

disconcerting at first encounter, comes to seem natural on rehearing. Admittedly a giant like Tchaikovsky allows himself more risks and sets the emotional stakes higher; and if pushed I would have to say that the very best of Taneyev is to be found in his piano chamber works rather than in the quartets. But if you want to know why he was (and in many quarters still is) such a hugely respected figure in Russia, you could do a lot worse than make the modest investment in this more than promising Naxos series.

David Fanning

Zemlinsky

String Quartets – No 1, Op 4; No 3, Op 19

Zemlinsky Quartet (František Souček, Petr Strížek vs Petr Holman vs Vladimír Fortin vs)

Praga Digitals © PRD350 029 (51' • DDD)

The Zemlinkys honour their namesake with these outstanding performances



One hopes that the Zemlinsky Quartet would offer special insights into the quartets of Zemlinsky, and so it proves: these performances are excellent, both technically and temperamentally. Budding Viennese composers of the 1890s tended to root their chamber compositions in the tradition culminating in Dvořák and Brahms, and Dvořák is as strong a presence in Zemlinsky's First Quartet (1896) as he is in the D major Quartet written a year later by Arnold Schoenberg, whom Zemlinsky was advising at the time. The Zemlinkys are at their best in the slow movement, where a Beethovenian forcefulness counters the tendency to overly homogenous textures found elsewhere. In writing which ladles on the cream and holds back on the acid, there's also much to be said for Praga Digital's rather abrasive sound, and this quality is even more rewarding in the Third Quartet of 1924.

Composed when Zemlinsky was preparing to conduct the first performance of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and Berg's *Wozzeck* fragments, it's clear from the outset that his own music has

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moved with the times. Nevertheless, it's closer to Berg in style than to Schoenberg, and there's even a hint of Hindemithian neo-classicism in the wittily discursive finale. This skilfully counters the intensity of the earlier movements, although there's more than a touch of nostalgia for the warm, consonant past in both the second movement, "Variations", and the third movement, "Romanza". It all comes quite close to the spirit of the quartet Berg would dedicate to Zemlinsky, the *Lyric Suite*. **Arnold Whittall**