

ANTONIN DVOŘÁK (1841 – 1904)
(Nelahozeves, 1841 - Prague, 1904)

The Cypresses (1887)

Dvořák's music is unique in that he was able, like no other composer, to incorporate elements of the great European Classical and Romantic composers he so admired, with the characteristic Czech harmonies and rhythm of his own country - to produce distinctive music of unsurpassed richness and orchestral colors to rival Josef's coat. Yet we only regularly hear a small number of his compositions—the famous cello concerto, the *Slavonic Dances*, one of the nine marvelous symphonies ("*From the New World*"), only one of his many string quartets; only one of his three piano trios, and the Piano Quintet. But in fact he left us a large treasure of superbly constructed wonderful, strong, melodic works, which (thanks to the efforts of Johannes Brahms, who used his prestige to help Dvořák get a foothold in a Western Europe disdainful of eastern European culture) came to be in demand all over the "Old World" during his lifetime. Nor is it just in America that performance of Dvorak's music has been so narrow. Dr. Thomas Klima, a pathologist now working in the Houston Medical Center, grew up in post-war Communist Czechoslovakia. He tells me that, incredibly, he knew less of Dvorak than we do until he came to America, because the government's Cultural Czar of the day preferred the music of Smetana! So Dvořák had to wait for the Velvet Revolution to be liberated from exile.

It seems appropriate, then, to urge the reader to explore further the many marvelous works of this composer now available in recording and waiting in the wings - chamber music, symphonies, symphonic variations and tone poems, concert overtures, operas, songs, and his sublime music for violin and orchestra.

The quartet pieces on tonight's program are an excellent place to start. They are among the least known of Dvořák's works - adaptations for string quartet made by Dvořák himself, of 12 of the 20 songs he had composed to texts by Gustav Pflieger-Moravsky two decades earlier, when he was in love with the actress Josefina Cermakova. She married someone else with Dvořák ultimately marrying her sister (all too familiar a story in the lives of impoverished young composers: think also Mozart and Haydn). In the string quartet version he has altered the sequence and enriched the textures of these pieces. They are exquisite expressions of love and longing, optimism and resignation, which serve to remind us of his endless melodic gift which Brahms so admired. The Emerson Quartet has chosen to play nine of the songs: six on the first half and another three in the second, in this all-Czech program.

It has been a long time since The Houston Friends of Music has heard any of them - once in 1983 and again in 1998. We are fortunate to have them again.

Program note © by Nora Avins Klein, December, 2009

LEOS JANACEK (1854 – 1928)
String Quartet No. 2 “Intimate Letters” (1928)

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were so many outstanding composers representing so many different national schools of music that it was difficult for a person of that time to learn of them all. It is no wonder that a strong composer like Leos Janacek was almost unknown in his lifetime, even in Prague, the capital of his native Czechoslovakia (which became an independent country just ten years before his death). He spent most of his lifetime in Hukvaldy where he was born and in nearby Brno. Only in his late years, after his opera *Jenufa* was finally performed in the State Theater of Prague, did Janacek gain notoriety. Today he comes to mind, along with Smetana and Dvorak, as one of the three important Czech composers of his time.

Janacek primarily composed operas and other works for the voice, and in doing so, turned early in his life to the study of Moravian and Slovakian folk songs. He composed chamber music only during the last years of his life when his style had matured and had, in its originality, become somewhat avant garde. His personal theory about melody was that it had evolved from the natural flow of speech. Poetic and literary associations can be found in the titles of his works. Janacek’s chamber compositions include two string quartets. Quartet No. 1 (1923) was purportedly inspired by Tolstoy’s short story “The Kreutzer Sonata”. String Quartet No.2 was completed in 1928, the year of Janacek’s death at the age of seventy-four. It was originally titled “*Listy Duverne*”, or “Intimate Pages”, and later became known as “Intimate Letters,” in honor of his strong friendship with Kamila Stosslova, the wife of an antique dealer in Pisek, Bohemia. Janacek met her when he was 63 years old and she was 25 and though Janacek never abandoned his own wife, Zdenka, Kamila did inspire many of the female characters in his late operas. He wrote to Kamila almost every day for the remainder of his life. How much of his love was returned is unclear.

A program is indicated for the movements of the quartet to reflect Janacek’s eleven years of love for Kamila. The first movement describes their initial meeting, the second a meeting at the Moravian Spa, Luhacovice. The third refers to feelings of joy, and the fourth refers to his fear, longing, and finally fulfillment. As is often the case, the music perhaps stands best on its own without knowledge of the story behind it. It is free of traditional form and harmony, and the structure needed to incorporate its constantly changing moods makes it very difficult for the performers. Janacek originally planned to use the viola d’amore as replacement for the viola but found it too weak against the other three instruments. This was an important decision because the viola has a dominant role in this quartet.

The first movement opens with a fortissimo trill in the cello under aggressive chords in the upper instruments. After eight bars, the viola interrupts with an eerie line played *sul ponticello*, bowing as close as possible to the bridge of the instrument. The music is repeated with different instrumentation before the first violin plays an arpeggio *sul ponticello*, which sounds like an accompaniment but ultimately becomes part of the subject. After a pause, a more melodic theme is taken up and all of the ideas are

intertwined throughout the rest of the movement. Of particular note is the lovely duet between the violin and viola, leading shortly to a solo line in the viola.

The second movement is based largely on an opening theme in the viola, taken up by the other instruments in altered keys, intervals, and tempi. After a sudden pause, the second violin begins an agitated section, reminiscent of the first movement. Interesting scale fragments are interspersed by the second violin to be played "*flautato*", with an airy sound somewhat akin to a flute.

The third movement begins with a rocking melody in triple meter, suggestive of a lullaby. The screeching of the upper strings provides periodic interruptions. The fourth movement is so varied and so aurally riveting that it defies analysis. Though the movement begins with a foot stomping folk melody in the first violin, its mood soon begins to alternate between the gruff and the tender. A few melodies surprise the listener with their beauty and there is an imaginative use of sound effects---apeggiated pizzicato chords, *sul ponticello* tremolos, elongated trills, alternating pizzicato and arco in the cello, as well as an accelerating idea in triple meter. Finally all four instruments play a dissonant passage *sul ponticello*. Out of this disarray the second violin returns to the original folk theme, only to be stamped out by the four note pattern once again. The ending leaves things somewhat unresolved.

This quartet was sight-read for the first time in Janacek's home in Hukvaldy near the end of May 1928. It was first performed in Brno by the Moravia Quartet in September of the same year, two weeks after Janacek's death.

Program note © Margaret Bragg, January 2010

ANTONIN DVOŘÁK (1841 – 1904) **String Quartet No. 10 in E-Flat Major, Op. 51**

Following the success of his Slavonic Dances, Dvorak was approached by Jean Becker of the Florentine Quartet and asked to write a quartet that would also be composed in the "Slavic style". The request came at a particularly happy period in Dvorak's life. At home he was celebrating the birth of a new daughter after having lost two of his children. As a composer he had taken a leap forward. Due in large part to an endorsement by Brahms, Dvorak's works were now to be handled by the well known publisher, Simrock. In addition, being a violist himself, Dvorak was particularly fond of the chamber music scene---small groups of individuals meeting in one another's homes for the sole purpose of making music together. He gladly accepted the assignment.

Written between Christmas Day 1878 and the spring of 1879, the Quartet in E-flat was composed almost entirely of dance tunes. Although Dvorak's melodies and rhythms are clearly taken from the songs and dances of his native land, they are rarely direct quotes of such, but more often imaginative creations of his own.

The entire first movement is a bouncy dance in sonata form. In the first theme, the small turns at the end of the phrases are much like those in some of Dvorak's orchestral Slavonic Dances. The short second melody is so song-like that it almost begs for words. Polka rhythms are added to it as an accompaniment. The first theme and its counterpart vie for the upper hand in the development, after which a beautiful treatment of the first theme provides a calm ending.

The second movement, Dumka, is a popular folk tradition in much of Slavic music. The word "dumati" means "to meditate or recollect" and the form was originally used to tell the stories of folk heroes. The introductory theme of this movement is a melancholy dialogue in G minor between the violin and viola over strummed chords in the cello. The same theme then acquires a completely different character in the second section when, in G major, it appears as a wild Czech dance, or *furiant*. The two contrasting sections alternate several times with a final return to the *furiant* in the key of G Minor.

The Romanze is also song-like in form but elaborate in its development. A set of chords provides a false ending to the movement before the actual closing occurs more quietly. The fourth movement brings to mind yet another peasant dance with a shorter melody interspersed to provide a relaxing contrast. One can hear once again the turns, seemingly taken from the end of the initial motif in the first movement, and used contrapunctally in the finale. The movement wraps up a quartet that reflects Dvorak's basically sunny nature.

Although this quartet was dedicated to Jean Becker of the Florentine Quartet it was actually premiered by the Joachim Quartet in Berlin, on July 29, 1879.

Program note © Margaret Bragg, January 2010

Emerson String Quartet

The Emerson String Quartet stands alone in the history of string quartets with an unparalleled list of achievements over three decades: thirty acclaimed recordings produced with Deutsche Grammophon since 1987, eight Grammy® Awards (including two for Best Classical Album, an unprecedented honor for a chamber music group), three Gramophone Awards, the coveted Avery Fisher Prize and cycles of the complete Beethoven, Bartók, Mendelssohn and Shostakovich string quartets in the world's musical capitals, from New York to London to Vienna. The Quartet has collaborated in concerts and on recordings with some of the greatest artists of our time. After more than 32 years of extensive touring and recording, the Emerson Quartet continues to perform with the same integrity, energy and commitment that it has demonstrated since it was formed in 1976.

The 2009-2010 season comprises more than ninety worldwide engagements, with a three-concert series at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London's South Bank Centre, two concerts at Wigmore Hall, and performances in Prague and at the Edinburgh International

Festival. European tours feature multiple stops in Spain, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria and France. North American engagements are highlighted by a three-concert series entitled *Adventures in Bohemia* in the recently renovated Alice Tully Hall at New York's Lincoln Center. A correlated 3-CD set for Deutsche Grammophon of Dvorák's late quartets, *Cypresses* and the viola quintet will be released in 2010. Additional concerts include Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Diego, Boston, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Houston, Salt Lake City, Calgary, Toronto and Vancouver, among others. In 2010, the Emerson embarks on a rare tour of Asia, visiting Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Taipei. The Quartet continues its residency at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, now in its 30th sold-out season.

The Emerson is Quartet-in-Residence at Stony Brook University, where, in addition to a concert series, teaching and chamber music coaching throughout the academic year, it has conducted intensive string quartet workshops in 2004, 2006 and 2008. The Quartet has also overseen three Professional Training Workshops at Carnegie's Weill Music Institute. In the 2006-2007 season, Carnegie Hall invited the Emerson to present its own *Perspectives* series, a nine-concert exploration titled *Beethoven in Context*, held in Isaac Stern Auditorium. No other quartet has had the opportunity to present such an expansive series at Carnegie. In March 2004 the Emerson was named the 18th recipient of the Avery Fisher Prize - another first for a chamber ensemble.

Formed in 1976, the Emerson String Quartet took its name from the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Violinists Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer alternate in the first chair position and are joined by violist Lawrence Dutton and cellist David Finckel. Since January 2002, Messrs. Drucker, Setzer and Dutton have stood for their performances; Mr. Finckel sits on a podium. The Quartet is based in New York City.

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