

JITKA HOSPROVÁ – CZECH VIOLA CONCERTOS

What is immediately striking here is the rich baritone tone of Jitka Hosprova's viola, which she plays with consummate authority. The liner notes consist of an interview with her discussing the three works plus other aspects of her interests and career. What a refreshing way to learn about each of these works and composers versus the usual academic analysis akin to the biological study of a skeleton. Jindrich Feld (1925-2007) wrote his 27-minute Viola Concerto in 2004. It consists of two elements: a step-wise pattern of melody that quickly becomes familiar, and a long-lined lyrical yearning that serves somewhat as a second theme. Any lyricism isn't of the singable sort, but the music is always rhythmically clear—I always feel grounded. To say merely that its three movements are slow-fast-slow is deceptive. Each movement is dramatic, solidly structured, serious, and substantial. The middle movement (scherzo?) has a marvelous full-range cadenza of many moods all tied together; it is here that Hosprova gives full display of the control she has over colorful tones, styles, and especially vibrato (or none at all) that heightens her deep powers of expression. III is the most heartfelt movement, ending with a virtuosic flourish that doesn't end *fff*. This is a truly integral and emotional work, especially with the rich, balanced sound given to Jan Kucera's transparent orchestra. The Prague Radio Symphony is in exceptional form. Oldrich Flosman (1925-98) wrote *Visions of Michelangelo* in 1975 for the 500th anniversary of the artist's birth. What lyrical, rich soul Hosprova brings to this lyrical 16-minute work. It's structured like a theme and variations that flows integrally from one section to the next. I'd have to listen much more to certify that these are variations on an actual theme rather than some other element. What I can say is that it has a strong structure and rich colors that build in both strength and sensitivity, you might say, like Michelangelo's works do. Engineers do not give conductor Tomas Brauner's orchestra the vivid, transparent acoustics of the other two works, but that's nitpicking, given the excellence of both the music and performance. Sylvie Bodorova (born 1954) wrote *Planctus* in 1981. The title translates "Laments of the Mother of God", and therein lies a tale. In the notes Hosprova says that Flosman was a loyalist of the Czech communist government, who's now "doomed to fall into oblivion". But she doesn't care! He's a great composer, she loves his music, and here it is! Bodorova, on the other hand, is from a generation who suffered "despondency at the social atmosphere during the time of the communist regime, with the viola being a truly fitting instrument for expressing the mood. Worried whether the religiosity-evoking title would be tolerated by the authorities, she had in reserve the neutral title, *Music for Viola and Symphony*." (I first met an old friend from Prague, who has been American for decades, by introducing a Karl Anserl-Czech Philharmonic recording on the radio on the anniversary of the conductor's death; she called in tears, remembering how the orchestra's concerts were the only thing that lifted her despondency in the flatlined 1970s.) *Planctus* is a *lacrymae* where Kucera's orchestra offers color, treble relief, one outcry, and the yearning for salvation as the viola plays the lament, here with the special poignancy that Hosprova draws from her gorgeous instrument's range and tone. It's a 15-minute meditation, one whole prayer or uninterrupted emotion, with the same glorious sound qualities Kucera has in the Feld. If you have a chance to hear Jitka Hosprova in person, drop everything and go to hear this stunning musician with the catholicity to incorporate on one album two composers on opposite sides of the Czech communist divide.