

CZECH ACCOUNTS

Tully Potter rounds up a selection of new discs with a Slavic flavour

Kocian Quartet: spontaneous



The Czechs are lucky in being able to lay claim to a magnificent modern quartet repertoire, much of it associated with the Bohemian Quartet, as influential in 1892–1934 as the Smetana Quartet in 1945–89.

The Kocian Quartet has released a beautiful CD of a concert given in Dijon in March 2004 (Praga PRD 350 035). These players explore the intricacies of Smetana's D minor without losing the shape or the rhythm. Better still, they give us a loving but always forward-moving account of Dvořák's massive G major, spontaneous and accomplished. Add delightful accounts of Dvořák's Two Waltzes and you have something special. I always feel it my duty to hear a disc more than once, but in this case it was a pleasure.

Repeated listening to a 23 November 2006 concert by the Škampa Quartet (Wigmore Hall Live WHLive 0019) was harder. In Mozart's K575, some short notes are swallowed by the players and by the acoustic; much of the playing lacks finesse and the finale is brusquely phrased. The Smetana D minor is overwrought, scrappy and sometimes out of tune. Then the players produce their best form in a searingly intense Shostakovich Eighth Quartet – difficult to listen to a second time, only because such a performance should be for special occasions. There are interesting booklet notes by Misha Donat, but the recording is rather strident.

Of two ensembles presenting their 'name composers', I prefer the Zemlinsky Quartet in Zemlinsky (Praga PRD/DSD 350 029). The First Quartet (1896) is a lovely, spring-fresh work given an ideal performance, the perfect antidote to a winter's day. The Third Quartet (1924) is more Expressionist: the second of its four movements is a weird set of variations on a whimsical theme. Here again the performance could hardly be bettered. Each player's tone glows, tuning is superb and identification with the music seems complete. The presentation is poor, but the recordings are first-rate.

The Pavel Haas Quartet's performances of Janáček's First Quartet and Haas's First and Third are pretty well played but studio-bound, lacking full intensity (Supraphon SU 3922-2). For Haas I prefer the Kocian's tauter interpretations on an all-Haas disc (Praga) – both ensembles have slight intonation problems in the First Quartet, which may be harder to play than it sounds, like many student works. Recording quality for the Pavel Haas Quartet is a little subdued.

Where does this leave the Dante Quartet? Very well placed. Its disc of Janáček's two quartets and – with Ferenc Rados partnering leader Krysia Osostowicz – his Violin Sonata and Allegro is the best Janáček I have heard from a British ensemble (Meridian CDE 84560). Bolstered now by the powerful cellist Bernard Gregor-Smith, the ensemble plays the quartets beautifully, with rhythmic flair. The violin works are lovely and the recordings excellent.