

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) String Quartet in C major, Op 61 (1881)

Allegro

Poco adagio et molto cantabile

Allegro vivo

Finale. Vivace

This work was commissioned by the Hellmesberger Quartet, a group that had been formed in Vienna in 1849 and which was the first permanent String Quartet named after its leader. In October 1881, Dvořák was working on a new opera, *Dimitrij*, when he read in the newspaper that the Hellmesberger Quartet was proposing to perform his new string quartet in December in Vienna's Ringtheater. He was thus forced to interrupt work on the opera, in order to begin to compose the quartet. He finished it in time (10th November), but on December 8th, just a week before the intended performance, the Ringtheater burned down in a catastrophic fire that killed over 600 people. The tragedy led to legislation on safety curtains and outward-opening doors, and also to Dvořák's quartet receiving its first performance by a different group in Bonn.

Dvořák's previous quartet, Op 51 in Eb, had been commissioned in 1879 by Jean Becker of the Florence-based Florentine Quartet. They specifically asked for a "Slavonic Quartet". Dvořák had just sprung to fame thanks to a helping hand from Brahms who had recommended Dvořák to his own publisher Simrock. Simrock in turn suggested that he write a set of *Slavonic Dances* analogous to Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*. These *Slavonic Dances* were a tremendous success and brought Dvořák immediate acclaim. His slavonic style owed much to Smetana and from studying collections of folk music. Its characteristics include: the absence of an upbeat in the melody (mirroring Czech word-stress), pentatonic phrasing, the sharpened fourth in the minor and strongly syncopated traditional dance rhythms.

The Hellmesberger Quartet, by contrast, had made no such Slavonic request (perhaps as an insurance against the growing anti-Czech political feelings in Vienna at that time) and today's quartet (Op 61) is built in a more classical mould. Its composition marks the start of a new phase in Dvořák's style. The writing, though subtly detailed and retaining some Czech character, is more dramatic, with rapid, strong contrasts of dynamics and expression, large melodic leaps and forceful rhythms. Dvořák had written to Joseph Hellmesberger in response to the commission: "*Rest assured I will work on my new quartet with the utmost élan, deploying all my art and knowledge, only to be able to give you a composition well done and accomplished, and certainly the good Lord will also inspire me with some melodies.*" All the movements do indeed demonstrate Dvořák's natural melodic gift.

The amiable theme that the first violin announces at the start of the first movement is later extensively developed in a classical style. Listen out particularly for the rising triplet and dotted figure (**) occurring again and again. The initial raw material for the second movement seems nothing special, but Dvorak spins wonders from the inter-twining of the two violins. The rising triplet and dotted figure (**) from the first movement provides the main theme for Scherzo, and a modified version of the first bar and a half of the example (*) the material for its substantial Trio section. The last movement's simple theme is elaborated with daunting pyrotechnics for the first violin, which no doubt Joseph Hellmesberger relished - after all his programmes did have the heading: "*Hellmesberger Quartet, with the assistance of ... [names of the three other players]*"!

