

AMERICAN VOICES • Pacifica Str Qrt; ¹Uniting Voices • CEDILLE 90000
228 (65:23)

DVOŘÁK String Quartet No. 12 in F, op. 96, “American”. **FLORENCE PRICE** String Quartet No. 1 in G. **GRUENBERG** *Four Diversions*, op. 22. **JAMES LEE III** ¹*Pitch In*

The Pacifica String Quartet offers a refreshing take on a standard quartet compact disc: a nice balance of old and new, plus a choir as a bonus. The Pacifica Quartet clearly has a wide repertoire: I have reviewed them in Castelnovo-Tedesco, Boccherini, Vivaldi, and Turina on a disc with Sharon Isbin (*Fanfare* 43:3); a disc of Shulamit Ran, Jennifer Higdon, and Ellen Zwilich (44:2); and (a great big tick here) they have recorded a Prokofiev String Quartet (No. 2) alongside Shostakovich, reviewed in 35:6.

But first there comes Dvořák, with his famous op. 96 quartet (one with the epithet “American”), in a rendition fresher than just about any I have heard. Another defining factor of this superbly recorded performance is its dynamic range: True pianissimos just make you hold your breath. There are also four equal voices, and quite rightly for this composer a violist of note, Mark Holloway. The melodies the composer used shine here; detail is superb. The *Lento* forms the perfect foil for the excised activity of the first movement, and how cellist Brandon Vamos makes the upper register of his instrument sing. The attention to inner voices as a method of rhythm and forwarding of music, and the intertwining of string voices in duet, is flawless. The third movement gallops around but remains nevertheless one of the most subtle as well as joyous accounts. This is highly intelligent playing, informed by awareness of both textural terrain and harmonic direction. And as to the finale, it flies deliciously, creating gossamer beds of sound over which Simin Ganatra and Austin Hartman’s violins can fly.

There is a plethora of fine recordings of this piece already, from the Emerson Quartet to the Lindsays, from the Hollywood String Quartet to the Cleveland Quartet. The Pacifica Quartet’s vibrant reading now joins the hallowed ranks. The joys of recording mean the viola statements of the theme in the final measures are more than perfectly audible; the trajectory to that finishing line is as exciting as any. Bravo! And, what would I really like? To hear the Pacifica Quartet in those early Dvořák string quartets, the ones that last hours. I exaggerate (a little) but with advocacy like this, could the Pacifica Quartet be the group to call for a reappraisal? Food for thought.

The discography of Florence Price’s 1929 String Quartet No. 1 in G Major is decidedly smaller. And yet this music is radiant and flows beautifully. The Pacifica Quartet plays the first movement (of two) with real aplomb; the slow movement opens in interior mode and really does sound like Dvořák, at least initially. It moves from that *Andante moderato* to a more active, and indeed more individual, *Allegretto*. No one would call

that Dvořák. This is quicksilver music, but also quixotic in its changes of direction; Dvořák would never write this. The Pacifica Quartet celebrates the music's individuality, lavishing on Price every inch of care they spent on Dvořák. That's respect, and Price's music glows in response. And how beautifully the movement ends.

The ideal supplement to the Price on this disc would be the Naxos disc featuring Price's String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor and the *Five Folksongs in Counterpoint* for string quartet (a disc that also includes Leo Sowerby's String Quartet, all performed by the Avalon String Quartet). The Fort Worth Symphony's performances of Price's First and Fourth Symphonies on Naxos is also well worth seeking out (42:5).

Written in 1930, the *Four Diversions*, op. 32 for string quartet were penned by Louis Gruenberg (1884–1964). There is a link to Dvořák in that Gruenberg was just streets away from the National Conservatory in New York (where the elder composer was director); but, as the sound world we hear here makes clear, Gruenberg's heart lay with one Arnold Schoenberg. This is coupled with an interest in popular music, including jazz, which we can perhaps hear in the slinky repeated cello rhythms of the third movement. The scurrying finale with its angular thrusting melody is most involving. This piece certainly invites further exploration into Gruenberg's music, especially given the Pacifica Quartet's fervent advocacy of the score.

James Lee III makes a welcome appearance in the *Fanfare* Archive with *Pitch In* for string quartet and children's choir, a reflection of the "collective recognition of America's 250 years." The result of a social justice commissioning project, Lee's piece sets a text by Sylvia Dianne Beverly: "People are hungry, yet people continue to waste food" it begins. Lee's setting of this line becomes a recurrent feature of the work. Once again there is an American folk influence, particularly a pentatonic aspect. So here we have American voices, in the form of the youth choir Uniting Voices, asking for a new chapter of awareness from the American people. The piece certainly raises questions on a moral basis; on a purely musical level there is nothing new here, but the performance certainly cannot be faulted.

This is a very well-programmed, beautifully recorded and superbly played disc, therefore. If I fail to warm to the Lee, the Price and Gruenberg alone make the disc worthwhile; and then there's that lovely Dvořák. **Colin Clarke**

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