

Discovering Dvorák

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## Discovering Dvorák

Until relatively recently, the average music-lover might have been forgiven for assuming, from the evidence of the record catalogues, that Dvorák's chamber music comprised a piano trio, a piano quintet and a string quartet. In fact, Dvorák wrote over 50 chamber works, and although many are eclectic, and some admittedly lightweight, very few are dull, and most deserve to be heard far more frequently on the concert platform. These three issues are therefore to be welcomed; and anyone interested in exploring Dvorák's less 'popular' chamber repertoire will find here an absorbing *catalogue raisonné* of the composer's Romantic preoccupations.

The Ames Piano Quartet (**Dorian DOR 90125**) offer his two piano quartets, works that have largely been overshadowed by Brahms's essays in the medium (and indeed, by Dvorák's own op. 81 Quintet), though in the First Quartet (op. 23) it is very much the spirit of Schubert that hovers in the wings. Like much early Dvorák, the parts amount to more than the whole, and the Ames Quartet's essentially Romantic approach, accentuated by the reverberant acoustic, emphasizes this episodic quality, rather than attempting to paper over the joins. They luxuriate in the variety of texture in the Andante variations, and respond with considerable *élan* to the cut and thrust of the Finale. The Second Quartet, in E flat (op. 87), is more overtly rhetorical, and here there is some magnificent bravura playing, especially in the outer movements. In the Lento the cello sustains its cantilena with great beauty of tone, while the 'local' colour of the Scherzo, replete with cimbalom effects, is appropriately vibrant.

The Piano Trio in F minor (op. 65) falls less comfortably on the ear. The work's atmosphere of impassioned melancholy, its obsessive Neapolitan sidesteps, even its mysterious opening phrase, all recall Brahms's monumental Piano Quintet in the same key. The York Piano Trio's account (**Meridian CDE 84187**) of the first movement is wonderfully tense and febrile (though the recording does not flatter the strings, and the cello sounds disconcertingly plangent on its 'big' tune). Thereafter the emotional temperature seems to drop; and while the cross-rhythms of the Scherzo are all beautifully executed, there is little real fire here or in the Finale. Livelier by far is the York Trio's performance of the well-known 'Dumky' Trio (op. 90), six short dance-

like movements in which pensive sections alternate with passages of unbuttoned *joie de vivre*.

The English String Quartet's disc (**Unicorn-Kanchana DKP (CD) 9079**) combines Dvorák's *Cypresses* with his *Terzetto* (op. 74) for two violins and viola. The former are arrangements the composer made of a dozen youthful songs, and their vocal provenance is apparent from the dominant role of the first violin. These are charming miniatures, though the unremittingly high tessitura of the melodic line and the lack of variety between consecutive numbers suggest that they should be sampled, rather than listened to as a cycle. For all its concision, the *Terzetto* is a little miracle of textural inventiveness, comprising a brief *Introduzione*, a songlike *Larghetto* (encompassing a quasi-baroque episode), a spirited *pizzicato Scherzo* and a set of remarkably free *Variations*. Notwithstanding the somewhat occluded quality of the recording, the performance has a spontaneity wholly in keeping with the intimate character of the score.

INGRID GRIMES

## Satie & Hahn

In the early 1960s Jean-Joël Barbier's recording of piano works by Satie came out on the French *Boite à Musique* label. The double-sleeve album had the Cocteau cartoon of Satie holding his nose and smoking a cigar on the cover and the release won the *Grand Prix de l'Académie du Disque Français*. It was one of the first recordings of Satie's piano music to reach LP - stereo too. The playing was stronger on atmosphere than detail and the recorded sound was particularly good. Now, 30 years later, Jean-Joël Barbier has finished his four CD set for the Accord label (**Accord/Musidisc 200902**).

He has not played the complete works, rightly recognising that some pieces published in the later 1960s are not worthy of the best of Satie. And he has included two sets of duets - *Aperçus Désagréables* and *En Habit de Cheval*. These are performed with Jean Wiener and were recorded in 1963, which shows. The playing lacks dynamic contrast and is not precise enough. That is also true of the solos, although there is no doubting Jean-Joël Barbier's affection for the music.

Much more of a discovery is the piano music of Reynaldo Hahn, recorded by the award-winning young French pianist Catherine Joly (**Accord 200542**). This has all the charm of his songs and is salon music of the best

kind. The melodies are memorable, the textures economical but always neatly controlled, and from time to time there is harmonic originality. *Premières Valses* (1898) is a set of ten played complete but the recording contains only about half of *Le Rossignol Eperdu*, completed in 1910. It is amazing that this elegantly polished sophisticated music is not better known: it is not even difficult to play. Catherine Joly is rather wayward - you can hardly beat three to her first waltz - but the atmosphere is infectious and pervaded by Proustian hedonism.

PETER DICKINSON

## Modern Vienna

A collection of works with the title *Wien Modern* (**DG 429 260-2**) immediately provokes questions about its choice of contents. In this case, these pieces by Boulez, Ligeti, Nono and Rihm formed the programme (together with Berg's Op. 6, not included here) of the opening concert in the festival 'Wien Modern' held in the autumn of 1988. This live recording of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the Vienna Youth Choir under Claudio Abbado captures the spontaneity of a concert performance, and suffers few of its potential disadvantages; also there is little audience participation, and applause is held off until after the concluding piece.

A variety of criteria might be applied in some rationale of the programme heard on this disc within the umbrella of 'modernism'. Firstly, each decade, including the post-war 1940s, to the 1980s is represented by the composition or the reworking of a piece, suggesting the continuing ambit of the second rise of modernism which for some reached its apogee in the Darmstadt of the 1950s. Secondly, it represents some of the diversity of manner possible within the modernist ethos while thirdly, and partly in consequence, the rejection of the primacy of the individual note by Ligeti in favour of clusters forming planes of individual textures, allowed for regeneration of the modernist vocabulary, of which Rihm's *Départ* (1988) on a text by Rimbaud, represents a recent stage.

The two Ligeti pieces, *Atmosphères* (1961) and *Lontano* (1967) respectively assert the possibilities offered by texture, and the subsequent readmittance of individual pitches as goals within the structure. Because of its nature, *Atmosphères* is subject to considerable performance fluctuation in matters of balance, but here the overall effect is good while revealing some