

Dvorak:

String Quintet in G major, Op.77

Boston Symphony Chamber Players

(Joseph Silverstein & Max Hobart (vlns) Burton Fine (viola) Jules Eskin (cello) Henry Portnoi (double-bass))

Recorded in Symphony Hall, Boston, June 1971

Producer: Thomas Mowrey

Recording Engineer: Günter Hermanns

Speakers Corner 180gram LP: DGG 2530 214

Performance: 5

During the 1970s the Boston Symphony Chamber Players made a series of recordings for Deutsche Grammophon that included this urbane account of Dvorak's early String Quintet (the opus number is misleading) where they reinstated the second Adagio religioso that was discarded in the 1888 revision of the work. Because the work features a double-bass any performance and recording must ensure that the terse rhythmic motifs Dvorak makes extensive use of aren't blurred by the richness of the sound and from the opening bars it is obvious the Bostonians won't allow this happen, the tempo is fast, but they relax slightly for the second subject, the textures are lean and they observe the exposition repeat (in 1971 repeats weren't de rigueur). The discarded Adagio is suitably slow and soulful, replete with luxuriant phrasing and natural rubato. Nor are they in a hurry in the Scherzo, where they spring the rhythms, relax the tempo for the Trio and manage to sound both elegant and rustic.

As in the Adagio the tempo for the Andante is spacious, the phrasing beautifully fluid, the range of piano dynamics exceptional - the players truly sing this gorgeous music. In the Finale the basic tempo is swift, but the players aren't afraid to slow slightly in the second half of the first subject and again there is an old-world approach to phrasing, tempo variation and rubato, which is all to the good. Occasionally a bit more rhythmic élan and attack wouldn't go amiss, but in essence this is very refined, civilised – yet truly felt - music-making and as such carries the highest recommendation.

Sound

Balance: 5

Inner balance: 4

Detail and clarity: 5

Dynamic range: 3

As mentioned above any recording of this work must cope with the rich sonorities that a double-bass brings and ensure that the instrument doesn't sound soggy or boom. In the 1950s and 1960s Deutsche Grammophon would have struggled to do this, but unlike most other recording companies their sound improved with the advent of solid-state amplification and on this LP the instrument has plenty of presence, extension, is firmly placed within the image and clearly and cleanly focused. One can say much the same about all of the

instruments, they are anchored within a broad sound-stage which has depth and is nicely balanced just to the rear of the speakers. The sound also has bloom, which means the pizzicati in the Andante have true, but not excessive, resonance, within an acoustic that has an ideal reverberation time (Symphony Hall, Boston is acknowledged to have a well-nigh perfect acoustic) and being analogue instrumental timbres are caught in a way no digital recording can equal.

There are two slight criticisms. While the sound has bloom, the upper treble is a little muted, but the same can be said of the CD transfer, so one presumes the master-tapes are at fault, not the transfer and the dynamic range is restricted, particularly at forte and above, but that was – and is – a problem found on many chamber music recordings. Nevertheless the overall effect is very natural and easy-on-the-ear and far superior to the 16bit DG CD offering, which sounds decidedly ersatz by comparison.