

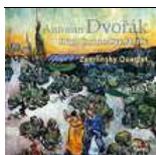
SACD & Other Hi-Res Reviews

DVOŘÁK: String Quartet No. 9 in D Minor; String Quartet No. 13 in G Major – Zemlinsky Quartet – Praga Digitals

Excellent performances of two very fine quartets that happen not to be the "American."



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DVOŘÁK: String Quartet No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 34, B 75; String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, Op. 106, B 192 – Zemlinsky Quartet – Praga Digitals multichannel SACD PRD/DSD 250 292 [Distr. by Harmonia mundi], 70:08 ***:**

The overwhelming popularity of Dvořák's *Quartet No. 11, "American,"* has put the composer's other quartets somewhat in the shade. A further problem is Dvořák's sheer productivity; while other Romantic masters created a mere handful of such works, Dvořák turned out fourteen (fifteen, if you count the unfinished *B 120* of 1881). There's always a bit of skepticism on the part of music lovers when they encounter such numbers. The truth is that the two final quartets, *Op. 105* and *Op. 106*, written in 1895, are equal in quality to the *American Quartet*, just lacking the element of American local color, reflected in the pentatonic melodies and driving rhythms of the fast movements. Somewhat confusingly, *Quartet No. 13* was published under the higher opus number, *Quartet No. 14* being nominated *Op. 105*. Both works celebrate Dvořák's return to Bohemia after his extended stay in the U.S. They're both gentle pieces, with pastoral overtones; even though Dvořák manages to work up the scherzo of *Op. 105* into a dither reminiscent of the furiant-style scherzo of *Symphony No. 6*, the trio is one of Dvořák's tenderly songful Schubertian excursions.

The main part of the finale, after a similarly tender, brief *Andante sostenuto*, is an *Allegro con fuoco* with two folk-like melodies that might have come from the *Slavonic Dances*. There are quieter, more reflective moments as well, including soulful reprises of the *Andante sostenuto* opening and the reposeful second theme of the first movement. The work seems a reflection on Dvořák's American experiences and friendships, as well as a tribute to the Bohemian folk music that is the cornerstone of his artistry.

Like Schubert, while many of Dvořák's earlier quartets are undervalued, there are nonetheless gems among them, my favorites being *Quartet No. 10 in C Major, Op. 61* (1881), and the present *Quartet No. 9*, written in 1877 and revised in 1879. They're very different works and hint at the range of expression available to Dvořák in his chamber music. *Quartet No. 10* is music of big gestures, the long, dramatic first movement unfolding with Beethovenian (or Brahmsian) grandeur, while the last two movements are dancing juggernauts, especially the slightly wild-eyed scherzo.

In stark contrast, *Quartet No. 9* is more intimate and inward, the first movement dark, ruminative though hardly melancholy. Instead of a Beethovenian scherzo, the second movement offers up a graceful polka marked *Allegretto scherzando*. More Schubertian lyricism in the third movement: the main melody reminds me a bit of the slow movement from Schubert's *String Quintet in C Major*, just as English music critic Alec Robertson finds Dvořák quoting Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade* in the opening movement. However, Dvořák's *Adagio* has less tension than Schubert's music, more of quiet, sad resignation, perhaps reflecting, as the notes to the recording suggest, Dvořák's continued mourning for the deaths of his daughter Růžena and son Otakar. The last movement features a jogging syncopated melody that's treated to contrapuntal development and whose opening three-note phrase, two sixteenths and an eighth note, become the motto that drives the piece. This is probably the only one of the four that recalls in any way Dvořák's dedicatee, Johannes Brahms.

These performances from the Zemlinsky are lovely, beautifully polished. While I relish and applaud the extra refinement on display here, the Zemlinsky also brings proper fire to the last two movements of *Quartet No. 13* and toughness to the rigorously argued finale of *No. 9*. Though there are alternative recordings galore, the programming of two such nicely contrasted quartets and the universally excellent playing convince me that if you want this music, you don't have to search any farther. Praga Digitals' elegant surround sound is the perfect showcase for the performances, projecting the image of a warm hall of middling dimensions rather than the studio where the recording was actually done.

—Lee Passarella

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