

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Piano Quartet in E-flat major, op. 87

The seamless fusion of Romantic and folk idioms has made Antonín Dvořák's compositions some of the most distinctive and endearing in the classical canon. However, during his lifetime, there were certain places in Europe where such overt Czech nationalism could draw controversy. In Vienna specifically, racial prejudice lurked beneath the pristine surfaces of this bustling musical hub. After the 1880 Vienna premiere of Dvořák's Sixth Symphony was repeatedly postponed, the composer stated, "...Viennese audiences seem to be prejudiced against a composition with a Slav flavor..." Despite this, Dvořák continued to gain wider recognition in the 1880s, but he must certainly have been torn at times between composing in a strictly Germano-Austrian vein or in a more "exotic" Slavic style, which would open the door to either enthusiastic praise or outright dismissal.

The Piano Quartet in E-flat major, op. 87—his second—is one work that might very well reflect those tensions. Dvořák's publisher (Simrock) requested the piece in 1885, after the staggering financial success of releasing the first set of *Slavonic Dances* several years earlier. Though Dvořák did not get around to the quartet until 1889, the creative process came fairly quickly. On August 10, two days before he finished the work, he wrote to his friend Alois Göbl, "I've now already finished three movements of a new piano quartet, and the Finale will be ready in a few days. As expected, it came easily, and the melodies just surged upon me. Thank God!" As part of the original request, Simrock specifically asked that the piece not be too Slavic in character. The resulting piano quartet presents an intriguing aural journey, one that grapples with both sides of Dvořák's musical personality.

The first movement (*Allegro con fuoco*) opens with an emphatic, unison melody in the strings, which is quickly answered by a capricious descending line in the piano. This juxtaposition between stern and playful holds true throughout the movement, but there are also moments of pure beauty, as heard in the secondary melody introduced by the cello. The subsequent *Lento*—set in the warm key of G-flat major—is the longest movement of the work and perhaps the most stunning. A bucolic mood is set by the cello, who sings a lyrical song over soft plucked strings and rolled piano chords. The proceedings are briefly interrupted twice by storm clouds but return each time to the serene mood of the opening. Flavorings of Dvořák's Czech heritage begin to sneak their way in the lighthearted third movement (*Allegro moderato*), as if the composer could no longer hold back the love for his homeland's music. Here, a stately dance in 3/4 time, possibly inspired by the waltz, is interspersed with gravelly cello drones and "exotic-sounding" piano scales (thanks specifically to an augmented second scale degree). This is followed by a whirling finale (*Allegro ma non troppo*), where a folklike dance is a partnered alongside a luscious, heart-on-sleeve melody. The music gradually builds in exuberance—with some lyrical respites in between—before ending with a breathless conclusion. —© Kevin McBrien