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Shostakovich: Piano Quintet, Piano Trios (Julia Fischer, Nils Mönkemeyer, Oliver Schnyder Trio)

Shostakovich's chamber music in imaginative new interpretations.

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by *Clive Paget* on 11 August, 2025

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When Dmitri Shostakovich died in 1975, the world lost the last of the great classicists, a prolific composer whose output embraced traditional forms from symphony to string quartet. Among a plethora of new releases acknowledging the 50th anniversary of his death, these outstanding accounts of his Piano Quintet and his two Piano Trios are a perfect example of his ability to combine accessible melody with craft and emotional depth.

The five-movement Piano Quintet was composed for the Beethoven Quartet who gave the premieres of all but the first and last of Shostakovich's string quartets. It's an amiable, rigorously conceived work, and the composer, who played the piano part at the premiere, joked afterwards that it had been written so that the ensemble would have to take him along on all their tours to exotic locales.

The Swiss-domiciled Oliver Schnyder Trio (Andreas Janke, violin, Benjamin Nyffenegger, cello and Oliver Schnyder, piano) are the common denominator on this album. Here they are joined by violinist Julia Fischer and violist Nils Mönkemeyer. Schnyder himself sets the tone, opening the Bachian prelude in a stately yet flexible manner. The rest of the ensemble demonstrates a perfectly balanced collective tone in which, thanks to fine sonic engineering, each instrument is given room to display its own personality while maintaining the sense of one motivational thought. It's light and airy, with a wonderful silvery quality to the first violin as it explores its upper register.

The second movement, *fugue*, is warmly purposeful yet never heavy-footed, while the fourth movement, *intermezzo*, has a captivating grace with finely spun violin lines over a passacaglia-like pizzicato tread. The catchy central *scherzo* has a real tang to it, bouncy, and with an infectious lilt to lift the Jewish theme of the trio. The finale posesses an almost pastoral quality with individually characterful espisodes leading to a breathtakingly peaceful conclusion.

In many ways, Shostakovich's two piano trios are worlds apart. The First – just 12 minutes and in one movement – was an early work (1924) and only published after the composer's death. The Schnyder Trio imbues it with a wistful nostalgia at first, digging in to supply plenty of bite for the spiky interjections, and finishing on a radiantly romantic high.

The Second Piano Trio premiered in 1944, again with the composer at the piano. Thoroughly rehabilitated at the time thanks to the success of the *Leningrad Symphony* Shostakovich felt at liberty to introduce some of the Jewish themes with which he came to increasingly identify. (Only a few years later, this kind of material would condemn works like the First Violin Concerto and *From Jewish Folk Poetry* to the composer's desk draw awaiting a more auspicious, less antisemitic time).

The work is dedicated to Shostakovich's friend Ivan Sollertinsky with movements that suggest the Soviet polymath's Jewish roots (the quirky second movement was considered a shrewd musical portrait by Sollertinsky's sister). The Schnyders take it for a madcap spin, matching the pace of composer's own 1947 account but benefitting from state of the art sound.

It's framed by a haunting interpretation of the opening *Andante*, slow and soulful, and a valedictory reading of the *Largo*, surely intended as a consoling funeral dirge. The songful string playing, here, is heartbreakingly intense. The finale, with its Jewish earworms, is grandly conceived and meticulously executed with some hypnotic dynamic shading.

These works have been recorded before, of course, but these wiry accounts, delicately flecked with imaginative touches, stand shoulder to shoulder with the very best.

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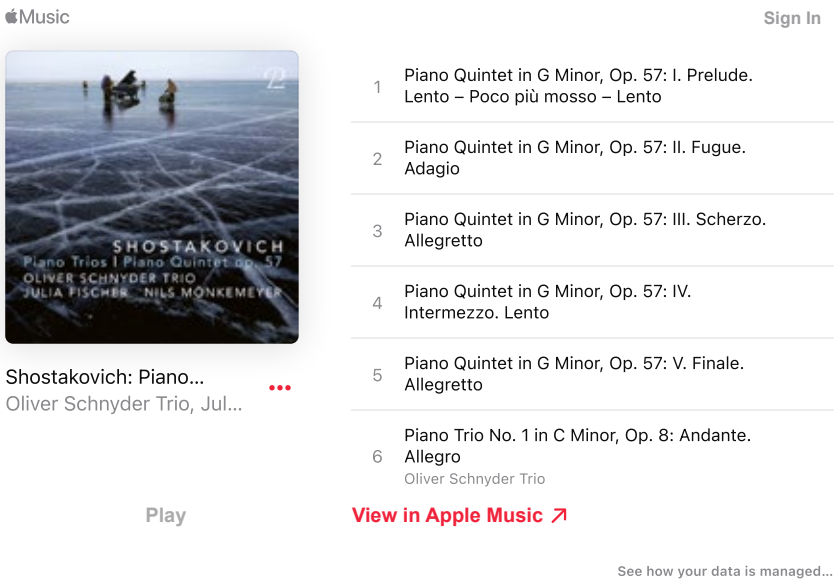

Composer: Shostakovich
Works: Piano Quintet, Piano Trios
Performers: Julia Fischer *v*, Nils Mönkemeyer *va*, Oliver Schnyder Trio
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