



Fanfare

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DVOŘÁK Quartets: No. 1 in A; No. 2 in B; No. 3 in D; No. 4 in e; No. 5 in f; No. 6 in a; No. 7 in a. Quartet in F (fragment), B 120. Quartet Movement in a, B 40a. String Quintet in a, op. 1.¹ 2 Waltzes, op. 54 • Zemlinsky Qt; Josef Klusoň (va)¹ • PRAGA 350 028 (4 CDs: 268:20)

Right from the First Quartet, composed in 1868, this music is pure Dvořák, as melodious and as spirited as anything he would ever write. These early quartets do tend to ramble, however, their formal logic often difficult to follow. Those who know the quartets from the complete cycles recorded by the Prague, Stamitz, or Panocha Quartets (*Fanfare* 29:6) may be surprised at how many of the early works have been squeezed onto four discs. The answer is soon apparent: "the present programme respects, for the first time, the cuts recommended by the Commission to give these pieces a density and length compatible with their programming in concert . . .". Not exactly a vote of confidence in their great composer! Things turn out to be not as bad as they seem: the infamous Third Quartet (70, 72, and 57 minutes long, in the above-noted competitive performances) has been cut virtually in half, and the Fourth Quartet has also been clipped, but the rest seem to be all here—I do not have scores. All the performances cannot be compared, because the Prague Quartet prepared its own versions of some works, whereas the Stamitz and the Panocha play the authorized versions prepared by that commission of Czech musicologists and published in 1985.

I don't remember encountering the Zemlinsky Quartet before—their namesake was a major figure in Prague from 1911 to 1927, primarily conducting opera—but I had no qualms: any music-lover who has spent a week in Prague has been dumbfounded by how many superb string quartets there are in that most musical of cities, playing all over town every day. Formerly called the Penguin Quartet, it has been in business since 1994, studying at the Prague Conservatory and the Academy of Performing Arts with members of the Talich, Prague, Kocian, and Pražák Quartets; no wonder local standards are so high.

I like the Zemlinsky enormously in this fresh, youthful music; it displays plenty of color, fairly solid intonation, and an energetic, high-spirited approach that scores over the smooth, creamy Panocha, which is superb in Dvořák's best music but can become a bit boring in his lengthy lesser moments. The Prague Quartet plays with less personality, hewing to an echt-Dvořák style rather than bringing out the character of each piece. The Zemlinsky can be a bit strident at stressful moments, but I'm willing to pay that price. This is music to throw oneself into with gusto, and these four young men (František Souček, Petr Střížek, Petr Holman, Vladimír Fortin) do so, infusing the music with vibrant life. Praga's recorded sound is typically up close and clean; unfortunately, the marketing is also typical of that label: this four-disc set costs almost as much as each of the other complete recordings, on eight to 10 discs. **James H. North**