronounced beat and a lot of action. I guess similar to what they would hear in the sound track of an action or thriller movie. I also feel that as long as the music is great and played with full sincerity you can grab the attention of young people.

LRB: Are you playing, or planning to play, in American Midwestern cities in the near future? I'm sure that a lot of our readers would like to see you after hearing your album.

JL: We're playing in Chicago a couple more times this year. In particular, we have a recital in Ganz Hall at Roosevelt University on October 1 that should be a good program.

MH: We would love to play more often in other parts of the Midwest!

LRB: Are there any future projects, recording or otherwise, that you'd like to share with our readers?

PT: Well, having just finished this project, it is most important for us to get the word out about this CD. Then we'll have a chance to focus on new projects.

JL: We plan to allow more time for meals in our future touring. Ahem.

MH: Yes, Jasmine is right—we often don't have the time to indulge in a good meal when we're in the midst of intensive rehearsing!

**ZEMLINSKY Piano Trio in d. SUK Piano Trio in c. ARENSKY Piano Trio No. 1 in d
• Trio Voce • CON BRIO 21344 (78:26)**

Here is a refreshing disc of unhackneyed piano trios, titled *In a New Light*, played by an extraordinarily refreshing group of young women known collectively as Trio Voce. I received a promo copy of this CD at almost the 11th hour for reviewing because my next assignment was to conduct an interview with these three talented performers, but since it is my policy to never ask a question until I've heard their work, I had to sit tight and simply await the disc.

And it was well worth the slight delay, for Trio Voce plays with a passionate commitment that is almost overwhelming in its emotionalism. No cookie-cutter players, these, but three ladies who jump into their music-making feet first and with no holds barred! They fully explore, and even revel in, the dark colors and sharp rhythmic accents of the Zemlinsky Trio, a work that I found difficult to believe had been composed for clarinet, piano, and cello, simply because the character of the lead voice sounds so, well, violinish. Certainly, the trio convinces one of their slight transcription as being not only appropriate but proper. Much of the kinetic energy in their playing seems to me to be coming from the talented fingers of pianist Patricia Tao, a player whose smoldering energy put me so much in mind of one of my all-time favorite modern pianists, Anne-Marie McDermott. Yet one should not interpret my comments regarding Tao's smoldering energy as being in any way brusque or insensitive. On the contrary, she knows how to draw out a broad phrase when called upon to do so as well, it's just that when the music needs a "kick," she is there to do so, and both violinist Jasmine Lin and cellist Marina Hoover are there to take the hint when Tao gives it to them. Perhaps it was the recording perspective, I'm not sure, but in this trio I found Lin's violin tone appropriately bright and sultry in turn but Hoover's cello tone sounded a bit "covered" (she sounds less so in other pieces on this disc). Nevertheless, as a group they fully grasp the style and feel of the music, pushing its boundaries so that even when one feels they have reached an apex in volume and energy, they find a way to go still further later on in the work. One good example comes at the end of the first movement, where Tao's piano suddenly arises to pounce, tiger-like, on the increased tempo to push the strings over the finish line.

In the second movement of the Zemlinsky, yet another surprise: their willingness to play with portamento. Not too broadly, mind you, but noticeable nonetheless—not overly subtle or hidden, and not dispensed with entirely as so many modern chamber groups do. Another mark in their favor. The final movement also comes in for its share of surprises, thanks to the tireless efforts of this trio to dig into every corner of the score. Despite the fact that Josef Suk has a very high reputation while Anton Arensky is often thought of as lightweight, my general impression of their piano trios was the opposite. Although Trio Voce does a splendid job with it, I found Suk's work relatively lightweight in musical material, but the Arensky piece was endlessly fascinating, taking many unexpected turns of phrase and harmonic changes that one would not automatically associate with this composer. Once again, in the long opening movement of the Arensky piece, I had the impression that Trio Voce was minting this music anew, almost as if they were giving its world premiere and thus trying to convince a fresh audience of its worth. The Scherzo, taken at not too fast a tempo, has a genuine playfulness about it, with violinist Lin doing (at one point) a pretty good Fritz Kreisler imitation (that wonderful light touch and the feeling that she is smiling as she plays), while the "Elegia: Adagio" has a tremendous feeling of drama to it, partially due to the dramatic pauses in the score and partially due to Trio Voce's highly emotional approach.

I was tremendously impressed by this CD, and think you will be, too. This is truly committed music-making on a level rarely heard nowadays. **Lynn René Bayley**