

CD Review 24

DVORAK: Cello Concerto in B minor, Piano Concerto in G minor

Rostropovich (cello)
Frantisek Maxian (piano)
Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, Vaclav Talich
(76.52)
Regis RRC 1368

Dvorak's B minor Cello Concerto is the finest cello concerto ever written.

In an international survey of two years ago, people voted as to the greatest cello concertos and the top ten were as follows:

1. Dvorak B minor
2. Shostakovich 1
3. Walton
4. Boccherini B flat
5. Haydn D
6. Saint Saens 1
7. Schumann
8. Finzi
9. Boris Blacher – a surprise!
10. Lalo



The greatest cello concerto played by one of the finest cellists of all time and with a fine orchestra and conductor does not guarantee a superlative performance.

The sound on this CD is sometimes dubious, but then Talich retired in 1956 and died in 1961, fifty years ago. The sound at the very opening is unclear and somewhat ponderous. Sometimes the orchestra buzzes like a bee in a matchbox and, at other times, the orchestra is distant as if playing in the next room.

Rostropovich is somewhat on the slow side but his tone is superb. But to me, he is dragging out all the emotion at the expense of the correct tempi and he is allowing the music to wallow or, if you prefer, he uses extreme lyricism and rubato. There are times when you feel the music is to breakdown altogether and grind to a halt in sickly sentimentality, as if every drop of nauseating emotion is being squeezed out.

We have, therefore, a continuity problem and it does not hang together. The performance seems uncertain and, at times, it sounds like a rehearsal.

Rostropovich is at his best in the slow movement but the angry orchestral outburst are bottom heavy. Some woodwind solos are exquisite, but the music does not flow; it hits a dam and runs out of steam. Compare this with the effortless flow of Janos Starker with the LSO under Dorati on Mercury Living presence 432 001-2.

The opening of the finale of this recording approaches the dreadful; the tempi are all over the place; there is more wallowing and excessive rubato; the continuity is not there and, often, the music, drags. There are inexcusable wrong notes and the soloist is heavy handed. It hangs like a pair of badly torn curtains.

The version to have is Starker's already mentioned. It is a superb and vital performance with the tragic coda of heartbeats in the finale very poignant. This performance sparkles and is glorious and a real experience.

Do not buy the Jacqueline DuPre versions of this masterpiece as they are also drawn out with idiosyncratic features and 'hormonal excess' as one top flight cellist put it.

The Piano Concerto has been dismissed as a weak work with the explanation that Dvorak was not a pianist but a string player. It has never found many friends, but, as a honest man, I found this performance hugely enjoyable and uplifting and the most appropriate candidate to revive this concerto. It is not really virtuosic; it does not have fireworks but, in the main, it is attractive music and beautifully played without excess or liberties being taken. I loved it. It was delightful.

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