

# GRAMOPHONE

## RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Peter J Rabinowitz welcomes a survey of Martinů's cello-and-piano music from a young duo who bring insight and verve to these distinctive works



Martinů

'Complete Works for Cello and Piano'  
Cello Sonatas - No 1, H277; No 2, H286; No 3, H340.  
Seven Arabesques, H201. Ariette, H188b.  
Four Nocturnes, H189. Six Pastorales, H190.  
Romance, H186bis. Suite miniature, H192.  
Variations on a Slovak Folk Song, H378.  
Variations on a Theme of Rossini, H290  
Vilém Vlček vc Denis Linnik pf  
Supraphon (SU4364-2 2 • 149')

These compact and tough-minded cello sonatas are hardly standard repertoire, but they've been recorded repeatedly – for good reason, since they offer Martinů distilled. They perfectly capture his voice: not only its recognisable cadences and rhythmic gestures but also its nervousness and flashes of jazziness, as well as the characteristic way, inspired by Janáček, it tends to speak in small shards of material rather than long paragraphs. The cello sonatas reflect his spirit, too, in their readiness to shift directions (the long cadenza that interrupts the finale of the Second is but one startling digression) and in their paradoxical blends of emotion – especially the way their extreme momentum is clouded by nostalgic regret (all three were written during his years of exile from his native Czechoslovakia).

This is the kind of quirky music that only the committed take up, so recordings of the complete cycle are also generally of high quality, running from the intimate 1982 account by Josef Chuchro and Josef Hála and the stern 1990 version by János Starker and Rudolf Firkušný onwards. This latest collection, by relative newcomers Vilém Vlček and Denis Linnik, continues that tradition of excellence.

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Vlček and Linnik fully catch the astonishing range of Martinů's music

urgency of the outer movements and the profundity in between. Granted, for the most part the sonatas' *allegros* aren't notably fast. But Vlček's often penetrating, low-vibrato sound – far from what Andrew Farach-Colton calls Johannes Moser's 'beautiful, even tone' – and his superb etching of rhythmic gestures, coupled with Linnik's spiky playing, give them even more kick than usual. This isn't highly polished playing: the players aim for something grittier, and in the more kinetic passages they're more apt to scuffle than to defer to one another (evident as early as the first movement of the First). But the sparks they create only enhance the vitality of the performances. Granted, too, Vlček's lower register may not always have the weight for ideal projection. But even the darkest moments in the slow movements have a spellbinding introspection (note the poignant

gravity that marks the chorale-inspired *Largo* of the Second).

High points? It's hard not to be taken in by the joyful brightness of the piano's brief bursts of ecstasy in the first movement of the First, the Bernsteinian swagger at the beginning of the finale of the Third (did Martinů know *The Age of Anxiety*?), and – most striking – the whiplash opening of the finale of the Second, launched with a jolt that makes even the dynamic Steven Isserlis and Olli Mustonen seem relatively tame. But what really impresses here is not the quality of individual passages but the way the players' quick reflexes allow them to follow the music's unconventional ebb and flow. Vlček and Linnik, like expert white-water rafting guides, somehow manage to keep sight of their ultimate destination without minimising the local pleasures of the music's constant twists.



Vlček and Linnik's quick reflexes allow them to follow the unconventional ebb and flow of music that often feels nervous, with occasional flashes of jazziness

To add to its attractions, Supraphon includes not just the sonatas and the moderately familiar sets of variations (with at least one interpretative surprise I won't give away), but also Martinů's more obscure cello-and-piano works. The rarer material was composed in France around 1930, well before the 1939 First Sonata, and Vlček admits that this earlier music doesn't always 'exhibit the highest ... mastery'. The fairly bland *Suite miniature*, sporting few of Martinů's usual fingerprints, perhaps supports that view. Still, in its whimsy, in the way its dissonances throw you off balance (try the first of the *Pastorales*) and in its quicksilver changes of perspective, the rest of the early music largely rewards your attention. I was especially taken with the *Arabesques*, a set of seven brief rhythmic études filled with delights, often exploiting the joyful clash

produced by the superimposition of conflicting metrical patterns. And the odd Americanisms give the recently discovered *Ariette* (originally for violin and getting its first recording here) an infectious charm.

But even if you're seeking just the sonatas, this is arguably the best option. Yes, Moser's luminous cycle with Andrei Korobeinikov, almost consistently slower, pays high dividends, especially in the middle movements. And the Isserlis/Mustonen (the cellist's second recording of this repertoire), often edgier still than the Vlček/Linnik, provides a thrilling volatility. But to my ears, this new release – in its slightly more measured but no less emotionally charged way – most fully catches the astonishing range of the music. May we hear more from these talented musicians. **G**

#### Sonatas – selected comparisons:

Chubch, Hálá

Supraphon E6672 (5/88)

Isserlis, Mustonen

BIS BIS2042 (8/14)

Moser, Korobeinikov

Pentatone PTC5187 007 (1/23)

Starker, Firkuňý

RCA 09026 61220-2

#### KEY TO SYMBOLS

② Compact disc (number of discs)

**H** Historic

SACD (Super Audio CD)

**T** Text(s) included

DVD Video

**t** translation(s) included

Blu-ray

**s** subtitles included

Dolby Atmos

**na** no longer available

LP

**aas** all available

Download/

**separately**

streaming only

**oas** only available

Reissue

**separately**



#### Editor's Choice

Martin Cullingford's pick of the finest recordings reviewed in this issue