

DVOŘÁK Concerto in B Minor for Cello and Orchestra, op. 104. ELGAR Concerto in E Minor for Cello and Orchestra, op. 85. • Maria Kliegel, cello; Michael Halász, conductor; Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. • NAXOS 8.550503 [DDD]; 73:11.

Naxos has been building up quite an impressive catalog and quite a list of good reviews as well. Henry Fogel, for example, gave high praise to Naxos's recent releases of three Puccini operas (*Fanfare* 16:1). This new recording of two of the most famous concertos for cello is another winner.

Maria Kliegel is a first-rate cellist. She plays with a pleasing, full-bodied tone, particularly lovely in the upper part of the instrument's range. Her approach to both concertos is for the most part relaxed and controlled—an approach that works especially well in the Elgar. In fact, it is the Elgar performance that really shines on this disc. The first movement is taken a bit more slowly than in most recordings; this only heightens the mixture of melancholy and grandeur that pervades the work. But the performance also has the energy and bite necessary to keep the concerto from becoming excessively rhapsodic. The second movement, played with great delicacy, achieves a Mendelssohn-like fleetness that contrasts beautifully with the meditative Adagio which follows it.

There are many fine moments in the Dvořák concerto as well. While the performance on the whole lacks the intensity of Rostropovich and Ozawa—this may be an asset to some listeners—it does have a lyricism that works to great advantage in the slow movement and the second theme of the first movement. The finale, on the other hand, really needs a bit more drive to prevent the movement from sounding somewhat fragmentary. But on the whole, this is a very nice performance. Here, as in the Elgar, Michael Halász and the Royal Philharmonic ably support Kliegel's view of the work.

The sound of the recording is only good, not spectacular, but strongly in its favor is the natural-sounding balance of the solo instrument and the orchestra. This disc, then, is recommended both to those seeking excellent performances of basic repertoire items at a bargain price and to those who love these two concertos.

Richard Burke

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DVOŘÁK Cello Concerto. ELGAR Cello Concerto • Maria Kliegel, vc; Michael

Halász, cond; Royal PO. • NAXOS 8.550503 (73:11)

Why is this one of my favorite compact discs? Let me count the ways.

1. An inspired coupling. Surely these are the two greatest pieces written so far for violoncello and orchestra. One should love the excellent essays by Schumann, Lalo, Saint-Saëns, Bliss, Prokofiev, Walton, and Shostakovich, but Dvořák and Elgar offer profundities well beyond them.
2. An inspired soloist. By now it should be clear that Maria Kliegel is one of the great cellists of the age, always playing with lovely tone, technical finesse, and above all, deep insight into the expressive possibilities of each work she performs.
3. An inspired conductor and orchestra. Kliegel's finely judged interpretation is matched in every bar of these glorious pieces by a conductor who seems of one mind with her, and a top-notch orchestra superbly responsive to both of them.
4. Inspired engineering. Producer Murray Khouri and his unnamed engineers have achieved a triumphant simulation ornature. The solo instrument, almost always over-miked in concerto recordings, here sounds as if in real life: front and center, but never louder than the full orchestra, or the loudest instruments in it. The stereo stage is wide and deep. The sound is rich, but also clear. The dynamic range is awesome.

Though soloist, conductor, and orchestra perform with the firmest possible control in both concertos, they do so to produce what, for want of a better term, must be called intensely romantic performances. These works from the late maturity of two great composers have interesting, even fascinating formal features, but form follows function in both of them, and the function is to express powerful feelings, the most powerful of which are apprehension of immense beauties and irretrievable losses. Why such works are so consoling and even inspiring is one of the enduring mysteries of great art.

Both concertos have had many great recordings, dating back to early electric 78s. Before this Naxos disc appeared around ten years ago, I naturally had other favorites. They are favorites still, but Kliegel, Halász, and the Royal Philharmonic are now firmly in first place for both works.

Robert McColley

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MusicWeb Review - 4*/4* for Performance & Recording

This recording was made in London in November 1991. The German cellist Maria Kliegel has the enviable advantage of having studied the cello in America with the

Hungarian cellist, Janos Starker and became his assistant. The Starker recording of the Dvorák is a clear winner and Tortelier's recording with Sir Malcolm Sargent is also recommended.

From a professional, musical and technical point of view, which is totally objective, the Elgar is a very poor work. And why is it that British soloists and British orchestras play it so feebly and self-indulgently? To watch a British cellist play it always seems to be accompanied by their pulling awful faces and acting the part of someone about to break down into tears and go completely mad.

I saw Starker play the Elgar and he was not trying to win an Oscar! He played it straight and in a very un-British way ... no nobilmentes or pomposity and he did not wallow in mawkish nauseating sentimentality. He ignored the slowing down in the finale and therefore cut a few minutes off the piece. And, he did not make the usual ugly slur of a perfect fifth at the beginning of the concerto. As a result I found the work to be too good to be by Elgar.

Kliegel does observe the annoying slur but she plays the piece almost as Starker did and, quite frankly, it works. The music is no longer pathetic and pitiful but strong and robust and the orchestral parts are stunningly realised. It is explosive, sometimes excitingly noisy and terribly non-British. I am afraid that some of the Elgar's vulgarities still remain but this performance is so positive. It has a common message. We have to get on with life and go forward not live in an unhappy past. Kliegel's speeds are also generally convincing and the conductor, who was a student of Christoph von Dohnanyi, makes the music blaze at times ... and, please, don't call the fire brigade! The first big orchestral entry is a knockout!

But it is the soloist's simplicity and lack of ostentation that wins through. I shall never admire this work but I will continue to enjoy this revealing performance ... occasionally!

The Dvorák is the exact opposite of the Elgar since it is a masterpiece and probably the finest concerto written for the cello. If you compare it with the Elgar, see how Dvorák deals with the slow tender passage in the finale to great effect and without whingeing. I think Kliegel's *tempi* are a tiny bit cautious and there a few rough edges in the orchestra but it is a good performance and at the bargain price one cannot complain.

But I have left the best until last. In the exquisite and profoundly moving passages in the Dvorák there is a beautiful cello tone and the orchestral playing of quiet passages is a delight.

Reviewer

David Wright

Performances



Recording



