

Dvorak, Antonin (1841-1904) Quartet in F Major, Op. 96, "American"

Allegro ma non troppo Lento

Molto vivace

Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

Antonín Dvořák was the most prolific chamber music composer of the late nineteenth century. His natural and seemingly effortless proclivity for the genre resulted in a body of work that was unusual for a composer of the Romantic period, a time in which the exploration of large forces and expansive forms had little to do with this intimate type of music most associated with the Classical era.

One of Dvořák's best-known chamber music compositions is his String Quartet in F major composed in 1893. At this time he held the position of Director of the National Conservatory in New York; after an exhaustive season during which he continued to compose as well as fulfil his many obligations as a visiting celebrity, he was delighted to accept an invitation to spend the summer in the Midwest town of Spillville, Iowa. This tiny farming community of Czech immigrants who preserved the language, culture, and customs of their native land provided Dvořák with an environment he loved best. So after many months working in the hectic atmosphere of the big city, he was now once more in the company of all his children, who had come to America for the holidays, and surrounded by nature which he loved. He set to work immediately and within very short time completed the quartet which has become one of Dvořák's most loved chamber music compositions, acquiring along the way the popular nickname, the "American".

Quiet string 'tremolandi' provide the foundation for the viola's opening theme—its rising-and-falling shape and sharp syncopations will provide much of the substance of the first movement. A cloud of darker emotion draws briefly across the music for the presentation of the complementary subject, a more restrained theme presented by the violin. Dvořák bases both themes on the five-tone pentatonic scale. This arrangement of notes is a common feature of folk songs around the world; it omits the semitones found at the 4th and the 7th degrees of the more common classical scale yielding a specific quality of broadness, stability and a lack of tension (even in a minor key). Whatever influences or expressive intentions lay behind this choice, it imbues the quartet with a personality and a continuity that is distinctive and strongly evocative. The development section concerns itself first with permutations of the main subject and then with an imitative treatment of a motive derived from the dark-hued complementary theme. The fugato based on the second subject acts as a transition to the restatement of both themes which brings balance, formal closure and fulfilment to this most satisfying movement.

The Lento is one of Dvořák's most evocative slow movements. Its flowing, melancholic melody moves, without interruption and without major contrasts, in a single, sweeping arc against a background of an 'ostinato' figure. Starting quietly it builds gradually to an impassioned climax before fading to a subdued close, as the cello nostalgically plays the melody for the last time, accompanied by alternate bowed and plucked notes.

The third movement, a cheerful scherzo, provides an effective contrast to the second movement. It is constructed exclusively from a single, rhythmical theme and comprises two contrasting segments – a lively section in F major and a second section in F minor which is an augmentation of the main theme. The movement also contains a further variant of the main subject which is heard several times high up in the top register of the first violin. It is a stylisation of the song of a bird which Dvořák heard while out walking in the countryside around Spillville. (Musicological and ornithological researchers have identified the bird as the scarlet tanager.)

The Finale immediately establishes a rhythmic pattern that may be an adaptation of native Indian drumming. The first violin dances its joyful tune in and around the continuing beat. Other melodies follow, all with the same high-spirited good humour. In the middle of the movement, the tempo slows, and Dvořák introduces a chorale, probably derived from one of the hymns that he enjoyed playing on the organ for services at Saint Wenceslas church in Spillville. Following the chorale is a shortened restatement of the main theme, leading to a resolutely happy ending.

Opinions vary as to whether the themes in this quartet were derived from Negro spirituals and American Indian music, or whether they simply resemble both American and Bohemian folk traditions in their melodic and rhythmic structure. What is incontrovertible is the fact that this joyful piece of music has maintained its status as a string quartet of universal appeal.

Elizabeth Dalton, 2018