



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

Remastered at Emil Berliner Studios, Berlin

Speakers Corner 180gram LP: DGG 2530 214



Glazunov

Chant de Ménestrel Op.71

Shostakovich

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra No.2, Op.126
Mstislav Rostropovich (cello)
Boston Symphony Orchestra
Seiji Ozawa

Recorded in August 1975 at Symphony Hall, Boston
Producer: Thomas Mowrey
Recording Engineer: Hans-Peter Schweigmann

Remastered at Emil Berliner Studios, Berlin

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: DGG 2530 653



Balalaika Favorites

Music by Andreyev, Budashkin, Gorodovskaya, Kulikov, Mikailov-Shalayev, Mossolov, Osipov, Poponov, Rimsky-Korsakov, Shisakov, Soloviev-Sedoy and Tchaikovsky

Rudolf Belov (dorma)
Osipov State Russian Folk Orchestra
Vitaly Gnutov

Recorded 13 and 16 June, 1962 in the Great Hall of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, Moscow
Producer: Wilma Cozart
Recording Engineers: C.R. Fine and Robert Eberenz

Remastered at Emil Berliner Studios, Berlin

Speaker Corner 180gram vinyl: SR90310



An Historic Return, Horowitz at Carnegie Hall.

Music by Bach/Busoni, Schumann, Scriabin, Chopin, Debussy and Moszkowski

Vladimir Horowitz (piano)

Recorded live at Carnegie Hall on Sunday, 9 May 1965

Producer: Thomas Frost

Recording Engineer: Fred Plaut

Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner 2 x 180gm LPs: Columbia M2S 728

If these seemingly diverse releases have one thing in common (other than three of them featuring Russian performers) it is an old-world approach to interpretation that produces one superlative performance after another. In the case of the Dvorak we have one of the world's great chamber ensembles (made up of string and wind principals from the Boston Symphony Orchestra) which was formed in 1964 and made a series of recordings for Deutsche Grammophon that included this suave, sophisticated account of an early Dvorak chamber work (the opus number is misleading).

The Quintet was composed in 1875 for string quartet with double-bass and published as Op.18. When Dvorak revised it he removed the second movement Intermezzo, but this performance quite rightly reinstates what is an exceptionally beautiful piece of music. Any successful account (and recording) has to ensure that the double-bass doesn't overwhelm or muddy the sound and the sharply rhythmic nature of much of the writing needs to be emphasised without compromising the singing melodic lines, which the Boston players do quite brilliantly. Their bouncy, propulsive, but not over-fast tempo for the opening Allegro con fuoco gives them time to observe sforzandi and create rhythmic and melodic patterns that evoke Czech folk music and Klezmer, they also observe the exposition repeat (which was not de rigueur in 1971).

In the discarded Adagio the players are 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. 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 they 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. There are earthier, less sophisticated ways of playing Dvorak, but in essence this is refined, civilised – yet truly felt - music-making and as such carries the highest recommendation.

In terms of sound, as mentioned above, any recording of this work must cope with the rich sonorities 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 some other recording companies their sound improved with the advent of solid-state amplification and on this LP the instrument has plenty of presence, 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. 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) and the dynamic range is restricted at forte and above, but that was – and is – a problem found on many chamber music recordings. Nonetheless the overall effect is very natural and far superior to the ersatz DG CD offering.

Any disc featuring arguably the greatest of cellists, Mstislav Rostropovich, in his heyday (he was 48 at the time of the recording) was an event, especially when this was the premiere Western recording of a work written for him by Dimitri Shostakovich in 1966.

The Concerto is prefaced by Glazunov's pleasantly unmemorable Minstrel Song, which Rostropovich sings eloquently. Shostakovich's gloriously dark and introspective Second Cello Concerto was almost inevitably dedicated to him. It is scored for three bassoons (one doubling as a contra) single flute and piccolo, two oboes and clarinets, strings, French horns (but no trumpets), harps, timpani and percussion, including wood block, xylophone and whip and it would be difficult to imagine anything more sombre than the works opening where at a slow tempo the cello and strings intone low held notes that gradually form into a sparse spectral theme that is interrupted by macabre, burlesque like outbursts from the xylophone and upper-wind and a written cadenza for the soloist. Apparently the brief, scherzo like second movement is based on a street song and the Allegretto finale ends in unresolved gloom and despondency. Throughout Rostropovich effortlessly conveys every changing mood using a vast range of dynamic and tonal shading, rubato and tempo variation, his intonation is perfect and even the ferociously difficult high, double-stopping that follows the last movements massive climax is effortlessly dispatched - lest anyone thinks that he couldn't do it live, both the first Russian and British performances are available on CD to prove otherwise (EMI and BBC Legends) – throughout he seems to make the bow disappear in an unbroken stream of almost vocal introspection, which means the performance resonates in the memory long after the final bars have died away.

Seigi Ozawa secures marvellous orchestral playing from the Bostonians, but you know that any of the great Russian conductors, or that matter Bernstein or Previn, would have brought even greater bite and power to the score. Nevertheless this is the finest studio version of the work, it is however a pity that DG engineers couldn't produce equally fine sound.

As previously mentioned, Symphony Hall, Boston has a well-nigh perfect acoustic, but for some reason the recording team (which had the same producer as the Dvorak) seems to have added reverberation and there is little sense of space around the image. And while the overall balance is just about acceptably forward, the sense of orchestral perspective and inner balance is awry, in that the wind and assorted percussion move forward outside of tutti passages and the side-drum and xylophone are sometimes given even greater prominence; the score also calls for two harps, but these are often virtually inaudible, while Rostropovich seems to be sat forward of the conductor and completely dominates the sound-stage, which is disappointing. However, when compared to a first label German pressing the Speakers Corner disc has more presence and a better defined bass response; which brings us to the Mercury disc, which isn't new but a fascinating example of cold-war history.

Up until Stalin's death in 1953 the Soviet Union was a virtual no-go area for Western musicians, but in the following decade there was a gradual thawing in relations which enabled companies such as Mercury to access Soviet talent and after a lot of negotiating the company's mobile recording studio van ended up outside the Great Hall of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, Moscow. When the record appeared - as can be seen from the picture above - Mercury weren't exactly backward in coming forward about what they had done, but the result is a triumph, in that as well as the balalaika (which comes in four different sizes, the largest of which - the contrabass - is shown on the sleeve) there are also parts for instruments such as the domra, gusli and the exotically named and sounding Vladimir Shepherd's Horn (which features in Tchaikovsky's Dance of the Comedians) all of which are played with incredible virtuosity and tightness of ensemble. Much of the material is in ballad or dance form and features a surprisingly large number of Soviet era composers, the expressive range is large, the orchestra play in a style and produce a sound (the brass are wonderfully coarse) that must have been quite startling to Western ears in a far more insular era; all of which adds up to an immensely entertaining disc, whose appeal is further enhanced by the wonderful sound.

At their finest Mercury could produce state-of-the-art recordings and in the spacious but not over-blown acoustic of the Great Hall they pulled out all of the stops. The balance is middle-distance, other than for the accordion there is no spotlighting and the balalaikas produce a glowing bed of rustling, vibrant sound. Clarity and definition are exemplary, which means the percussion are crisp and you can hear that the domra is played with a plectrum. No register dominates, the treble is sweet, the bass extended; the whole sound-picture has real vibrancy and presence.

When Vladimir Horowitz walked onto the Carnegie Hall stage at 3.38pm on Sunday, Needless to say the concert was headline news and CBS were there to record it, although it is worth mentioning that probably due to nerves, there were a lot of wrong notes,

some of which were touched-up later or replaced with rehearsal sequences (the unedited recital is now available on CD).

The challenging, richly eclectic programme opened with Busoni's magnificent arrangement of Bach's C major Organ Toccata, where the first bar is an inaccurate scramble (apparently Horowitz asked for it to be retained), but what follows is an object lesson in pedal, dynamic and rhythmic control, rubato, clarity and where necessary, beautiful singing tone. In the Schumann Fantasy Horowitz observes a very high percentage of the dynamic markings, which makes the music sound very quixotic and volatile; there is however some stiff phrasing and articulation in the second movement and the performance as a whole lacks the fluency of many of the pianists other accounts of the work. Scriabin's 'Black Mass' Sonata, Op.68 is given a totally uncompromising, well-nigh definitive performance, as is his more romantic F sharp minor Poem, where once again one marvels at Horowitz's total command of every aspect of piano technique and thereby expression. He ended the recital with Chopin, starting with the C Sharp Minor Mazurka, where the rhythmic finesse, split-hands and rubato belong to a sadly long-gone age. The tempo for the Etude Op.10/8 is relaxed, which allows Horowitz to make it sound like a dance and use a huge range of tonal shading. Finally there is the Op.23 Ballade where Horowitz seems to rewrite the score, time-and-again one hears rhythmic figures, inner parts and melodic lines highlighted in a way that is totally unique, thought provoking and profoundly moving.

There were four encores. Debussy's Serenade for the Doll is played with crystalline, yet languorous poise and grace, Scriabin's early Etude in C Sharp minor is a beautifully voiced reverie, Moszkowski's Etude in A flat is cheekily dispatched and finally there is Schumann's Traumerei about which one could write an essay on the control of touch, tempo variation, rubato and the art of simplicity.

Before considering the sound there are two presentational issues. The spindle-hole on LP1 is too small, which shouldn't happen on such an expensive product and why doesn't Speakers Corner provide windowed inner sleeves, surely at the price one shouldn't have to mark them to know which disc is which?

Sound-wise, British first label pressings were used for comparison and one immediately hears more wow-and-flutter at the beginning of side-one of the Speakers Corner disc, but there is a similar problem on the 2013 Sony CD remastering, which would indicate an issue with the master-tapes. Elsewhere the new ones are slightly more forwardly balanced, have a greater dynamic range, the piano sound is bigger and they are cut at a higher level. Both have real presence and there is some idea of the hall acoustic, although given the size of the auditorium one assumes the microphones were fairly close to the piano. There is excellent definition and clarity; however particularly in the middle-register the tone is harsher than on the original. With regard to applause all of the versions severely truncate the minute long standing ovation that greeted Horowitz's entrance, which is unfortunate if the tapes have it complete, as it would have nicely set the scene. This release, while very different, isn't superior to the original, but as ever availability and condition enter into the equation and here Speakers Corner win hands down.