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CLASSICS

DVOŘÁK

STRING QUARTETS NOS. 8 & 10

ALBION QUARTET

DVOŘÁK

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ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

STRING QUARTET NO. 8 IN E MAJOR, OP. 80

1	I. Allegro	[8.41]
2	II. Andante con moto	[6.49]
3	III. Allegro scherzando	[4.53]
4	IV. Finale: Allegro con brio	[7.11]

STRING QUARTET NO. 10 IN E \flat MAJOR, OP. 51

5	I. Allegro ma non troppo	[10.30]
6	II. Andante con moto	[7.16]
7	III. Andante con moto	[6.12]
8	IV. Finale: Allegro assai	[6.52]

Total timings: [57.24]

By Roger Parker

It has long been recognized that Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) was one of the greatest late nineteenth-century contributors to the string quartet, and the accolade says something important about his aspirations as a composer. After all, this restricted medium, with strong reminders of the early eighteenth century in its duetting violins, was powerfully against the times in a period of gigantic instrumental and choral ensembles, and of ever more extreme searches for new colours and combinations. But it was equally clear that the string quartet had, since the days of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, transcended its limited sonic possibilities. It had come to represent not so much an ensemble as a Tradition: one of two critical symbols (the other was the symphony) of the aesthetic prestige that Austro-German instrumental music had claimed over the course of the century. There was, though, an evident problem with the string quartet: unlike the symphony, which could easily accommodate explosions of colour by employing an ever-expanding orchestra, the quartet remained trapped in its peculiar, restricted sound world. Small wonder that those most anxious about their place in the Tradition trod warily. Mendelssohn's remarkable, almost carefree teenage confrontations with late Beethoven quartets (his Op. 12 and Op. 13) were never replicated. Brahms and Schumann, both drawn to chamber music and intimate expression, tended to shy away from pushing the boundaries of the quartet, reserving for the medium some of their most conservative and "serious" inspirations. By the end of the nineteenth century, the quartet seems almost to have sunk under the weight of its sanctity. It took a new wave of "classical" composers in

the twentieth century, armed with new musical languages and new reasons to cultivate austerity, to renew the ensemble from within: cue Schoenberg, cue Bartók, cue Shostakovich.

The most conspicuous example contradicting this line of argument comes from Dvořák's contribution to the string quartet, which was important to him throughout the various stages of his career: he wrote fourteen of them, starting in his twenties and continuing until a few years before his death. And therein lies a complex biographical tale, intimately involved with the status of a composer who by virtue of his birth in the Czech region of the Austrian Empire was inevitably placed outside the Tradition. His musical training in the Prague organ school was that of a Kapellmeister, but while a jobbing viola player in Prague he learned from the occasional appearance of luminaries from the centre: in February 1863, for example, he played a concert under Wagner's direction, the programme including exciting novelties such as the *Tristan* Prelude. From this early period come the first four quartets, in which one can hear Dvořák moving in a somewhat undisciplined way through a series of stylistic experiments, from Beethoven to Schumann and even as far as the wilder reaches of Wagnerian harmony (with predictably unstable results). But then, in the early 1870s and confronted by the complete failure of his arch-Wagnerian opera *King and Charcoal Burner* at the Prague Provisional Theatre, he decided to retreat from advanced German trends and instead embrace a more conservative idiom, albeit one that included "Slavonic" elements for added spice and individuality. It is significant that this decision to make a stylistic shift was again marked by string quartet composition; the fifth,

sixth and seventh quartets all emerged in 1873-4, and all achieved a greater sense of balance and proportion through a return to Schubertian ideals.

Equally important in the emergence of this "new" Dvořák was his application for, and award of, a series of Austrian State Stipendiums. Not only did these allow him more leisure to compose, but they also put him close to the very heart of the Tradition. On the jury for his first application in 1874 was the revered Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick (by now a staunch anti-Wagnerian and supporter of Brahms); by the time of his second application, a year later, Brahms himself was one of the judges. In 1876 Dvořák proudly included for the jury's inspection a further string quartet, No. 8 in E major, the first of the two quartets on this disc. It was this and other pieces that caused Brahms to write an enthusiastic letter of recommendation to his publisher Simrock, who took up Dvořák with some enthusiasm. But it is probably significant that Simrock's first commission was not for a piece in a "serious" genre such as the symphony or string quartet – those genres that Dvořák was so anxious to impress in – but rather for a set of "Slavonic Dances" for piano duet: in other words, for music that would mark the composer out as a musical exotic, a purveyor of what has with some justification been called "tourist nationalism". In spite of this exoticizing move, the flood gates soon opened. By the end of the 1870s, with two further string quartets published (No. 9 and, soon after, the second work on this disc, No. 10), Dvořák found himself in demand at the highest levels: a symphony was commissioned for Vienna by Richter; Joachim wanted a violin concerto; publishers were queuing up for a

further quartet (No. 11). Dvořák's future was assured.

During the remainder of his distinguished career, Dvořák continued to hold in careful balance his dual aspirations: to be accepted as part of the Tradition but also to be regarded as a national figure, representative of his country. Sometimes these positions came into open conflict, particularly at moments of political tension between Vienna and Prague. But in the 1880s and 1890s he found a welcome home from home in Britain (nine separate visits, honorary membership of the Philharmonic Society, even an honorary degree from Cambridge), where his Czech identity was eagerly embraced; and of course he travelled to the US, where he was welcomed as a "national composer" who might aid in the formation of an authentically American school of composition. Three more quartets appeared in the early 1890s (including No. 12, the famous "American" quartet), and the period also saw a partial return to Wagnerian enthusiasms in his most popular opera, *Rusalka* (1901).

Even a hundred and more years after his death, Dvořák's reputation as a "national composer", admittedly one he often fostered with some enthusiasm, has never faded. His most popular pieces still tend to be those that overtly parade their nationalistic credentials, even though it is clear that his interest in any putative Czech musical heritage rarely went beyond the clichés of the period, never aspiring to the "authenticity" that a later generation of composers would attempt. This attitude can be seen even in perceptions about what makes a convincing musical performance of his music: in extreme cases some mysterious national essence is thought

to transmit itself across the generations to produce an "authentic Czech sound". In this context, Dvořák's continual return to the string quartet offers a powerful counter-argument. It is a body of work unique in the late nineteenth century, and one that paints the picture of a composer who, in spite of occasional gestures to "Slavonic" material, was above all anxious to compete for the Austro-German high ground, and to do so in the most prestige-laden chamber music form available.

Quartet No. 8 in E major (Op. 80)

Written in Jan-Feb 1876, on the brink of his international career, then revised and published more than ten years later (hence its late opus number: it was originally designated Op. 27), this quartet is often thought an important breakthrough in Dvořák's chamber music.

The opening Allegro starts in quasi fugal style with uncertain tonality, creating a somber atmosphere that rarely disappears during this long, ambitious work. The opening idea is periodically interrupted by quasi-orchestral textures, with much double stopping, as if straining at the restrictions of the string quartet medium; but then the principal second theme, in the relative minor, adumbrates with its distinctive dotted rhythms a Schubertian lyricism. The usual sonata-form repetitions take place, but the formal joins are always blurred to give a sense of continuous development. At the end, in a characteristic Dvořák coda, the main theme returns very high on the first violin, perhaps suggesting peace at the last.

The second movement, Andante con moto, is a so-called *dumka*, a Slavic



lament that is usually in duple time but here is in 3/8. Its characteristic ornaments sound improvisatory and the mood is maintained by a second theme that later acquires a chorale-like simplicity. At the close, the first theme returns only to fade into the distance.

The third movement, *Allegro scherzando*, is full of rhythmic shocks and reversals. Its main theme, although very different in mood, bears more than a passing resemblance to the opening theme of the first movement, perhaps an example of Dvořák's penchant for cyclic forms. The Trio section is, in good classical style, strongly contrasting: a driven, almost obsessive exploration of the relative minor.

The last movement, an *Allegro con brio*, begins with an extended viola solo: an energetic, questioning, upward-leaping melody which, like passages in the first movement, seems often to be straining for orchestral effects. Almost Bartókian moments, with the violins in octaves seemingly in open opposition to the viola and cello, contrast with passages reminiscent of a Mendelssohnian scherzo, ending the quartet in an atmosphere of boisterous virtuosity.

Quartet No. 10 in Eb major (Op. 51)

The change of fortune in Dvořák's career in the short time between the Quartet No. 8 and this work (begun on Christmas Day 1878 and completed three months later) is striking. While No. 8 had to wait until 1888 for its first performance and publication, this one was commissioned by Jean Becker, leader of the renowned Florentine Quartet, premiered by Joseph

Joachim in Berlin, and ushered into print soon after by Brahms's publisher Simrock. It was also typical of this period that, just as Simrock had made his first Dvořák commission a set of "Slavonic Dances", Becker specifically asked for a "Slavonic" quartet, making clear that the composer's route to international success would be in parading his "national" credentials. Dvořák duly obliged, supplying a work that makes prominent gestures to popularly-conceived (and by now clichéd) "Slavonic" folk dances.

The first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, is typical of Dvořák in being a sonata form adapted to make it seem looser and less obviously sectional. Its basic mood, though, is elegiac – perhaps a homage to the Schubertian influences that had earlier sustained him. The second main theme hardly alters the mood and it is only in the development section that a more energetic, dance-like atmosphere briefly emerges. Although the recapitulation is disguised, the main theme reappears as a coda, restoring the serenity of the movement as a whole.

The second movement, *Andante con moto*, is the quartet's first obvious gesture to the requested "Slavonic" atmosphere: like the second movement of No. 8 it is a *dumka*, although now in the more usual 2/4 metre. This *dumka* still has the required melancholy atmosphere, and hints of improvisation, but is much more thoroughly integrated into the string quartet texture (the main melody is shared between the first violin and Dvořák's beloved viola) and displays evident resonances of the first movement's main theme. The *Andante* then alternates with a *Vivace* section with obvious "folk" gestures.

The third movement, also *Andante con moto*, is called “Romanze” and, true to its title, explores some obvious operatic effects. The mysterious opening might be a gesture to an offstage choir; then some recitative-like moments usher in a serene melody that dominates the movement, unfolding like a theme and variations rather than anything more developmental. The ending sees a return to the offstage choir, mingled with the main theme to produce a serene close, again reminiscent of the first movement.

The last movement, *Allegro assai*, has another “Slavonic” reference, this time to a lively Czech dance called the *skočná*, already something of a cliché through its use in the Act 3 circus scene of Smetana’s *Bartered Bride*. Simply stated at the start, this dance soon becomes absorbed in complex string quartet textures (again the viola is prominent), with quasi fugal developments and counter melodies galore; slower sections again gesture towards earlier movements, but in the end the *skočná* returns triumphant.

A L B I O N Q U A R T E T

Tamsin Waley-Cohen violin

Emma Parker violin

Rosalind Ventris viola

Nathaniel Boyd cello

Formed in 2016, the Albion Quartet unites four outstanding young string players, brought together by a shared belief in the visceral power of the string quartet. The upcoming season sees the quartet returning to the Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh Festival, as well as continuing residencies at Sainte-Mère Festival in France and RWCMD in Cardiff. They will be making a number of broadcasts for BBC Radio 3, whilst continuing their recording projects for Signum Records, for whom they are exclusive artists.

Engagements from the 2017-18 season included performances at the Louvre in Paris, Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Robert Schumann Gesellschaft in Frankfurt, Båstad Festival in Sweden, Festival of Music in Franconia and Rhine Valley Music Festival in Germany, as well as the Hay Festival in the UK. They were artists in residence at the Ryedale Festival, exploring the chamber works of Dvořák, and are currently recording a Dvořák cycle for Signum Records. They have been invited back for an extended residency to explore the complete set of Mozart’s “Haydn” quartets, with the exciting addition

that each one is to be paired with a newly commissioned work.

Their commitment to new music has most recently seen a collaboration with Kate Whitley for a powerful and evocative song cycle, the “Charlotte Mew Songs”, recently performed with soprano Caroline Melzer. Over the summer the quartet is excited to be premiering and touring a new work by Freya Waley-Cohen, co-commissioned by Aldeburgh Festival, the Phillips Collection and Sainte-Mère Festival. In 2019 Ann Beilby joined the Albion Quartet as their new violist.

Performances in the 2019-20 season include their US debut at the Phillips Collection in Washington, alongside appearances at several festivals including the Oxford Lieder, Stratford International, Belfast International, Cheltenham, Presteigne, and Lichfield, and participating in Beethoven cycles in the UK and Portugal.

Passionate about musical education, the quartet holds a residency at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, where they regularly give masterclasses and performances in the Dora Stoutzker Hall. As a Cavatina Chamber Music Trust ensemble, they also give frequent workshops at primary school level where they are thrilled to share the magic of chamber music with children from diverse backgrounds.

The members of the quartet play on a fine collection of instruments, including a Stradivarius and Guarnerius.

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