

FIBICH Violin Sonatina, op. 27. Violin Sonata in D. Romance, op. 10. Andantino, "Clear Night." Song Without Words for 2 Violins and Piano. Concert Polonaise • Josef Suk (vn); Josef Hála (pn) • SUPRAPHON SU 3473-2 131 (51:17)

The Bohemian-born Zdenek Fibich (1850-1900) lives on in most record collections, and in the violinist's repertoire, largely by way of transcriptions of his pretty and melancholy Poem (Suk has recorded it, including a version with what must be regarded as a Czech disco orchestra!). This disc, entitled Works for Violin and Piano, First Complete Edition, also includes the exquisitely beautiful Romance, op. 10, which Suk recorded with orchestra some years ago. It is pretty, melancholy, and far more "Czech" than anything else on this recording. That gift of tunefulness, and especially tuneful melancholy, served Fibich quite reliably, so there is some attractive music on this release. Suk and his old colleague Hála recorded it early in 2000; Suk is now 71 and reputedly ready to retire, but his tone remains firm and sweet and unlabored, and his bowing is still elegant, his sense of style tasteful. Only a lack of sheer power in the fourth movement of the Sonata and the virtuoso Concert Polonaise betrays Suk's age, and that may be as much a function of the unfamiliarity of the music.

The Sonatina was written in 1869, supposedly in a single day. It is decidedly simple in form and content—more elementary even than Dvořák's Violin Sonatina—but it has that same ready tunefulness, and tuneful melancholy, that accounts for the popularity of Fibich's Poem. What with the vigorous folk-dance materials in the first movement, and the payability of the work as a whole, this would seem a candidate for some level of recital use, even if only by students and amateurs. It certainly sounds effective as performed by Suk and Hála. The more ambitious Sonata of 1876 (the notes confusingly refer to another Sonata of 1874, so perhaps this should be regarded as the Sonata No. 2) is variable enough in quality that it has less potential for performance use. It begins with a clever and arresting slow introduction showing characteristics of a fugue and a strong neo-Classical seriousness, a great concept that soon drops off in favor of the composer's mournful shades of harmony expressed in the piano, while the violin plays mere filigree around it. The impression is that of a piano piece to which some ineffectual violin-writing has been added. The piano also carries the emotional and expressive burden in the slow movement, with deep rolled chords over a tepid but pretty violin melody. The scherzo, Vivace, shows some influences of Dvořák in the rhythmic externals, but there is really no development or depth to the writing. The fourth movement is harmonically advanced, and the polonaise rhythms would seem to promise some potential for crowd-pleasing virtuosity if nothing else; but Suk sounds weak here, and an indecisive conclusion sounds disappointingly tacked-on.

Clear Night is a picturesque bit of tone painting, comparable in

many ways to Dvořák's Quiet Woods for cello but with surprising tinges of Gustav Mahler in the piano accompaniment. The Song is for two violins but is said to be playable by a single violinist (it is mostly elementary and rather boring double-stops). I suspect this recording is overdubbed by Suk, though. Fibich's melodic gifts seem to have abandoned him in this tiresome piece.

The showiest work is the Polonaise; not as difficult as Wieniawski's, it nonetheless has its share of high positions, difficult leaps to those heights, double-stops, including passages that reminded me of the Brahms Concerto, and a cadenza at the end. Suk sounds strained at times—this surely cannot be everyday fare for him—but there is also some impressive violin-playing, and if the work fails to lift one out of one's seat, Fibich is the guy to blame.

Fibich did not challenge his violinists as much as he did his pianists, and was highly inconsistent in his duo writing. Nor was he very imaginative in his development of (admittedly sometimes quite promising) musical ideas. This makes the Sonata particularly frustrating. But Fibich had a genuine melodic gift, make no mistake about it, and many works here (and portions of works) benefit from that. Suk and Hála are lavishing high art on material of variable quality. There are enough nice moments to give the disc a highly qualified if a bit reluctant recommendation. David K. Nelson

This article originally appeared in Issue 24:4 (Mar/Apr 2001) of Fanfare Magazine.

Fibich: Works for Violin & Piano (complete) – BBC Magazine

COMPOSER(S)

Fibich

WORKS:

Works for Violin & Piano (complete)

PERFORMER:

Josef Suk (violin), Josef Hála (piano)

LABEL:

Supraphon

CATALOGUE NUMBER:

SU 3473-2

PERFORMANCE:

SOUND:

Despite his considerable reputation as a symphonist and dramatic composer, the essence of Fibich's musical voice is best perceived in more intimate genres such as the exquisite cycle of Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences for solo piano. The works for violin and piano

follow a similar line of gentle nostalgia and melancholy juxtaposed with more extrovert dance patterns that relate to Czech folk music.

This mixture of elements is harnessed most effectively here in the large-scale Sonata in D of 1876 – an idiosyncratic composition of diverse emotions which seems haunted by a strange contrapuntal episode that opens both the first and final movements. The rest of the material on this disc is less distinctive, though the charmingly unpretentious Sonatina and attractive Romance deserve the occasional airing. Veteran fiddler Josef Suk has been particularly active in the recording studio in recent years promoting some of the byways of the violin repertoire, and he certainly performs these works with wholehearted commitment.

Admittedly, there are moments where his over-sweet tone and lack of variety of nuance begin to pall – an impression that is probably exacerbated by a recording that favours the violin at the expense of the piano. Nonetheless, this is an enterprising release that makes one curious to hear more of Fibich's neglected chamber works.
Erik Levi