

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904) String Quartet No 12 in F ('American') Op 96 (1893)

Allegro ma non troppo

Lento

Molto vivace

Finale: vivace ma non troppo

The American Quartet, like the New World Symphony, was written whilst Dvořák was living and working in America. He had come to the United States in 1892 to head the National Conservatory of Music, at an annual salary of \$15,000 (25 times what he was paid in Prague) thanks to the enthusiastic patronage of Mrs Jeanette Thurber, the wife of a millionaire grocery wholesaler. After the railway investment bubble burst in April 1893, her husband was bankrupted and Mrs Thurber was unable to pay Dvorak reliably. Dvořák finally returned home in 1895.

Mrs Thurber had hired Dvořák to help fulfil her dream of creating a national American style of Art music. The National Conservatory admitted unusually large numbers of poor and black students whose repertoire of folk music sat well with Dvořák's own inspiration from his native Bohemia. Dvořák believed the way forward for American music was not to follow the Europeans, but to draw from traditional music its stylistic features such as pentatonic rather than chromatic melodies, drone accompaniment and obstinate (*ostinato*) rhythmic repetition.

The 'American' quartet, together with the E \flat String Quintet op 97, was composed in the summer of 1893 in the small town of Spillville, Iowa. Dvořák had gone there immediately after finishing the New World Symphony to escape the New York heat and to enjoy the company of its colony of fellow Bohemians and of his wife and children who had come over from Prague for the summer. Whether Dvořák's American compositions show native American influences is hotly debated. But the 'American' quartet certainly reflects Dvořák's Bohemian background and his stated view that he "wanted to write something melodious and simple". In this, he succeeded. Compared with some of his earlier quartets, the 'American' makes fewer technical demands on the players but his wonderful melodic gift shines through.

Dvořák, a viola player himself, gives the viola the opening pentatonic theme, in a way that is reminiscent of the opening of Smetana's 'From my life' quartet. The equally memorable, mainly pentatonic second theme, played very, very quietly on the first violin has a nostalgic feel. So does the second movement's plaintive opening theme which has a rhythmically *ostinato* accompanying figure. The viola spends most of the second movement playing variants of this figure, while the second violin and cello are at times liberated to indulge in the glorious melody.

Allegro, ma non troppo



Musical niceties aside, there *is* one genuinely native American theme in the work. While composing, Dvořák was inspired and probably pestered by the repeated call of a 'red bird, only with black wings' – the Scarlet



Tanager. Lesser men might have shot it; Dvořák made its call the basis of his third movement. In imitation of the persistent bird, the movement is decidedly obstinate – the theme is played over and over and over again in various guises and at different tempi. The last movement romps home echoing Dvořák's inscription at the end of the score: *“Finished on 10 June 1893 in Spillville. I’m satisfied. Thanks God. It went quickly.”*