Zemlinsky Quartet

Antonín Dvořák: The Complete String Quartets

František Souček and Petr Stržížek (violin), Petr Holman (viola), Vladimir Fortin (cello)


TT: 70:08. 1 SACD. Praga Digitals PRD/DSO 250 292.


TT: 75:41. 1 SACD. Praga Digitals PRD/DSO 250 300.

String Quartets No. 8 in E major, Op. 80, B 57, & Miniatures, Op. 75a, B 149, & Cypresses, B 152.

TT: 75:08. 1 SACD. Praga Digitals PRD/DSO 250 303.


When it comes to new recordings of 19th- and 20th-century Czech classical music made during the Year of Czech Music 2014, the greatest attention on the part of the media was paid to the new complete set of Dvořák’s symphonies, recorded with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Jiří Bělohlávek (Decqa 2012–2014; see CMQ 2.3/2014). This attention was so concentrated that it put into the shade the (let us hope, to be finished) project of Dvořák’s symphonies with the same orchestra and its former music director Zdeněk Mácal (Octavia Record) and other interesting accomplishments, with the most intriguing among them being the very first recording of Dvořák’s debut opera Alfred (Arco Diva 2015, see CMQ 3/2014). The general press and, regrettably, the specialist media, paid little attention to the finalisation of a project comparable with the mentioned new complete recording carried out by the Czech Philharmonic under Jiří Bělohlávek, a release on a foreign label, with complicated distribution on the Czech market and, what is more, much more demanding for the performers and listeners alike. The project in question is the complete recording of the 14 Dvořák String Quartets dating from between 1862 and 1895, supplemented with a few chamber pieces for strings, undertaken by Messrs František Souček and Petr Stržížek (violin), Petr Holman (viola) and Vladimir Fortin (cello), the members of the Zemlinsky Quartet. Performed on concert stages with varying frequency has been the approximately second half of Dvořák’s quartet works, starting with the String Quartet in E major, Op. 80 (1876/1877), B. 57 (1876/1888). Thus all the more significant for the listeners and fans of Dvořák’s chamber music were the complete recordings of his quartets, which in the final third of the 20th century followed similar projects presenting the complete recordings of his symphonic works. The very first complete recording of Dvořák’s string quartets, made by the Prague String Quartet (Brešilav Novotný, Karel Pribyl, Lubomír Maly, Jan Štic) between 1973 and 1977 at the studio at the National House in Žižkov, Prague, was highly acclaimed by the critics, who branded it the best comprehensive set of the commercially recorded quartet œuvre of a single composer. This oldest recording of Dvořák’s string quartets has ever since been available to listeners, as it is still on the market on a Deutsche Grammophon re-release (429 193-2, 463 165-2). In addition to its indisputable artistic value, this Dvořák compendium possesses the great forte of the works being rendered by the Prague String Quartet in their original versions, without taking into consideration the reductions and retouches, as presented in the critical edition of Dvořák’s quartet pieces. Accordingly, if the listeners want to hear Dvořák’s early quartets in their true, non-revised form, they have no choice but to reach for this set of recordings. The chronologically second complete set, recorded, originally for Germany’s Bayer Classics, by the Stamatius Quartet between 1989 and 1993, was most recently re-released by Brilliant Classics (92396). Some of its main characteristics are slower tempos and looser handling of Dvořák’s music material, including repeated sections. The third complete recording of Dvořák’s quartet works was made by the Panocha Quartet (1993–1995, 1992–1999), who dedicated the major part of their career to this artistically highly refined project. Their decades-long labour paid off, as a number of the recordings contained in this sonically and rhythmically balanced set rank among the most intriguing accounts of Dvořák’s chamber works. Especially as regards the early pieces, the Panocha Quartet afforded them faster tempos and not overly furrowed agogics, thus arousing doubts as to the viability of extensive and structurally experimental compositions, which Dvořák himself rather deemed to oblivion. The complete Dvořák set embarked upon by the (New) Vlach Quartet Prague for Navos between 1995 and 1999 only lacks the early Quartets Nos. 2 and 4. The album has yet to be completed owing to the personnel changes in the ensemble, and we can only hope that it will soon be rounded off, as it is desirable not only due to the wide distribution avail-
ability of the recordings but also the definite qualities of some of the deliveries. Besides the, for the time being, most recent album of the complete Dvořák string quartets recorded by the Zemlinsky Quartet (yet another one made by a Czech ensemble for a foreign label), 2010 saw the launch of a project of complete Dvořák quartet works, of which Quartets Nos. 4, 9, 10, 12–14 have so far been recorded by Germany’s Vogler Quartet (Tim Vogler, Frank Reinecke, Stefan Fehlandt, Stephan Forck). It comes as no surprise that this set too is being produced by a German label, CPO, but, for the first time by a foreign ensemble from the Czech perspective. Germany, it would seem, is the promised land for Dvořák’s quartet music. Back in 2003, the Zemlinsky Quartet – at the time under the provocative moniker Penguin Quartet – recorded the most frequently performed of Dvořák’s string quartets, that in F major, Op. 96, B. 178 (Bohemia Musica). Yet the ensemble had to wait for their great Dvořák opportunity until 2006, when in November and December they made a four-part studio album featuring Dvořák’s early String Quartets Nos. 1–7 and smaller pieces (Two Waltzes, the Quartet Movement in A minor), including the String Quartet in A minor, Op. 1, B. 7, in which they were joined by the violist of the Pražák Quartet, Josef Klusnoš. The Zemlinsky Quartet did not approach the quartet works from the studio recording purist perspective, but as they decided to return them to concert stages (during the Year of Czech Music 2014, their repertoire encompassed the complete Dvořák quartet oeuvre), they recorded the early quartets in shortened form, as instructed by the composer himself or the publishers of the Dvořák critical edition. Dvořák’s spacious, occasionally youthfully chatty, compositions gave way to the young artist’s emotionally charged, often dramatically and tempo contrastive chamber statements. The first piece, String Quartet No. 1, is performed by the Zemlinsky Quartet as a vigorous work, with the brisk first and final movements and the tense slow movement. The account of Quartet No. 2 manifests the forthright choice of reductions, heightening Dvořák’s ability to intrigue by both melancholic moods and dance motion. The most strikingly shortened are Quartets Nos. 3 and 4, coming across as formally compendious, yet at the expense of forfeiting the Schubertian dimensions, hence also the potential of letting the compositions flow widely and alternate in moods. Quartet No. 5 is already interpreted by the Zemlinsky Quartet as a piece intended for the concert stage, contrastive in mood, with the winsome tone of the second movement and a delicate dance nature. A resignation to principally faster tempos, which should serve to disguise the allegedly composition-al obfuscation of the early quartets, as well as a sense for Dvořák’s melancholic seriousness and chamber intimacy, is splendidly demonstrated in the account of Quartet No. 7 (only performed more slowly by the Vlach Quartet), but also in the recording of such a miniature as the Quartet Movement in A minor, B 40a. Whereas decades ago the Prague Quartet in their purist recordings of the early quartets staked on their anonymity, or the fact that they were only known by a limited number of researchers, the Panocha Quartet in turn gave preference to an objectivising aloofness of lively tempo and the Stamitz Quartet to a natural flow of the music material, the Zemlinsky Quartet’s interference with the repeated sections resulted in the creation of a concentrated space, which proved to be good for alternating moods and agogic details. Six years down the road, the Zemlinsky Quartet plunged into the second part of Dvořák’s quartet works (the Cypresses, String Quartets Nos. 8–14) and between 2012 and 2014 made recordings that linked up to the older set of early string quartets, which was originally meant to round off their Dvořák project with Praga Digitalis. Fortunately, the label recognised the ensemble’s artistic potential and duly afforded them the opportunity to record Dvořák’s mature quartet pieces, thus creating a self-confident counterpart to the older sets. This time, the Zemlinsky Quartet combined rhythmic pregnancy (the scherzo of Quartet No. 9) and bold emotionality of the first and slow movements (the dreamy nocturne-like third movement of Quartet No. 9, the second and third movements of Quartet No. 10). A prime example of the ensemble’s remarkable approach is the liberal tempo delivery of the first movement of Quartet No. 10, with whose repetitions the musicians really fondled, perhaps bearing in mind that it was the last recording within the set. The Two Waltzes, Op. 64, B 105, and the Quartet Movement in F major, B 120, bear witness to the Zemlinsky Quartet’s increasing agogic loosening over time in their Dvořák creations, a case in point being their performance of Quartet No. 11, a work of major significance within the set and the Dvořák project in general, in which they succeeded in attaining a perfect symbiosis of the Brahmsian structure with Dvořák idioms, rhythms and affinity to the middle parts, which were paid great attention to especially in the swiftly conceived Cypresses, including with regard to the clearly led vocal line. The final three Dvořák quartets are ushered in by the Terzetto in C major, Op. 74, B 148, recorded in 2013. The Zemlinsky Quartet endowed the piece with the gravity of grand works, virtuosic fervency transcending the limits of an occasional composition (the third movement), as well as variation invention. The final variations of the Terzetto in C major alone make the Zemlinsky Quartet’s Dvořák set worthy of attentive listening. As for the American Quartet, the ensemble opted for wait-and-see tactics: the account deviates from the sonically Slavonic melodics, focusing instead on the composition’s semantic and structural aspect. Whereas older recordings made by the Smetana Quartet plumbed for engrossing sound, and while the most recent recording by the Pavel Haas Quartet sparkles with ferocious energy, the Zemlinsky Quartet’s objectivising take on the piece provides an analytical insight into the notorious score. The complete album of Dvořák quar-
tets maintains many of its fortes until the very end. The last Quartet, No. 14, too is characterised by variable tempos, revealing in the fast passages the ensemble’s virtuoso qualities, the tension resulting from the variability of the moods of the slow movement and a perfect tempo-rhythmic structure of the finale, in whose case many other ensembles failed to retain the thrill. Vivid agogics are also a salient feature of the recording of Quartet No. 13, a chamber symphony for four parts, whose opening bars are boldly divided by rests. Almost sounding rhetorically is the agogically furrowed introduction of the first movement which, in combination with the old-worldly rubatos, transforms the entire first and second movements into a narrative arch in audio magnificence. Pregnant rhythmisations, sensitive ornamentation (the glissando of the first violin in the third movement) and monumental sound make one forget about the more vibrant first violin and more ecstatic finale, as performed by the Panocha Quartet. None the less, the first violin, alongside the viola, of the Zemlinsky Quartet is the sonic buttress of the whole Dvořák set, with the second violin stepping out of its shadow more audibly than the sometimes overly soft voice of the cello. The recording of the Cypresses in particular presents the first violin and the viola as the most self-confident members of the Zemlinsky Quartet, whose current qualities and artistic cogency, as shown in the complete recording of Antonín Dvořák’s quartet works, are admirable indeed. Hats off!

Martin Jemelka