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## **Dvořák Quartet opus 105**

In the years between 1892 and 1895, Antonin Dvořák was across the ocean, forsaking his native Bohemia to become the director of New York's National Conservatory, and rather grandly to undertake the task of helping America articulate its own musical identity. It is uncertain if he helped accomplish the latter goal, but during his time in the United States he was acclaimed and feted as a pre-eminent European composer and an Old World cultural ambassador. Besides his activities in New York, he was to spend time in the rural Czech community of Spillville, Iowa, and to be captivated by the rich traditions of African-American spirituals and Indigenous music. Few European figures of Dvořák's cultural stature had ventured to explore America in such depth, at a time when London, Paris and Vienna remained so much the center of artistic life. It is telling that, whereas Brahms quailed at the thought of journeying to England to accept an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University, Dvořák was enterprising enough to cross the ocean and remain abroad for three years.

Nevertheless, even Dvořák -- an artist who identified deeply with his native land -- became homesick. He was to return home in the summer of 1895, at first just for a visit, but ultimately for good, submitting his resignation to New York a few weeks later. He had been extremely productive while in the States, composing his famous Cello Concerto and his even more famous "New World" Symphony. Two of his best-known chamber works also date from this time -- the "American" Quartet and the Viola Quintet, which is also nicknamed "American". In his final days before setting sail for home, he began work on his A-flat String Quartet, opus 105, but did not finish it until December, when he had been home for several months.

Listeners disagree on the flavor of the A-flat Quartet, composed on both sides of the Atlantic; some claim to hear persistent American strains in it, some hear an affirmation of the composer's Slavic roots, some just hear an expat yearning for home. Whatever its essence, this piece is one of Dvořák's chamber masterpieces, a showcase for all the traits that make him beloved: rich harmonizations, imaginative, layered textures, irresistible rhythmic verve. Couched in such a rich, darkly stained key, it nevertheless overflows with joy, a uniquely Dvořákian combination.

The first movement opens in minor-key shadows, starting deep down in the cello and traveling up the instruments; it recalls the opening of Beethoven's famous opus 132 quartet at first, lost and searching, chromatically fraught.

But Dvořák is not one to follow Beethoven too far into his philosophical labyrinths: where the earlier composer erupts into cascades of questions, the later one chooses to blossom miraculously into sunlight and celebration, an Allegro brimming with positive energy. The progress of this main section seems effortless, a carriage ride in a new stretch of countryside on a perfect afternoon. At times motoric, at times sweetly touching, at times even mock-ferocious, every time the music turns a corner it seems to encounter more good news, a new delightful scenario.

Following this comes a Scherzo, a dance with a darker, Furiant-like energy. This is spiky, whirling music; it flirts with demonic tendencies but always retains a suave balance, filled with grace and charm. The contrasting Trio section in the middle is an extraordinary episode, a kind of lovers' tryst: slightly removed from the dance scene but retaining its rhythmic sway, this is loving, wistful music, starting as duet between violin and cello but gradually becoming transformed into an ecstatic exchange between the two violins, amazing music from a master of string writing.

The slow third movement is hushed and choral; a simple and tender stanza is heard, then repeated as a variation; then a second stanza, the answer to the first, is stated and repeated in its own variation. Composed at Christmas in 1895, it is easy to imagine the glowing candlelight, the intimacy and peace of a scene at home or in church among loved ones. By contrast, the middle section of the movement is foreboding, hunted, restless; starting with feverish chromatic motion and constant changes of key, it eventually whips itself up to a crisis point. The thunder and lightning dissipate, and we find ourselves magically back in the clarity and simplicity of the opening material, this time adorned with second-violin birdsong, a kind of laughing disbelief at the bad dreams that came before.

The Finale is at first mock-menacing: the cellist as bad guy, his face muffled in a black cape. Not fooled for a minute, the first violin takes his material and transforms it into folksy celebration, a festive, friendly round dance. Filled with good cheer, ebullient but not urgent, the music irresistibly beckons us to cut a rug in the finest Bohemian tradition. Lyrical episodes intervene, a choral melody in simple rhythms, and later on a more undulating, lovely tune in triplets. Ultimately the movement spirals upward into a triumphant coda, wherein we hear these themes transformed, presented in a newly energized, blazing light, rocketing unstopably to a final cadence.

Note by Misha Amory