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Filmed at Studio 150 Bethlehemkerk, Amsterdam

Ragazze Quartet

Rosa Arnold, Jeanita Vriens [violins]

Annemijn Bergkotte [viola]

Rebecca Wise [cello]

Dvořák

String Quartet in F major Op.96 'American'

John Adams

movements from *John's Book of Alleged Dances*

Bartók

String Quartet No.6

Antonín Dvořák [1841-1904]

String Quartet No.12 in F major Op. 96 'The American' [1893]

1. *Allegro ma non troppo*
2. *Lento*
3. *Molto vivace*
4. *Vivace ma non troppo*

This work must be the best loved quartet ever written; Dvořák's vision of inspired simplicity and enchanting melodies has proved irresistible to audiences ever since its first performance. It was composed in barely two weeks during his first visit to America, whither he had been invited by the philanthropist Jeanette Thurber to help set up a school for American composition in her New York National Conservatory. Once Dvořák arrived in New York, he had gone out of his way to praise the qualities of what he evidently felt was Native American music, namely the plantation songs and spirituals. He described them as *tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay*, indeed every emotion a composer could need. So he wrote a work that would set his American students and audience an example of simplicity of form combined with melodic generosity.

He created this miracle of tunefulness in the little Czech settlement of Spillville in the north-east corner of Iowa, eleven miles from the nearest railway station, where he spent the summer of 1893 with his family, who had travelled from Europe to be with him. The atmosphere at Spillville clearly agreed with him as the quartet was composed almost as soon as he arrived and with the utmost facility. Much has been made of Dvořák's use of pentatonic melody - a theme that avoids the fourth and seventh degrees of the major scale - as showing the influence of the Negro spirituals on his compositional style, but the pentatonic scale was not a new feature of his music and can be found throughout his works.

The first bars are pure magic, where the gentle rustle of the violins with rhythmic pointing by the cello introduces the main theme. The music created out of this opening keeps propelling the music forward throughout the movement - apart from the wonderful interludes arising from the lyrically reflective second subject. As in much of Dvořák's chamber music, he gives the rich voice of his own instrument, the viola, a pre-eminent role. Above all, this is happy, life-affirming music, a joy for performer and listener alike.

The slow movement is famous for the eloquence of its poignant tune, full of the nostalgia of the exile. Rarely did Dvořák achieve so deep an intensity of expression as in the soaring phrases of this movement's ecstatic theme, while all the time the rocking figure of the accompaniment cradles the emotional impact of the melody as if comforting a distressed child. Certainly he knew only too well the power his music had to soften the cacophonous blows of city life and the pain of exile.

The open-air good humour of the third movement is notorious for the new addition to the aviary of classical music - the incessant rapid song of the scarlet tanager that distracted him during his walks at Spillville is slipped in as a subsidiary theme. The cheerful main theme gets to appear in nineteen versions, showing how a small amount of material can be made

to go a long way. The rondo finale is even more high-spirited and also gives the impression of being monothematic, so catchy is the main rondo theme. There is a charming chorale-like episode, which is said to call to mind the composer's efforts on the organ at morning mass in the church at Spillville. The work ends with triumphant flourishes as Dvořák races to his final conclusion.

Francis Humphrys

John Adams [born 1947]

John's Book of Alleged Dances [1994] Selections

1. *Stubble Crochet*
2. *Alligator Escalator*
3. *Pavane: She's so fine*
4. *Toot Nipple*

The composer writes: 'These dances, dedicated to my friends in Kronos, are alleged because the steps for them have yet to be invented. They cuss, chew, hock hooeys, scratch and talk too loud. They are also, so I'm told, hard to play'. The order of the dances is not fixed, so the order in this performance was chosen by the Ragazze Quartet.

Stubble Crochet is described by the composer as a sawed-off stump of a piece, dry bones and hardscrabble attacks (at the frog as stringers like to say). Or, worst of all, an early morning shave with an old razor.

Alligator Escalator The long sluggish beast ascends from the basement to the store's top floor and back down again. Slow slithering scales, played *flautando* and *sul tasto*, leave invisible tracks on the escalator, splitting the octave in strange reptilian ways. Mothers are terrified, children fascinated.

Pavane: She's so fine was written for Joan Jeanrenaud, cellist of the Kronos Quartet, who's so fine, high, sweet cello melodies. Also a quiet graceful song for a budding teenager, who is playing her favourite song, back and forth over those favourite progressions. She knows all the words.

Toot nipple Furious chainsaw triads on the cello, who rides them like a rodeo bull just long enough to hand them over to the viola.

Notes by composer

Béla Bartók [1881-1945]

String Quartet No 6. Sz.114 [1939]

1. *Mesto - Più mosso, pesante*
2. *Mesto - Marcia*
3. *Mesto - Burletta*
4. *Mesto*

Bartók's Sixth Quartet was commissioned by Zoltán Székely for his famous Hungarian Quartet. It was the last work Bartók wrote in Europe before he fled to New York. Since the advent of a right-wing and dictatorial government in 1932 his home city and country had become enemy territory. He declined the offer of prestigious national prizes, he refused to perform in Germany, his works were no longer premiered in Hungary and after Anschluss he changed from his Austrian publisher, Universal Edition, to Boosey and Hawkes in London and withdrew from membership of the Austrian performing rights society. He also began to send all his manuscripts out of the country for safe-keeping in Switzerland. Only two things kept him in Hungary, his aged mother and his ethnomusicological work at the Academy of Sciences. One cannot help but compare Bartók's principled opposition to the obscene political developments in central Europe with Richard Strauss' self-serving cooperation with the Nazis, a comparison that can clearly be heard in their music.

The Quartet reflects both the composer's sense of personal loss as he prepares to leave his homeland and his horror and despair at the advent of war. His normal dispassionate approach is swept aside in the emotional upheaval of the time. Each of the first three movements is preceded by a motto theme marked *mesto* (sad), which also provides the material for the slow Finale. This lament is then punctuated by scenes from real life making up the individual movements, the whole unfolding with the relentlessness of a Greek tragedy. This work is also exceptional in that Bartók found himself unable to write his planned rustic dance finale. The optimistic last movement was almost an article of faith with him, no conventional heroics but the joy of the dance.

Before the first movement the lament is sung by the unaccompanied viola. The first life scene is from the cultured order of classical composition; the movement is announced by a series of firm chords before the sonata form exposition is presented. The two themes are spiky and controlled in Bartók's intellectual manner. The introductory chords lead into the development and there is a recapitulation and coda as expected. The lament next appears on the cello, accompanied by the other three instruments in unison. The main section of the three-part movement mocks the inane militaristic ambitions of Europe's dictators, while the Trio takes up Bartók's beloved folk music that he had spent half a lifetime collecting. The third movement lament is in three voices with the melody in the first violin, accompanied by the second violin and cello; after 9 bars the viola doubles the melody at the octave. The Burlesque movement itself is a wild and sardonic dance with a heavy-footed, martial rhythm, which is interrupted by a gentle *Andantino*, a memory of a distant world. The *Burletta* rudely interrupts and the coda sees more hopeless attempts by the *Andantino* to return.

The *Mesto* theme now expands into all four voices and overwhelms the last movement. Within it is a central *molto tranquillo* made up of the two first movement themes. The rest is unappeased grief and irretrievable loss.

Francis Humphrys

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