

## Haydn & Dvořák

**Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)**

**String Quartet in D minor, Op. 76, No. 2 "Quinten"**

**Allegro**

**Andante o più tosto allegretto**

**Menuet. Allegro ma non troppo**

**Finale. Vivace assai**

Haydn often published quartets in groups of six, as he did in 1797 with Op. 76, his final complete set. As musical keys can have nearly synaesthetic associations and suggest differing moods and topoi it was important to present a variety of keys within each opus, and specifically to include at least one minor key work, exploring the darker intensities those keys can suggest. The present quartet, the so-called "Quinten" Quartet shares its d minor, significantly, with Mozart's K421 quartet, dedicated to Haydn, and Bach's Art of Fugue. Its first movement evinces a seriousness of style and a learned aspect fully resonant with these earlier masterpieces. The opening theme (the fifths which give the piece its "Quinten" nickname) is both bold and plain, such as might be profitable fodder for a fugue. Although this is a movement in sonata form, that tripartite dramatic structure that allows for exposition, development of ideas, and a recapitulation that returns to the opening material and irons out some of its conflicts (plus, in this instance, a rather brilliant coda, or added ending), it is highly contrapuntal in texture and subjects its theme to most of the techniques of fugue. The four note motive is played in different speeds, upside down (and backwards, which amounts to the same thing with these pitches), in stretto (answered by a copy of itself in another voice before its completion), compressed and expanded intervallically, and interrupted and resumed. It is rather like an Escher print where a large, compelling structure is built out of small units the potential of which might go unrecognized by a lesser artist. All of this amounts not only to a compositional tour de force, but a very tightly reasoned argument such as is often felt in fugues. Perhaps Haydn here is conversing with Bach, showing his mastery of these techniques in the dramatic form of his own time. It is good to realize, however, that these quartets were mostly purchased by the public to be read through at home with friends; scores (with all of the parts put together) were not included, only a set of parts. Because of this no player at a first reading would be able to imagine what the other parts might do, and the vital unfurling of the argument, as an idea in one part is picked up in another, tossed around, reconsidered, and mused upon, as in the very best of conversations, would be both fascinating and surprising. The composer is entering into dialogue with his players, and it may be a great way into the fabric of the piece for listeners to imagine themselves into the quartet in turn.

When Haydn chooses, as he does here, to write monothematic movements, eschewing the natural variety and relief of a second, contrasting theme, the level of rhetoric becomes even more elevated and concentrated. Marking the moment when a second theme might naturally appear in this movement is an extremely odd and striking idea such as might not be imagined again until the electronic music age, where sounds could be reversed at will. There are a series of notes that begin in vowels and end in consonants, growing to their ends in contradiction to the usual shape of a struck note (say the peal of a bell). These gasps serve also to sever the theme in half, and the series of them itself gets punctured by rests on two subsequent appearances in the movement. This is the material that then motivates the dazzling and rhythmically exciting coda of the movement, being tossed back and forth between the second violin and the lower voices while the first violin plays excited figuration. It is as if these gasping figures, left in the lurch several times earlier, finally influence the course of the discussion enough to drive it to a powerful and forthright conclusion (with the cello obsessively hammering home the fifth with which the movement begins). How often in the best conversations a brief aside or interruption casts the premise in just enough of a new light to bring it, eventually, to its fullest flowering.

The second movement has the rather fancy, detailed tempo marking *Andante o piu tosto Allegretto*, poised between a leisurely ramble and a somewhat brisker tread. There are quite a few movements by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven that have such indications, and they all seem to share an elegance ever so slightly infiltrated by artificiality, something just barely mechanical or marionette-like invading an otherwise graceful aspect. In this case the tune, played by the first violin with pizzicato accompaniment by the others, has some odd accents and self-conscious hesitancy, trying just a bit too hard to be just so. It seems to have potential as theme music for one of Proust's society ladies, intent on appearing effortlessly gracious but transparent in her wish. She is certainly something to behold in her sophistication, it's just that perhaps the pinky of her hand holding a teacup is the tiniest bit too stiff. The movement is lovely, but there are continual reminders that it is all a bit tongue-in-cheek: teasing accents answered by out of context orchestral hammer blows from which the first violin scampers away, long stuttering searching for a way to begin the tune anew, a frozen moment which leads the cello to attempt a takeover, a cadenza which gets caught up in repetitions and slows to a standstill.

The Minuet perhaps is Haydn's tribute to Mozart's d minor quartet (which was written in tribute to Haydn), as it shares its corresponding movement's severity, far from the courtliness of the typical minuet. It has the nickname *Hexenmenuett* or Witches' Minuet, and does certainly seem to cackle along, all in austere two part canon (like a round), the music chased by its *doppelgänger*. The trio, after a long preparation, erupts into the major mode, and grasps upon the idea of repeated notes (possibly taken from Mozart's minuet where a series of three repeated notes is featured) carrying it almost to ridiculous extremes of dynamic and enthusiasm. The end of the trio, quietly ticklish in the upper reaches of the first violin range, seems to wink at the whole enterprise, Haydn smiling at his players in case they have taken themselves just a touch too seriously in all the bluster.

The finale is a rollicking Gypsy-inflected movement colored by syncopations and slides. It has an infectious energy as well as a good dose of Haydn the trickster: moments that get stuck followed by a series of repeated notes that are only revealed to be against the main beat after the fact, a braying donkey motif, and pauses that tease (and, incidentally, recall the fifths of the opening movement). The music eventually finds its way into major, quietly humming the main theme while adorned by striking drones and hurdy-gurdy figuration. These drones reappear at the ebullient ending of the movement where they help give the impression of a festive Gypsy holiday. Muzio Clementi reported of Haydn that "when he hears any of his own pieces performed that are capricious he laughs like a fool." It is easy to imagine him here among us enjoying himself every bit as much as we always do when we play his quartets.

*Program Note by Mark Steinberg*

**Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)**  
**String Quartet No. 10 in E-flat Major, Op. 51**  
**Allegro ma non troppo**  
**Dumka: Andante con moto; Vivace**  
**Romanze: Andante con moto**  
**Finale: Allegro assai**

Son of a poor but musical butcher and innkeeper, Dvořák escaped that destiny and went instead to Prague where he began composing immediately after completing his studies at the Organ School. He was a violist in the orchestra of the National Theatre in Prague and little known as a composer until he was befriended by Brahms who recognized his rare genius and championed him throughout his life. Dvořák traveled to England in 1844 where he was immediately acclaimed and then to America in 1892 where he won fresh approval. He returned to his native Bohemia in 1895 where he became professor of composition and later director at the Prague Conservatorium until his death in 1904. He was given a national funeral and buried with other national heroes in Vyšehrad cemetery.

Chamber music permeated Dvořák's compositional life from his Op. 1 String Quintet of 1861 to his Op. 106 String Quartet of 1896. While his love of folk music is ever present in his some forty chamber works, he was not confined in them by his nationalistic interests. More important than any national identification are the freshness, spontaneity, and sense of exploration which pervade his chamber music.

No greater compliment has been paid Dvořák than by Brahms himself when he said, as quoted in Otakar Šourek's *Antonín Dvořák: Letters and Reminiscences* (Da Capo Press, 1954), "I should be glad if something occurred to me as a main idea that occurs to Dvořák only by the way." Threading its way through the many compliments to Dvořák is an admiration for his freshness of musical ideas, particularly in terms of his beautiful melodies, colorful harmony, rich sonorities, and rhythmic inventiveness. Interspersed are an awareness and a respect for the strong national identity and richness he brings, in different ways, to both his symphonic and chamber music outpourings.

Dvořák's admiration of Brahms, on the other hand, was far more than hero-worship. Between the two masters were a mutual admiration and respect as well as a difference in their genius. For Dvořák it was a natural wellspring, for Brahms a convoluted struggle cast with self-doubt. Although the number of works is not an indication of genius, Dvořák wrote fourteen string quartets, Brahms three. Curiously, Dvořák never acted on Brahms' encouragement to move to Vienna and share in the sophisticated musical culture there but chose to remain in his native Bohemia.

Despite its national flavor, a word should be said about Dvořák's transcendence of nationalism in his music. For all his championing of the Czech folk spirit, Dvořák was not slave to it nor imitative of it in any simple way.

The Op. 51 String Quartet reflects the good year, 1878, in which it was written. With his personal life happy and his fame now secure, Dvořák was invited to write a quartet in the Slavonic style for the distinguished Florentine Quartet.

The serene but radiant first movement contains suggestions of the Czech polka, while the *Dumka* of the second movement is clearly inspired by a Czech dance spirit. As with most of Dvořák's *dumky*, there is a contrasting fast section. The brief third movement *Romanze* is least nationalistic in character but lives wholly up to its title. A romance it is. The last movement returns to the Bohemian spirit with a boisterous dance which Dvořák takes to almost break-neck speed.

The Op. 51 Quartet was performed for the first time by the Joachim Quartet in Berlin on July, 29, 1879.

© 2015 Lucy Miller Murray

Lucy Miller Murray is the author of *Chamber Music: An Extensive Guide for Listeners* published in 2015 by Rowman & Littlefield and available on amazon.com.