

"Their unanimity of conception was admirably and readily apparent in the opening concert" Musical Opinion." "This was an outstanding recital. The performance of the first of the expansive Razumovsky Quartets, Opus 59 was inspired and gripping from beginning to end." Musical Pointers

Of their Beethoven recordings The Independent said: 'these [performances] are excellent: their fiery interpretations do full justice to Beethoven's final masterpieces'; and International Record Review: "...this is magnificent quartet playing: I am not sure I can name a finer account of this on disc in the past 50 or so years."

The Wihan are Quartet in Residence at Trinity College of Music, London, and for several years have taught many of the UK's gifted young Quartets at Pro Corda in Suffolk. The Quartet are great supporters of the work of the **CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust**, giving inspirational concerts and master classes to young people in many parts of the country. Leoš Čepický plays on a violin by Jan Spidlen. Jan Schulmeister plays on a Jan Baptista Dvořák violin (1879) and Jiří Žigmund's viola is a 1659 Andrea Hieronimus Amati, on permanent loan from the Czech State collection. Aleš Kaspřík's cello was made in Paris in 1840 by Henry Thouvenel.

Recorded at Potton Hall, December 2004

Producer: Jeremy Hayes

Engineer: Eric James

Design: www.doubletakedesign.co.uk

Photo: Wolf Marloh

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QUARTET
Wihan

Antonín Dvořák

Quartet in F major, Op. 96, 'American'
Quartet in C major, Op. 61



Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet No. 11 in C, Op. 61, B. 121

1 Allegro	11.53
2 Poco adagio e molto cantabile	8.24
3 Scherzo: Allegro vivo; Trio: L'istesso tempo	8.40
4 Finale: Vivace	8.30

String Quartet No. 12 in F, Op. 96, B. 179, 'American'

5 Allegro ma non troppo	7.54
6 Lento	8.13
7 Molto vivace	4.07
8 Finale: Vivace ma non troppo	5.46

TT 63.30

The Wihan Quartet
Leoš Čepický & Jan Schulmeister - *violins*
Jiří Žigmund - *viola* • **Aleš Kaspřík** - *cello*

However, it had had an earlier private performance in Spillville just after its completion in June 1893. Dvořák's first biographer, Otakar Šourek, tells us that the players were the composer, Jan Josef Kovařík, Cecile Kovaříková and Josef Jan Kovařík. Interestingly, Dvořák, a viola player, led the quartet, while Jan Kovařík was not noted as a string player and his son, Josef, was a respected violinist and violist but had no record as a 'cellist'!

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The Wihan Quartet

Leoš Čepický & Jan Schulmeister - *violins*
Jiří Žigmund - *viola* • **Aleš Kaspřík** - *cello*

The Wihan Quartet, formed in 1985, are heirs to the great Czech musical tradition. The Quartet's outstanding reputation for the interpretation of its native Czech heritage and of the many classical, romantic and modern masterpieces of the string quartet repertoire is widely acknowledged.

They have developed an impressive international career, which includes visits to major festivals in Europe and the Far East. They visit the United States and Japan regularly and have had highly acclaimed tours of Australia and New Zealand. They are frequent visitors to the UK and can often be heard on BBC Radio 3 as well as in concert at Wigmore Hall, Bridgewater Hall, the South Bank and many other venues throughout the country.

The Wihan Quartet has won many International Competitions including The Prague Spring Festival and the Osaka 'Chamber Festa'. In 1991, they won both the First Prize and the Audience Prize in the London International String Quartet Competition.

From October 2007 to March 2008, the Wihan gave the first ever series of all the Beethoven Quartets in Prague, and these landmark concerts were recorded for this series of CDs. The cycle was repeated in the UK at Blackheath Halls during May and June 2008.

In these more racially sensitive times, this work has been given the subtitle of 'American', although the original title - not given to it by Dvořák - referred to the belief that Dvořák had made use of negro spirituals in the piece. When Dvořák was invited to America, through his English connections with the publishers, Novello, Ewer and Co., to become head of Mrs. Thurber's new National Conservatory in New York, he stated his belief that American composers should look to the wealth of indigenous music for some of their thematic material. That Dvořák himself took an interest in the music of both the American Indians & African slaves is known but no direct musical quotations from these sources have ever been identified in any of the works from this period, a fact which his own writings confirm.

The first movement's opening viola solo passage, while different, has its conception in the solo viola declamation from the start of Smetana's *String Quartet No.1 in e minor, 'From My Life'* but thereafter no such similarities are to be found. Echoes of the negro spirituals may be heard in Dvořák's use of the pentatonic scale in some of his themes in each movement but music of a pentatonic nature also can be found in some of his works written long before stepping on American soil. Equally, some of the rhythmic figures found in American folk sources are also to be found in Bohemian, Moravian and especially Slovak folk songs. Other American influences have been suggested, including the call of the Scarlet Tanager bird, common to that area of Iowa, in the violin motif of the third movement. It is in the beautiful slow movement that we can sense Dvořák remembering home with a sense of nostalgia, where the violoncello takes up the main theme presented by the first violin. The last movement carries all the ebullience of Czech joy and laughter. For Dvořák, as for Martinů and surely most Czechs abroad, that strong sense of the pull of home, for which the Welsh have a special word - *hiraeth* - was ever present.

The Quartet received its first performance in Boston on 1st. January 1894, given by the Kneisel Quartet (Franz Kneisel, Otto Roth, Louis Svecenski and Alwin Schroeder).

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) **String Quartet No. 11 in C, Op. 61, B. 121**

The *String Quartet in C major* is the most significant of Dvořák's fourteen quartets before the final two examples completed in 1895 after his return from America. It presents a greater challenge to performers, which may explain its relatively infrequent performance, as well as a most satisfying reward to the listener receptive to its mastery of composition.

By 1881, the year of its composition, Dvořák was a well established composer in receipt of requests for works, including string quartets. The preceding 'Slavonic' *String Quartet No. 10 in Eb, Op. 51, B. 92* was the result of a request from Jean Becker, the leader of the Florentine Quartet in 1878. In the autumn of 1881 Dvořák agreed to a request from Josef Hellmesberger senior, Court Kapellmeister and leader of the Viennese Quartet which also bore his name, to write a new quartet and then forgot about it while he was busily engaged on writing his opera *Dimitrij, Op. 64, B. 127*. In October 1881 Dvořák received quite a shock to read in the newspaper, *Neue freie Presse*, that Hellmesberger's quartet was going to play the new quartet on 15th. December and he had not yet written a note of it! There was nothing for it but to stop work on the opera and begin the new quartet. At Vysoká he began work on 7th. October and two days later had finished a movement in F major. However, he was dissatisfied with it and started again on a work in C major. (The discarded movement stands today as the *String Quartet Movement in F, B. 120*. Having prepared sketches, also due to shortage of time uncharacteristically utilising some discarded ideas from other works, he began the final score of the first movement on 25th. October, the second movement on 27th., the third on 29th. and the last on 4th. November, completing the whole work on 10th. November. The result, while abandoning the overt "Czechness" of the previous quartet, shows no sign of haste but demonstrates an extraordinary almost Beethovenian strength and depth while remaining undoubtedly the work of a Czech. Here is Dvořák the master of his material and the medium.

The opening *Allegro* in C major leads with a strong but beautiful theme built out of three triplet-based motifs. The second subject opens in the key of Eb major before moving into G major after just fourteen bars. The development section primarily is built out of the first theme but allows also the introduction of an additional melody. The recapitulation eventually allows us to hear the opening theme in the viola, in the key of A major, before the second subject returns in C major and the remainder of this section is transposed down to the key of E major. Only with the arrival of the coda does Dvořák begin the pull the tonality back to C major. For all his masterly handling of tonal relationships, Dvořák never allows the music to sound anything but natural and spontaneous.

The following slow movement in F major, its opening theme provided in a duet between the violins being both lyrical and yearning. The material for this came originally from the unused sketch for the slow movement of the *Violin Sonata in F, Op. 57, B. 106* of 1880. Set against this Dvořák provides a contrasting melody in Db, gentle yet tinged with sadness and hovering between the major and minor. The third movement has the *Scherzo* in a minor and its theme uses material from the second theme of the *Polonaise in A, B. 94* for violoncello and piano written in 1879, which leads to a gentler second motif. The *Trio* is in A major, while contrasting with the *Scherzo*, remains essentially lively and it is here that we hear Dvořák closest to his beloved Schubert but in music which is not without clear reference to its Czech origins, notably in its delightful song-like counter melody of the second part of this central section.

The final movement returns us to the key of C major, where again the principal melody comes from the *Polonaise*, this time from its central theme but turned into a chirpy Czech tune rather than keeping to the 3/4 *cantabile* of the original. The movement is a sonata form rondo and the most Bohemian in character of the four, yet retaining the Beethovenian boldness which pervades the whole work. Dvořák again uses harmony to great effect, moving between the home C major and e minor, developing the movement with some of his delightfully unexpected turns which always sound just right, while

carrying us along in music which gives such immense pleasure and inner satisfaction, as well as sheer joy.

The planned Vienna première for 15th. December 1881 did not take place because the Ringtheater was destroyed by fire and with tragic loss of life. After a suitable period of mourning, the Hellmesberger Quartet did give the first performance but the date and details are not know. On 2nd. November 1882 it received its German première in Berlin, played by the Joachim Quartet (Joseph Joachim, Heinrich de Ahna, Emanuel Wirth and Hugo Dechert), repeating it four days later in Bonn. The Prague première came on 3rd. January 1884 at one of the famous chamber music evenings at the *Umělecká Beseda*, when the players were Ferdinand Lachner, Julius Raušer, Josef Krehan and Alois Neruda.

String Quartet No. 12 in F, Op. 96, B. 179, 'American'

This, the most well known of Dvořák's fourteen string quartets has a popularity which almost rivals that of his *Symphony No. 9 in e minor, Op. 95, B. 178, 'From the New World'*. Both were written with an obvious ease and fluency during some of the happier early days of his American sojourn; the quartet was composed while on holiday with his family in the Czech community at Spillville in Iowa during June 1893. For an essentially home-loving, family man, Dvořák's time in America, from September 1892 to April 1895, was marred by homesickness, alleviated only by having some of his family join him for the summer of 1893. Even so, he insisted on spending the summer vacation of 1894 back in Bohemia. In the previous year, his Czech secretary, Josef Jan Kovařík, recognised Dvořák's longing for contact with home and so suggested a partial solution in a holiday at Spillville, a small remote town of less than three hundred inhabitants, all of whom were Czechs who had emigrated, including Kovařík's own family.

This Quartet, the second work that he wrote completely in America, was sketched between 8th. and 10th. June, with the whole score completed by 23rd. of the month. On the final page, Dvořák wrote: *Zaplať pán Bůh. Jsem spokojen, šlo to rychle. (Thanks be to God. I am satisfied; it went quickly).*

Antonín Dvořák

String Quartet No. 11 in C, Op. 61, B. 121

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