



American Record Guide

July/August 2007

DVORAK: *Early Quartets (1-7); String
Quintet in A minor*
Zemlinsky Quartet
Praga 350028 [4CD] 268 minutes

At least reviewing this set is fairly easy. Three quartets—the Panocha, Stamitz, and Zemlinsky—have recorded all of the works in this box, and the Vlach Quartet has recorded most of them on Naxos—and presumably the rest will soon be along. The Stamitz recordings are available individually, but I suspect the Panochas, in one eight-disc box of the complete Dvořák quartets, may be cheaper overall.

All three sets are extremely well played by Czech players. The Zemlinskys are a fairly new quartet, organized in 1994. They have won a good number of prizes after their studies at the Prague Conservatory and the Prague Music Academy.

The Stamitz Quartet was established in 1985 by three members of the older Dolezal Quartet. All four trained at the Prague Music Academy.

The Panocha Quartet was founded in 1968 by four students at the Prague Conservatory. They have played world wide and are generally recognized as one of the country's finest quartets.

All three play very well but quite differently. The Zemlinskys have a polished sound and tend to take more rapid tempos. For example, in 5, they take 26 minutes. The Panochas are just as polished but take 28:27. The Vlach Quartet comes in at 30:53, while the Stamitz Quartet takes a grand total of 37:27! This is a pronounced difference—12:28 faster than the Zemlinskys. There is an earthier, grittier quality to their playing that fits with Dvořák's earlier, peasant-influenced works. They aren't always faster, though. In the second of the two Waltzes Dvořák published in 1880 as Op. 54 they take 2:44 compared to the Zemlinsky's 3:02. Once one adjusts to the slower tempos, I think those performances are my favorites, followed by the Panocha Quartet. The Zemlinsky recordings are well played but are simply too quick for my taste. The Vlach Quartet shouldn't be overlooked, either. Their budget-priced recordings are almost as fine as the others.

All four have very fine quality recordings that space the quartets ideally. All have fine notes, though the Stamitz may be the best.

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