



Martinů: *Bergerettes*. Piano Trios.
Smetana Trio. Supraphon.

Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů may not be the deepest nor subtlest, but he's almost always enjoyable. His First Trio, from 1930, is nicknamed "Five Short Pieces," and those range from argumentative to sneaky to sweetly melancholy to acrobatic. The last even has sublimated touches of jazz. A *bergerette* was originally a medieval French *chanson*, pastoral in nature. Martinů's five are sunny and influenced by Czech folk music, so there's kinship with Dvořák. The repeated notes can get too chatty, but there's enough beauty to make up for that. The Second Trio has interesting harmonies, alluring melodies, and the most varied textures. The slow movement is a thoughtful romance, while the finale has a festival atmosphere in the outer sections. In the Third, Martinů tends to go on autopilot with his churning accompanying parts, so it isn't as satisfying. This is where the program order errs; listening to the pieces chronologically (First, *Bergerettes*, Second, and Third) is much easier on the ears. There is one engineering hiccup, too: the first note of the *Bergerettes* is snipped off at the start. The sound is otherwise clear and balanced, and the Smetana Trio sounds like it came out of the womb playing Martinů.

Stephen Estep

Further Listening: Martinů: Cello Sonatas (Isserlis, Mustonen/BIS)



Comédie et Tragédie Vol. 1.
Lully, Rebel, Marais. Tempesta di Mare. Chaconne.

If "baroque" makes you think of overplayed violin concertos, endless organ dramas, or garish harpsichords, this album will knock aside some preconceptions. Tempesta di Mare is a baroque orchestra, so there's the inevitable harpsichord, along with the expected strings, flutes, recorders, and bassoons, but there's exotic percussion, guitars, and a theorbo as well. Jean-Baptiste Lully's comedy-ballet *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, with a script by Molière, was commissioned after the Turkish ambassador visited Louis XIV and his exotic culture became all the rage. French baroque stylings dance with tambourines, cymbals, and Eastern scales, leading up to the *Ballet des nations* section that's as cosmopolitan as it sounds. Jean-Féry Rebel was a student of Lully, but from the opening of *Les éléments*, you'd think he studied with Stravinsky. It's a crashing cluster of dissonance that suddenly stops, leaving only an eerie flute note hanging in the air. The four elements attempt to separate from each other and take their prescribed places in the natural order, portrayed by Rebel's colorful orchestration. Marin Marais' *Alyone* was a tragic opera with some groundbreaking writing, especially in the "Tempest" movement. The orchestra plays with grit and vigor, and my sole complaint is that the hall is rather dry. **SE**

Further Listening: Biber: *La Battalia*



Bruckner: *Symphony 9*. Altomonte Orchestra, Ballot. Gramola.

Conductors have long experimented with widely disparate tempos in Bruckner's symphonies, perhaps because the music is so exalted that no one performance can ever fully encompass its dark mysteries and celestial heights. Rémy Ballot's reading of Bruckner's Ninth (and last) Symphony is the slowest yet on record: 77 minutes. Critical reactions have been mixed, some excoriating Ballot for letting its vast architecture collapse (perhaps true of the elephantine central scherzo), some extolling him for achieving an awesome grandeur that approaches ideal. I find Ballot's Ninth riveting; listening to it sends chills up my spine, especially as Gramola's magnificent surround-sound presentation conveys both the cavernous vastness and the granitic power of this (in concert) performance with stunning realism. Included also on a second disc is a two-piano arrangement of the symphony (here played by Matthias Giesen and Klaus Laczika). Though necessarily a sort of X-ray of the symphonic score, this is still massive in sonority while at the same time revealing all sorts of fascinating harmonic and polyphonic audacities submerged in the orchestral incarnation: an indispensable benefit for anyone who wishes to delve deeper into this ever-astounding Austrian's sonic cathedrals. **Mark Lehman**

Further Listening: Beethoven: Symphony 5 (Gould, piano)