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Antonio Janigro & The Zagreb Soloists

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I always associate the Zagreb Soloists with their excellent recordings of Bach cantatas and Handel arias performed by the Canadian contralto Maureen Forrester, and the two Mozart piano concertos (nos. 9 and 14) with Alfred Brendel, recorded in the mid-1960s (now on Alto) before he hit the big time.

An ensemble of twelve string players, they were formed in 1953 through the auspices of Zagreb Radiotelevision. The Italian cellist Antonio Janigro became their artistic director, acting both as conductor and soloist until 1968. They exist to this day, having travelled the world and made many recordings of a wide-ranging repertoire. The performances here are all radio productions, made between 1957 and 1966 during Janigro's distinguished tenure; all are in mono. They were taped whilst on their frequent visits to Berlin.

This programme of music showcases the Zagreb Soloists' wide-ranging repertoire, extending from the Baroque to the twentieth century. On their travels they saw themselves as cultural ambassadors of Yugoslavia, later Croatia and they ensured that the majority of their concerts featured at least one work by a Croatian composer. The country is represented here by Milko Kelemen, a name new to me, but he was closely associated with the ensemble. His brief four movement Concertante Improvisations gives plenty of scope for them to shine. The first movement has echoes of Bartók's night music, and is reminiscent of his Divertimento for String Orchestra. Pizzicato features prominently in the third movement Allegro scherzando, whilst the finale is, once again, of a Bartókian persuasion. The only bad apple here is the Adagio for Strings by Samuel Barber, which is rushed (compare). Maybe they were having a bad day, as the performance lacks feeling and expression; it's as if they're playing on auto-pilot, failing to savour the eloquence of this marvellous score. In Reger's Lyric Andante, on the other hand, the players luxuriate in the music's lyricism. Their fervent expression and rich, velvety tone, makes this a performance to relish. There's some superb playing from the unnamed solo violist in Hindemith's Trauermusik. The performance projects the deep sorrow and grief of this poignant score.

In Vivaldi's Concerto in D major, Janigro takes centre-stage as cello soloist in a transcription of this violin concerto, probably made by Janigro himself, though not stated as such. He transcribed several Vivaldi concertos for his instrument, so it is a treat to have one example. His rich, warm tone and spotless intonation lend graceful simplicity to this well managed account. Added to this, an ideal balance has been struck between soloist and orchestra. The Corelli Concerto grosso, Op. 6/4 is notable for its subtlety and finesse.

Despite the mono sound, the audio quality throughout is exceptionally fine on this

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generously timed disc. Annotations in German and English are comparable to Audite's usual high standard.

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