

Milverton Concert Society

Concert 4th June 2021

Programme Notes

Antonin Dvořák

'American' Quartet Op. 96 in F major

1. Allegro ma non troppo 2. Lento 3. Molto vivace 4. Finale - vivace ma non troppo

This, the 12th string quartet composed by Dvořák, was written in 1893, during the composer's time in the United States and is one of the most popular in the chamber music repertoire.

At this time he was Director of the National Conservatory in New York; after an exhausting season during which he composed as well as fulfilling his many obligations as a visiting celebrity, he was delighted to spend the summer in the Midwest town of Spillville, Iowa. This tiny farming community of Czech immigrants provided Dvořák with an environment he loved. After months in the big city, he was 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 a very short time completed the quartet which has become one his most loved chamber music compositions, acquiring along the way the popular nickname, the "American".

Whether there actually is anything identifiably American in the composition is one of these things which eminent musicologists love to debate solemnly, usually to no great purpose. There is little doubt that Dvořák himself intended the works of this period, including the 'New World' Symphony, to reflect something of the American environment. He was interested in the chants and folk music of the African-American population, the native Americans and even the developing music of the immigrant Irish, Scottish (and Czech) settlers – to discuss if any of these influences can actually be heard in this work would take far more space and patience than I have at my disposal!

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, an arrangement of notes which is a common feature of folk songs around the world.

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. 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 said to be a stylisation of the song of a bird which Dvořák heard while out walking in the countryside around Spillville. (Believe it or not, 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, perhaps 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.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Quartet Op. 59 No. 2 in E Minor 'Razumovsky'

1. Allegro 2. Molto adagio 3. Allegretto 4. Finale - presto

The String Quartet No. 8 in E minor, Op. 59, No. 2, was written and published in 1808. The work is the second of a cycle of three string quartets, and is a product of his middle period. Prince Razumovsky was Russian ambassador in Vienna, as well as a great patron of the arts and it was he who commissioned three String Quartets, known today as the Razumovsky Quartets, Opus 59. In two of the three quartets, numbers one and two, Beethoven incorporated Russian themes to please his patron.

The first movement features two arresting opening chords that lead to a mysterious, meandering opening segment, punctuated by moments of silence. Very quickly we are led to a beautifully lyrical section mostly in G major. There is a subtle use of repetition and this movement is full of harmonic uncertainty, displaying Beethoven's uncanny ability to switch to distant keys in an instant. The movement is also complex rhythmically. The last section of this movement is tender and calm - momentarily – but it leads to a crescendo and a crunchy fortissimo chord. Another crescendo brings a final unison statement of the theme and a fading away to nothing.

The second movement comes with the instruction “treat this piece with a great deal of feeling”. The hymn-like opening sets up a heavenly atmosphere that will continue through the movement, but full of whimsical, bittersweet elements that remind the players - and us - not to take everything too seriously. It's another very complex rhythmic and mathematical puzzle that fits together in infinite ways. There's what sounds like a short nod to the Pachelbel canon that comes twice in this movement! Beethoven uses his offbeat ‘subito forte’ trick near the end of the movement which leads to a poignant ending: a perfect, long E major chord, richly voiced.

In today's parlance, the third movement might be described as ‘funky’! The rhythmic components of the opening theme are full of cross-rhythms creating the kind of effect one finds in complex drumming. The mood of the movement goes from mysterious to grandiose in a split second. It's full of rich harmonies and stretches the range of the first violin to the extreme. The middle section is fascinating in the way Beethoven harmonises the Russian theme, with great eccentricity at times. The theme is thrown around the different instruments and the accompanying material is also very inventive.

In the last movement what key are we in? It feels like C major, but then we drop to B major, leading to E minor – then we're back in C. The rules don't apply to Beethoven, and yet it all makes sense! There's wonderful offbeat energy in this Rondo and the virtuosity of all the players is on display at every turn. The second theme of this movement is inventive and daring, too. The build up to the last utterance of the rondo is very odd, with all the instruments finally just wailing away on repeated notes before exploding into the C major theme. The “*piu presto*” gives a proper rocket-like end to this incredible piece.