



Bohuslav Martinu: Complete Cello Sonatas

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The American Record Guide
There's something about Czech music that goes to my heart. It isn't just the music itself. The plots of the operas of Smetana, Dvorak, Fibich, and particularly Janacek have something about them that is more human and touching than any other country's productions. And the folk music is somehow more positive and hopeful than almost any other.

Which brings us to Bohuslav Martinu, one of the liveliest, most engaging composers I know of. There's a reason why I chose his second cello sonata to play in my first Carnegie Recital Hall program. All three of the sonatas are special, but 2 is the most emotionally moving. Sonata 1 is exciting and virtuosic, almost too technically exciting to be fully expressive, written in 1939 while the composer was just trying to stay alive. By 1942, he was here in America, looking back on his flight from Europe and able to express the feelings of tragedy evoked by the war. In 1953 he wrote the Third Sonata, a more relaxed and lyrical work, broad and beautiful, after he had returned to Europe and was living in his wife's home town in Picardy.

There have been a fair number of recordings of the sonatas over the years, beginning with exciting ones by Steven Isserlis and Peter Evans (Hyperion 66296, Nov/Dec 1989), where the recorded sound was a bit muffled. Then came Roel Dieltiens and Robert Groslot (Accent 8967, March/April 1991), who brought even more variety to their treatment. Then the big guns got into the act, perhaps a bit late. Janos Starker and Rudolf Firkusny (RCA 61220, March/April 1993) whipped through the music without getting emotionally involved or even rhythmically precise in places. I was disappointed. Later that same year came reissues by Czech nationals Josef Chuchro and Josef Hala (Supraphon 0992, Nov/Dec 1993), a bit weak in the knees but speaking the right language.

At this point Martinu cello sonatas suddenly went out of fashion, and I didn't hear them again until Naxos climbed on the bandwagon with 554502, played by Sebastian and Christian Benda (May/June 2000). They played well, but tended to improvise their way through the composer's precise rhythms, making his train of thought hard to follow. Then came another Supraphon issue by Vectomov (3586, July/Aug 2002). I seem to be missing my copy of that—it didn't make it to my permanent collection.

Finally, we reach today's recording. It was worth the wait. Wick and Devoyon play with great enthusiasm and rhythmic accuracy yet with plenty of well-controlled rubato where they wish to make a point. It is a fine, clearly expressed performance, played with love for the composer's idiom and recorded with clarity and warmth of sound. Overall, I think it may now be my favorite of a generally distinguished collection of recordings.