

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 17 March 2025
1.00pm

Dover Quartet

Joel Link violin
Bryan Lee violin
Julianne Lee viola
Camden Shaw cello

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet No. 12 in F Op. 96 'American' (1893)
*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Lento •
III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Vivace ma non troppo*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in A minor Op. 41 No. 1 (1842)
*I. Introduzione. Andante espressivo - Allegro •
II. Scherzo. Presto - Intermezzo • III. Adagio • IV. Presto*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Immediately after finishing his *New World Symphony* in New York in May 1893, **Dvořák** travelled west to spend the summer holidays with his family in the Czech-speaking community at Spillville, a rural settlement in north-east Iowa. That summer, amid the tranquil surroundings of this 'home from home', he composed in quick succession two of his most appealing chamber works: the so-called (though not by Dvořák) 'American' Quartet, sketched in just three days in June, and the E flat String Quintet with two violas, Op. 97. Before its public première, given by the Kneisel Quartet in Boston on 1 January 1894, Dvořák played the Quartet in Spillville with a scratch ensemble consisting of himself and a local teacher on violins, his daughter Cecilia on viola and his son Josef Jan on cello. After the Boston performance an admiring reviewer praised the music's 'spirit of eternal sunshine'.

Dvořák gave little away about the 'American' Quartet except that his aim was to write something 'very melodious and straightforward'. 'Dear Papa Haydn kept appearing before my eyes, and that is why it turned out so simply.' He seems to have modelled the beginning of the Quartet, with the theme in the viola against *tremolo* violins and a cello pedal, on Smetana's 'From my Life' Quartet. But whereas Smetana's opening is pregnant with tragic foreboding, Dvořák's irresistibly catchy theme is all bounding innocence.

As in the *New World Symphony*, the melodies in the fast movements tend to be built on short repeated fragments, with a pentatonic flavour that vaguely suggests native American folk music. That said, it is easy to exaggerate the American influence. The pentatonic scale (corresponding to the black notes on the piano) also features in much European folk music, including Slovak and Bohemian.

The soulful Lento, in D minor, unfolds as a virtually unbroken song. Its melody – claimed by some to be based on an African-American spiritual – is presented by the first violin and repeated by the cello in its plangent upper register. Dvořák was a keen bird-watcher; and in the second theme of the Scherzo (*molto vivace*) his fellow-ornithologists will enjoy the first violin's avian twitterings. It was long thought that the bird in question was the scarlet tanager, a species of warbler unique to Iowa. An American ornithologist has recently countered that it was more probably a red-eyed vireo. The effect is charming, whatever the bird. The dreamy melody of the F minor Trio, introduced by the second violin, turns out to be slowed-up version of the Scherzo's main theme.

Trains, and train-spotting, were another of Dvořák's passions. It's even been suggested that the 'chugging' rhythms on second violin and viola that permeate the finale depict his long rail journeys across the United States. Others have proposed that this music is animated by the native American drum rhythms that the composer heard in Spillville. Take your pick. Amid the folksy high spirits are solemn chorale-like episodes

that evoke the Spillville church organ. Yet for all the splashes of local colour, this perennially popular quartet is as quintessentially Czech in spirit as the 'New World' Symphony and the E flat String Quintet.

In 1838, **Robert Schumann** confessed to his fiancée Clara Wieck that 'the piano has become too limiting for me....In the works I am now composing I can hear many things I can hardly express.' That year he composed a string quartet (now lost) which he described as 'only an essay'. The following year he immersed himself in Beethoven's late quartets and began, and then jettisoned, three quartets which, he told Clara, 'were as good as Haydn'. But it was not until 1842, after he had tackled large-scale classical form in his 'Spring' and D minor symphonies, that he felt confident enough to complete a series of three string quartets. Schumann had lamented the great quartet tradition had 'come to a serious standstill', kept alive only by the works of his friend Mendelssohn. And in the hope of making a lasting contribution to that tradition, he prepared himself by studying in depth the complete quartets of Beethoven and many of Haydn's and Mozart's quartets.

In the hands of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven the string quartet had become an elevated, 'learned' medium. Schumann acknowledges this at the opening of the A minor Quartet, No. 1, whose coiling imitative lines evoke both Bach and late Beethoven. A four-bar transition to the surprising key of F major then ushers in the Allegro, in a gliding 6/8 metre. Apart from a bout of strenuous argument in the central development, this is relaxed, genial music, ingeniously worked (all the material derives logically from the first theme), yet touched by Schumann's own quixotic fantasy.

The bi-polar first movement epitomises the tussle between A minor and F major that runs through the whole Quartet. Only with the Scherzo does Schumann emphatically assert the key of A minor. Launched by soft drum taps, this is a hectic night-ride of a movement that sounds like a more sinister take on the characteristic Mendelssohnian 'fairy scherzo'.

At the start of the Adagio the cello guides the music back to F major for the beautiful main theme, sung by the first violin. The Adagio of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was surely Schumann's inspiration here. The mood is rapt and *innig* – the Schumann most people love – though the music grows more troubled and the textures more fragmentary in the modulating central section.

Energetically reasserting A minor, the Finale opens with a Slavonic-flavoured theme that Schumann inverts and varies as a 'second subject'. Before the boisterous send-off the music melts magically into A major for a floating, dreamlike episode in the style of a *musette* – a veiled allusion to the music of the past that balances the Quartet's opening bars.

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