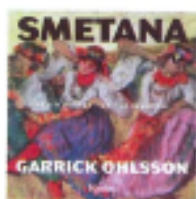


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Just when you think that Garrick Ohlsson finally has all bases covered – from such staples as a complete Chopin cycle and all the Beethoven sonatas, through the Russians to interesting Liszt, unusual Americans, Debussy and Bartók, Granados and the Weber sonatas – he strikes out in a new direction. His most recent musical passport stamp is from the Bohemian lands, where he's been exploring Smetana.

The earliest of these works is *On the Seashore*, recalling the waves near Gothenburg during Smetana's Swedish sojourn. Ohlsson's evocation of the lapping waves is subtle, giving the musical imagery its full, colourfully vivid due without overstatement. The varied characters of the four polkas constituting the first book of *Czech Dances* are aptly delineated. A large part of the flavours in these readings derives from the aplomb with which Ohlsson negotiates tempo fluctuations within individual dances, as if to the manner born. Listening to them, it's easy to feel that Smetana's ambition to do for the polka what Chopin did for the mazurka was fully realised.

Book 2 is a larger collection of several types of dances, from the brilliant *Furiant* and *Skočná*, through the robust *Lancers' Dance* to the *Bear Dance* and several varieties of stamping dances. The character of each emerges as uniquely distinctive. Sentiment abounds without a trace of sentimentality. And if nothing seems overblown, the virtuosity of the *Dupák* is nonetheless breathtaking.

Listening to this very enjoyable recording, I could not help but recall the performances of Rudolf Firkušný, which Ohlsson's resemble in their earnestness, sympathy and simplicity. What courage must have been required to tackle these most nationalistic of all Smetana's works, and what an accomplishment to present them not only lovingly but fairly bursting with character.

Patrick Rucker