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Dvorak, a Warm and Witty Melodist

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

SO this is what the classical record business has come to. Remember the last Mozart year (1991), the last Brahms year (1997), the last Bach year (2000)? Classical labels were all over them with big new projects and reissues.

As you may or may not have noticed, it is a Dvorak year, the centenary of the composer's death. The foundering record industry seems hardly to have noticed or to care. The highest-profile release of recent months was a Sony Classical CD compiling older performances by Yo-Yo Ma (the Cello Concerto and other works), and even Sony didn't make much of it.

True, Dvorak was not Bach, Mozart or Brahms (and more to the point when it comes to respect, not German but Czech). Still, he was Dvorak, one of the most beloved composers of all time, as at least a few major concert presenters are acknowledging in desultory fashion this season: Carnegie Hall in programs scattered about; the New York Philharmonic in its gala opening concert on Tuesday (inevitably, with the "New World" Symphony); the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center with two works next month.

Not that anyone is looking for the pointless reduplication that deadens concert life and that was largely responsible for the record labels' plight in the first place.

And fortunately, there is no lack of wonderful Dvorak recordings at least among the major works, though many nooks and crannies remain inadequately explored.

So the classical music critics of The New York Times are providing a guide of sorts with recommendations of favorite Dvorak CD's. (Their selections are on Page 6.) Think of it as a Dvorak year do-it-yourself kit. JAMES R. OESTREICH

Here are some favorite Dvorak recordings of the classical music critics of The New York Times. Availability is hard to determine in the current state of the market. Most of the recordings here can be found on Amazon.com or in major record stores. CD's range in price from \$11.98 to \$16.98 for one CD to \$47.98 for a six-CD set. (An introduction appears on Page 1 of Weekend.)

James R. Oestreich

SYMPHONY NO. 6. Cleveland Orchestra, conducted by Christoph von Dohnanyi (with Janacek's "Taras Bulba"; Decca/London 430 204-2, CD).

SYMPHONY NO. 5, "MY HOME," "HUSITSKA." London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Istvan Kertesz (Decca/London 417 597-2).

THREE OVERTURES (OPP. 91-93). Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch (with Liszt's "Préludes"; Philadelphia Orchestra, CD; www.philorch.org).

"DVORAK DISCOVERIES." Harmonie Ensemble New York, conducted by Steven Richman; others (Music & Arts CD-926, CD).

REQUIEM. Pilar Lorengar, Erszebet Komlossy, Robert Ilosfalvy, Tom Krause; Ambrosian Singers; London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Istvan Kertesz (with Kodaly's "Psalmus Hungaricus"; Decca/London 468 487-2, two CD's).

ALTHOUGH I share the general inclination in the surrounding lists to rely on Czech performers in Dvorak's music, the absence of any in the following discussion says much about the richness and variety of the Dvorak discography.

With Dvorak as with Tchaikovsky, I bow to no one in my admiration and respect for the towering three last symphonies. But they are so much a part of my mental baggage that I more often seek out the charming and flavorful earlier ones.

How to choose from so many favorite recordings of Dvorak's symphonies? Cheat, of course, by tossing in a few ringers.

Christoph von Dohnanyi's version of the Sixth is a gem, made in 1989, when the much-touted chemistry between him and the great Cleveland Orchestra was at its most potent. The piece comes off like a masterwork worthy to stand alongside the big three. But how often do you hear it in concert? I would also turn to Mr. Dohnanyi and the Cleveland Orchestra for the "New World" Symphony, a work they consistently made fresh, treating it almost as an outside chamber work, with lively and engaged interactions.

The Fifth Symphony, though not quite on the level of the Sixth, is also compelling, and I list it here more or less randomly as a blanket endorsement of performances of the orchestral works by Istvan Kertesz, a Hungarian-born maestro who seemed to have just the right temperament for Dvorak (among others). His recordings of the symphonies from the 1960's and early 70's are available as a six-CD set, highly recommended to any who can spare \$50 or so.

Another broad-brush recommendation in Dvorak goes to Wolfgang Sawallisch. His EMI recordings of the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies with the Philadelphia Orchestra are particularly fine. But I list another Philadelphia recording as an avenue to bring in several indispensable Dvorak works (in addition to the obviously indispensable ones).

The first is "In Nature's Realm," one of a set of three concert overtures (including the popular "Carnival") superbly rendered by Mr. Sawallisch and the Philadelphians. It is quite simply glorious music.

So is the "Czech Suite," though not available at the moment in a standout performance. (But be sure to hear it anyway; you'll get the idea.)

And then there are the serenades. Much as I relish the exquisite String Serenade, I have a special fondness for the clucking of the Wind Serenade. So Steven Richman's recordings of an early Octet version of the String Serenade on "Dvorak Discoveries" is a particular delight: the revenge of the Wind Serenade, as it were. The first lines of the string work, which seems so inevitable and immutable in the final version, emerge here on horn and bassoon, and woodwinds loom large throughout, alongside a string quartet and piano.

I add the Requiem not as a favorite work but as another opportunity to cite Kertesz's mastery and a way to expand the discussion. My favorites among the choral works are the Te Deum and especially the Stabat Mater, and I heartily second the recommendation of Robert Shaw's Stabat Mater elsewhere on this page.

Although Kertesz's performance is typically grand, the Requiem — even in relation to the Stabat Mater, itself no model of concision — is sprawling and uneven. What's more it lacks much of the drama of the great requiems across the centuries.

Clearly, Dvorak wasn't a fire-and-brimstone kind of guy. That's one of the reasons we love him.

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