
NEWS & INFORMATION

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For release: October 2001

For: Cedille Records
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YOUTHFUL QUARTET POLISHES DVORAK'S LATE-ROMANTIC GEMS

The Pacifica Quartet, a young A-list ensemble known for championing contemporary music and neglected composers, performs a pair of works by famous Romantic composer Antonin Dvorak on its second and newest CD.

The Pacifica, currently in residence at both the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, performs two of Dvorak's less recorded works: the String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, Op. 106, and String Quintet in E-Flat Major, Op. 97, with guest violist Michael Tree, a founding member of the Guarneri Quartet (Cedille Records CDR 90000 059).

Surprisingly, both works are seldom recorded nowadays outside the Czech Republic.

"A lot of professional musicians have never heard them before," says Brandon Vamos, the Pacifica's cellist. "They are very difficult."

A decade ago, *Gramophone* rated the Quartet No. 13 "the outstanding work" of Dvorak's cycle ("What marvelous music!") and asked, "Why is it so rarely heard? Instead of dishing out yet another 'American,' why don't some of our younger quartets tackle this masterpiece?"

Vamos says the work's "very symphonic, very thick" textures and sheer length (about 40 minutes) pose a daunting performance challenge, requiring "a lot of energy and concentration."

The 1895 work, which Dvorak wrote after returning to his native Czechoslovakia following his celebrated American sojourn, opens with a series of rising leaps, trills, and descending arpeggios, said to echo birdsongs he heard while living in Iowa. An early Dvorak biographer described the Adagio as "one

of the loveliest and most profound slow movements in Dvorak's creation." Wayne Booth, professor emeritus at the University of Chicago, writes in the CD booklet, "Rarely does any composer produce a theme-and-variations movement as profoundly moving and interesting as this one."

In the scherzo third movement, Dvorak pushes the boundaries of decorum as dissonances pile up over static harmonies and repeating rhythms, yet there are also passages infused with Dvorak's pastoral charm and mastery of the classical idiom. In the finale, darker moods vie with uplifting sentiments, ending on a note of triumphant exuberance.

Though not nearly as familiar today as his "American" Quartet, Op. 96, the Quintet in E-Flat, Op. 97, is also a product of his stay in Spillville, Iowa—a thriving Czech community at the time. A marvelous work that had immediate success, it shows the influence of the folk music of his homeland and of the African American and Native American music he heard in Spillville.

The first movement adapts a Native American melody, with rhythms echoing Algonquin drumming patterns. The rollicking second movement scherzo begins with the viola playing a tricky rhythm on a single note. This motif becomes a continuous ostinato over which Dvorak adds melodic layers. The trio section features a long, arching melody with unexpected harmonic turns.

The slow third movement is widely considered the emotional heart of the Quintet. It introduces a theme Dvorak originally wrote as a prospective American anthem: as a musical setting for "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." The light-hearted Finale ends with dervish-like energy.

Formed in 1994 on the West Coast, the Chicago-based Pacifica Quartet has built a reputation for brilliant ensemble work and exuberant, impassioned interpretations. The *New York Times* declared, "Its sound, individually and as a group, is pure, lyrical, and educated . . . remarkable" and added, "They all move on the same, strong supple band of time." The ensemble won grand prize at the 1996 Coleman Chamber Music Competition, top prize at the 1997 Concert Arts Guild Competition, and the 1998 Naumburg Chamber Music Award.

Cedille plans more recordings with the Pacifica, possibly including a survey of Mendelssohn's works for string quartet, says label founder and producer Jim Ginsburg.

The redoubtable violist Michael Tree has recorded more than 80 chamber music works, including collaborations with Artur Schnabel, Emanuel Ax, Richard Goode, Jaime Laredo, Yo Yo Ma, Rudolf Serkin, Isaac Stern, and Pinchas Zukerman.

The Pacifica first worked with Mr. Tree years ago when he coached them at the Aspen Music Festival. More recently, when the Guarneri Quartet visited Chicago, the Pacifica approached him about collaborating on the Dvorak quintet. “He’s the kind of person who likes to help young quartets and had a real desire to record this piece,” says the Pacifica’s Vamos. “He’s very fond of it.”

Cedille recorded the Dvorak CD in the performance studio of Chicago’s WFMT-FM, a venue that affords detailed pickup of each part within a comfortable overall acoustic. This is particularly evident in the clarity and crispness of the rhythmic elements in the Quintet’s second movement.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing Chicago’s most noteworthy classical artists and attractive yet unjustly neglected repertoire. The label is an arm of the nonprofit Chicago Classical Recording Foundation.

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ANTONIN DVORAK
String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, Op. 106 (40:30)
String Quintet in E-Flat Major, Op. 97 (34:56)

Pacifica Quartet
Simin Ganatra, violin; Sibbi Bernhardsson, violin
Kathryn Lockwood, viola; Brandon Vamos, cello

Michael Tree, viola

Cedille Records CDR 90000 059