

DVORAK: *Quartet 12*;
MENDELSSOHN: *Quartet 2*
with TCHAIKOVSKY: *Andante Cantabile*

St Petersburg Quartet—Marquis 81351—64:19

I didn't realize I had five other recordings of the Dvořák. It is certainly one of my favorite pieces of chamber music; I never tire of it, and I have heard dozens of performances. Each time I delight in the music and find it hard to be critical. The same thing happened here, except that the second time I took out the other five recordings and compared. That gave me something to say. The music always makes its effect, but there are differences.

There are even differences among Czech performances, though they are usually slight. Generally the Czech groups emphasize the lightness, the flow, and the cheerful rhythms. I hear little difference between the Travnicek, the Janaček, and the Dolezal Quartets. Our Dvořák Overview tells about the Panocha, Prague, and Smetana Quartets; the Smetana is thicker in sound and in some ways more peasant-like. But none of the Czech groups get too sophisticated or refined—that would kill the spirit of the music.

The Tokyo Quartet is the most refined and the most subtle. The Orion is warm and hearty, not quite as refined. But these Russians really dig into it—more than any group I have heard. They are blatantly emotional, full-throated, ecstatic, downright thrilling. They have won me over, and I will have to put their recording in place of one of the others. (Since they all have different pairings, I will have to decide which other Dvořák work I can do without—unless I replace the Tokyo, which comes with the piano quintet—a work I also have multiples of.)

I didn't start out with any prejudice in their favor. I view the Czechs as the most German of the Slavic peoples—very rational, but very balanced. I can't stand English performances of Dvořák, but the Germans are completely sympathetic. The Russians, on the other hand, strike me as much too emotional for Dvořák and Czech music in general. Too much moaning and groaning would stop his bright and flowing chamber music dead in its tracks. Yet these men manage it perfectly. It is emotional, but it still has the natural flow that Dvořák has to have; it doesn't sound too sophisticated, too manipulated. And there is so much ecstasy—and it sounds like Dvořák's kind of ecstasy (think of the third movement of the cello concerto—the kind of ecstasy that shines so bright it almost burns).

And the Mendelssohn can certainly use the Russian treatment, though of course there are other ways to play it as well. I think it helps Mendelssohn to infuse the playing with warmth and feeling. Sometimes he seems too reserved for his own good. Here he is bolder, more forthcoming than we are used to—but I like him this way, and this may be the strongest impression the Aminor Quartet has ever made on me.

The Tchaikovsky is the most emotional per-

formance I've heard. Usually it is tender, sometimes it's flowing, sometimes glowing; but never have I heard more feeling than here. Maybe they restrained themselves so much for the other two composers that they felt they had a right to let it all hang out with their own Tchaikovsky. I'm glad they did, though again this isn't the only way to play it.

If you knew how much joy I got out of this, you'd go looking for it. We need to break out of the usual way of playing music like this. Marquis is a Canadian label widely available in the USA.

VROON

RAVEL: *Trio*;
DVORAK: *Dumky Trio*;
BLOCH: *3 Nocturnes*

Trio Con Brio, Copenhagen

Azica 1240—66 minutes (216-681-0778)

I heard this group, previously unknown to me, in concert in West Palm Beach, FL. I went with limited expectations, but I heard one of the greatest performances of chamber music I've ever encountered.

The Trio con Brio Copenhagen is only one-third Danish—pianist Jens Elvekjaer. The remaining members are two Korean sisters, violinist Soojin Hong and cellist Soo-Kyung Hong. The trio was formed in 1999 and has an impressive record of performances and awards, mostly in Europe and Asia. Their most recent honor is the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson International Trio Award. This biennial prize is given by that trio to support rising careers. It includes a recording contract, a series of concerts, and the loan of a priceless historical violin and cello.

The evening's concert included the Ravel and the Dvořak, two of the greatest of all chamber works, and their performance was overwhelming. This recording is a comparable experience, with a more interesting filler than the Haydn trio they presented that night.

Let's get the basics out of the way. Balance, ensemble, intonation are all perfect. They play with perfect unanimity, and each is a solid virtuoso.

What stands out from this ensemble is the *range* of tone and sound, especially from the Hong sisters. They command an amazing range of timbres. Melodies sing with an aching sweetness, or seduce with wild eroticism, or haunt with impenetrable mystery. Cellist Kyung has a hundred different sounds of *pizzicato* and can fill the hall with the depth of her lowest register. Pianist Elvekjaer fears nothing, yet never for a moment overwhelms his colleagues.

The Ravel's second movement, 'Pantoum', dances gaily around that wonderful central melody. Menahem Pressler once referred to that passage, noting "the rare privilege we musicians enjoy, to be permitted to play such beauty", and the Copenhagen sings it gloriously. The performance of the 'Passacaille' (III) is elemental, inexorable. It captivates the listener like the flow of a mighty ocean current. In the finale the trio conjures a mighty wind of sound that threatens to blow the listener away. This is a memorable performance.

The Ravel is supremely Gallic, and the Dvořak requires an equal understanding of the Czech cultural soul. Once, while traveling in Moravia, I heard a band of fine local musicians, and it was immediately apparent what was the source of Dvořak's language.

The Trio now seems authentically and completely Czech, and they perform the work with the same masterly approach they brought to the Ravel. They are revelatory. They move comfortably and convincingly from melancholy to exuberant joy, and the listener cannot fail to be taken along.

The Bloch *Nocturnes* are less impressive only because they are less great music. Each is a meditation on some aspect of night. They are interesting, even moving, and are played with the same care and devotion the Trio gave to the Ravel and the Dvořak.

There are plenty of fine performances of these works. The Trio Fontenay's Dvořak has consistently been a favorite on the pages of ARG (Overview, S/O 1998), and other performances have seen very favorable reviews, such as the Joachim Trio (J/A 1999). The Joachim was also praised in the Ravel (J/F 1996), as was the Previn (N/D 1995). But this one now has a place on my desert island list, assuming I can find a desert island with consistent electrical power.

KEATON