

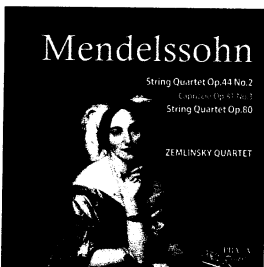
Mendelssohn

String Quartets – No. 4 in E minor, Op. 44 No. 2^a; No. 6 in F minor, Op. 80. Capriccio in E minor, Op. 81 No. 3.

Zemlinsky Quartet (František Souček, Petr Střížek, violins; Petr Holman, viola; Vladimír Fortin, cello).

Praga Digitals PRD/DSD250 267 (full price, 57 minutes). *Website* www.pragadigitals.com.

Producer Jiří Gemrot. *Engineers* Jan Lžičář, Karel Soukeník. *Dates* ^aSeptember 2nd and December 15th, 2009.



Mendelssohn's E minor Quartet (Op. 44 No. 2) and his F minor Quartet (Op.

80) have been coupled before, and doubtless will be again, for they make an enlightening pair. The former was written in the happy weeks after his marriage to Cécile Jeanrenaud in March 1837, when, he said, 'Everything flows so easily and prettily [*leicht und hübsch*] from my pen at the moment'; the latter is a tormented outburst of grief in the aftermath of the death of his beloved sister Fanny ten years later, in May 1847, and was written only a few weeks before his own death that November. Two perceptive performances draw a closer thread than might be expected between the works.

The nervous tension that runs through the E minor Quartet is not lost on these players. The great sweeping tune that opens the work is from the same stable as the opening of the Octet of his dazzling teenage years, but now the syncopated accompaniment is more agitated, pressing the melody rather than simply providing a warm bed of sound, and the performance recognizes that there is more depth in the music, even a tinge of melancholy underlying all the fluency and brilliance. Mendelssohn does not spare his performers: the figuration here is faultlessly clear, both in the execution and in a recording of exceptional lucidity. Everything may flow easily, but there is more than mere prettiness in the graceful lines; and it makes good musical sense when, near the end, the players take the *tranquillo* marking as allowing a thoughtful easing of the tempo before the firm close. The *Scherzo*'s basic figure is an opening *forte* shiver followed by light *piano* notes, and it has an obsessive quality which the players appreciate – there is nothing here of *Midsummer Night's Dream* fairy flitting – and they save their real relaxation for the warmth of the *Andante*. Mendelssohn emphasized that 'this piece must be played absolutely without dragging', and it is taken here at almost exactly the given metronome mark, gracefully and lyrically. The last movement is *Presto*

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agitato, one of Mendelssohn's speeding minor key finales that have a certain equivocal feeling to them, with a tinge of apprehension in the racing figuration. Why this should be so, who knows, but the Zemlinskys' charged performance releases something in the music which escapes prettier performances.

The so-called *Capriccio* of 1843 was assembled and published as part of a spurious Op. 81 after Mendelssohn's death; his last important work was the extraordinary Op. 80 Quartet, of which the Zemlinskys give another masterly performance. This is some of Mendelssohn's bitterest and most intense music, one of the late works (in the chronological sense: he was only 38, and never lived to write any 'late' music) that give the lie to suggestions that his best music came when he was a boy. Pierre Barbier's intelligent insert note goes so far as to call it 'pre-Expressionistic'. The opening *Allegro assai* includes, at its centre, extraordinary repeated gestures when the agitated music quietsens only to have its fabric suddenly torn apart by a soft, unaccompanied 'wrong' note that forces everything into a horribly 'wrong' key. The Zemlinskys make this as truly frightening as it should be. The *Scherzo* has the maimed, limping quality the music surely implies; and the slow movement is gently played, perhaps rather faster than is suggested by the marking *Adagio* and its sense of an elegy for Fanny, with its funereal dotted notes. The finale is surely an act of rage against the dying of the light, played at an unsparing pace here up to the wild cry of grief when the first violin hurls itself in triplets from a top C right the way down three octaves across the staff. It is an extraordinary work, played here with exceptional understanding and passion.

John Warrack

Schumann

New CD/SACD

String Quartet No. 1 in A minor, Op. 41 No. 1. Piano Quintet in E flat, Op. 44^a.

^a**Evgeni Koroliov** (piano); **Pražák Quartet** (Václav Remeš, Vlastimil Holek, violins; Josef Klusoň, viola; Michal Kaňka, cello).

Praga Digitals PRD/DSD250 265 (full price, 56 minutes). *Website* www.pragadigitals.com. *Producer* Jiří Gemrot. *Engineers* Karel Soukeník, Václav Roubal. *Dates* October 17th and ^aNovember 12th, 2009.

Comparisons:

String Quartet:

Kuijken Qt (Arcana) 324 (2009)

Piano Quintet:

Pires, Wang, Dumay, R. Capuçon, Causse (DG) 473 179-2 (2000)

Schnabel, Pro Arte Qt

(Music & Arts) CD1196 (1934)

In 1972 violinists Václav Remeš and Vlastimil Holek, violist Josef Klusoň and cellist Michal Kaňka, all students at the Prague Conservatory, formed the Pražák Quartet. Over the ensuing decades this