

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) Piano Quartet no. 2 in E flat major, op. 87 (1889)

Allegro con fuoco

Lento

Allegro moderato, grazioso

Finale. Allegro ma non troppo

The second piano quartet was written in Dvořák's maturity. Encouraged by Brahms, he had achieved early success with the Czech folk-based Slavonic Dances, but he later had to develop a more serious Germanic style to please his Viennese audiences. They had become biased against Czech-flavoured music by the rising tide of Czech nationalism. However, throughout the 1880s, on his frequent visits to England, Dvořák had enjoyed unstinting admiration. English concert-goers showed none of the anti-Czech prejudice of the Viennese. Encouraged by this success, the cheerful good humour of this second piano quartet (and of the Eighth Symphony, which was written immediately after it) returns to the Czech idiom, but with its structure strengthened by Dvořák's enforced Germanic digression. The work was requested by his publisher Simrock to whom Dvořák wrote enthusiastically on August 10, 1889: "*I've now already finished three movements of a new piano quartet and the Finale will be ready in a few days. As I expected it came easily and the melodies just surged upon me. Thank God!*"

Curiously, the first bar of the main theme of the first movement could have been the inspiration for the previous Kodály



Duo (and indeed for Queen's *Radio Ga Ga*) with its rising second and falling fourth. After showing us some of the interest of this boldly energetic theme, Dvořák slides into the unexpected key of G major and the viola



introduces the lyrical second subject. Dvořák plays these contrasting ideas off against each other, before a mysterious *tremolo* version of the first subject releases the final flourish.

The slow movement, mainly in the related but decidedly player-unfriendly key of Gb major, is one of Dvořák's most poignant, with the cellist getting lots of the good bits. Many of the ideas in the movement are derived from the cello's gorgeous opening theme (illustrated) and the piano's answering chromatically-descending semiquavers.



The violin follows the cello by giving us a similar phrase at half the speed – crotchets where the cello had quavers - while the viola and piano accompany with semiquavers (twice the speed) picking up on the initial rising arpeggio. The piano introduces another idea (derived from the turn-like figure in the initial theme's second bar) which leads via a now fortissimo chromatic descent to an impassioned passage in E major. The music settles to an extended version of the piano's idea (illustrated). All this lovely and varied material is reprised, and the piece ends with me at least wishing that



Dvořák had written a repeat mark over the whole movement!

The third movement is in conventional “Minuet and Trio” form with the “Minuet” a gentle waltz, with a secondary somewhat oriental episode, and the slightly faster “Trio” section in a relentlessly dotted Bohemian rhythm reminiscent of parts of the first movement. The Trio is in the player unfriendly key of B major (5 sharps) – what is it with Dvořák and remote keys? Did Mozart need to do that?

So, now back to 6 flats, in the guise of Eb minor, for the start of the last movement. It opens in a similarly robust mood to the first movement.

But soon it is the viola's turn to soar with the surge of Dvořák's melodic gift. The movement romps and slides through all the keys in the book, before ending triumphantly back home in Eb major.

Allegro ma non troppo

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of three flats (Eb minor) and a common time signature. It begins with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte). The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes with accents. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (B major) and a common time signature. It begins with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) and the instruction *molto espress.* (molto expressive). The melody features a series of slurs over eighth notes, with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) and a *dim* (diminuendo) marking towards the end.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin