

## Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

### Quartet in F Major, Op. 96, “American”

Allegro ma non troppo ~ Lento ~ Molto vivace ~ Finale: Vivace ma non troppo.

When Dvořák arrived in New York from Prague on September 17, 1892, he immediately took up his duties as director of the National Conservatory but also continued to compose and fulfill his many obligations as a visiting celebrity. By the end of the taxing season, he was delighted to accept an invitation to spend the summer visiting the tiny (population: 300) farming community of Spillville, Iowa, made up of Czech immigrants who preserved the language, culture, and customs of their native land. Dvořák arrived in Spillville on June 5 with his wife, six children, sister, maid, and secretary. Three days later he was already at work on a new string quartet. Although he usually composed quite slowly, he finished the sketches by June 11, writing at the end, “Thanks be to the Lord God. I am satisfied. It went quickly.” As soon as the finally score was ready, on June 23, Dvořák, playing violin, along with three students, read it through. The “official” premiere was given in Boston by the Kneisel Quartet on January 1, 1894.

Written just after the “New World” Symphony, his most famous symphony, this quartet became Dvořák’s best-known chamber music composition and acquired a similar nickname, the “American” Quartet. Many hear in the quartet strains of black spirituals and plantation songs, as well as elements of American Indian music. Others doubt that the quartet grew from the sounds Dvořák heard in America and hold rather that it is based on certain melodic and rhythmic similarities shared by both American ethnic music and the Bohemian-Slavic folk tradition. This difference of opinion really matters little in light of the “American” Quartet’s enormous popularity and universal appeal.

Against a shimmering background that resembles the start of Smetana’s E minor quartet (1876), the viola sings out the first jaunty tune. After the confident swagger of the viola melody, the second theme, played by the first violin, seems tentative and restrained. Both themes are based on the five-tone pentatonic scale (the black keys of a piano), a common feature of folk songs around the world. The following development is devoted to the first theme until a fugato based on the second subject acts as a transition to the restatement of both themes.

The Lento, widely considered the crowning movement of the quartet, is like a lovely emotional aria with the first violin and viola sustaining a busy, flowing accompaniment. The movement’s construction is arch-shaped, starting quietly and building gradually to an impassioned climax before fading to a subdued close, as the cello nostalgically goes through the melody for the last time, accompanied by alternate bowed and plucked notes.

Although cast in A-B-A-B-A form, the third movement is essentially monothematic, since B is little more than a slower version of the A tune. The middle part of the A section is based

on the song of the scarlet tanager, which Dvořák heard and notated on his walks around Spillville.

The Finale immediately establishes a rhythmic pattern that may be an adaptation of native Indian drumming. The first violin dances its joyful tune with and around the continuing beat. Other melodies follow, all with the same high-spirited good humor. 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 what came before, leading to a resolutely happy ending.

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## **Alban Berg**

Born February 9, 1885, in Vienna  
Died December 24, 1935, in Vienna

### **String Quartet Op. 3**

Langsam  
Mässiger Viertel

Berg's musical talent grew and flourished under the tutelage of Arnold Schoenberg. The String Quartet, his last apprentice work, Berg later wrote, was "received directly from Schoenberg." Most experts, though, also consider the quartet Berg's first mature composition. Written during the spring and early summer of 1910, it exhibits freshness, assurance, and mastery of technique.

The work approaches the boundary between tonality and atonality. Certain devices recall the musical vocabulary of Wagner, Mahler, and other late-nineteenth-century composers, who had already stretched the limits of tonal relationships. But in other respects it looks ahead to the twentieth century's rejection of traditional tonality.

The quartet contains just two movements: the first, introspective and lyrical; the second, intense and agitated. There are the usual two subjects in the first movement. The opening theme includes all twelve notes of the chromatic scale, although it is not treated as a tone row. After a short silence and some portentous sounds, played *ponticello* (on the bridge), by the cello, the tender second subject is introduced by the violin. In the unusually brief development section that follows, Berg is mostly concerned with working out the second theme. A new marchlike figure is introduced in the recapitulation, characterized by a glassy *ponticello* sound. An extended slow coda, based on the march melody and the other material heard before, ends with a reminder of the opening theme.

The second movement is in rondo form, with five repeats of one theme separated by four contrasting episodes. Each appearance of the melody, though, is not an exact restatement, but a free transformation of the original. Toward the end of the movement Berg brings back the first movement's opening subject, effectively unifying the entire quartet.

The String Quartet, Op. 3, was first presented on April 24, 1911, in Vienna by an ad hoc quartet made up of Brunner, Holzer, Buchbinder, and Hasa. It was, however, the performance by the Havemann Quartet at the First International Festival for Chamber Music in Salzburg on August 2, 1923, that attracted wide attention and established Berg's worldwide reputation in musical circles.

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**String Quartet No. 2 in A Major, Op. 68 (1944)**  
**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975)**

**Overture: Moderato con moto**  
**Recitative and Romance: Adagio**  
**Waltz: Allegro**  
**Theme with Variations: Adagio**

Shostakovich and his family spent the summer of 1944 with other composers at one of the government's rural 'Houses of Rest and Creativity.' While there he completed his Second Piano Trio and immediately began work on his String Quartet No. 2, finishing it in less than a month. He wrote to composer Vissarion Shebalin, to whom he dedicated the quartet, "I worry about the lightning speed with which I compose... One should not compose as quickly as I do... But I can't rid myself of the bad habit." According to his son Maxim, Shostakovich often explained the speed with which he composed by saying, "I think long; I write fast."

The sounds of Jewish folk music appear for the first time in Shostakovich's compositions in both the Second Piano Trio and String Quartet No. 2. In early 1944 he had been deeply involved in Jewish folk themes when he completed the unfinished opera *Rothschild's Violin* by his talented Jewish pupil Veniamin Fleishman, who died in battle in 1941. Contemporaries also mention the composer's sympathy for the Jews as an oppressed people as horrible news reports of the Treblinka concentration camp appeared in 1944. Shostakovich's own comments simply reflect a strong affinity between his creative imagination and the 'laughter through tears' character of Jewish music: "The distinguishing feature of Jewish music is the ability to build a jolly melody on sad intonations. Why does a man strike up a happy song? Because he feels sad at heart."

The first movement Overture opens with a forceful theme in A major, but the tonal stability is quickly disrupted by a minor key while the opening theme is still being restated. This early change of tonality from major to minor, with only the briefest reappearances of the movement's "official" A major key, creates an unsettling suspense that is not resolved by the movement's abrupt ending.

The Recitative and Romance begins and ends with long, harmonically free solo lines in the first violin played over quiet sustained chords in the other instruments. Jewish inflections fill the violin's mournful aria, and simple Baroque-sounding cadences punctuate the underlying drone. Between the sections of recitative, the Romance opens as a sweetly wistful waltz. Dissonant harmonies intervene, the waltz tempo dissolves, and a series of harsh rising lines collapse into the closing recitative.

The macabre third movement Waltz, one of Shostakovich's many sinister waltzes, is written in E flat minor, the key that disrupted the opening harmony of the first movement. In its jagged central section Shostakovich alludes to his

Fourth Symphony, which was banned after the official attack on *Lady Macbeth* in 1936. In the fourth movement Theme and Variations, a Russian-sounding theme is little changed in the first three variations before going through many radical transformations. The theme finally returns, altered but recognizable, and the quartet closes with sustained A minor chords. String Quartet No. 2 is Shostakovich's only quartet to begin in a major key and end in a minor.

--Program note by Robert Strong © 2012

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