

Dover Quartet

New Orleans Friends of Music

PROGRAM NOTES

by Marc Loudon

Mason Bates is the composer-in-residence at the Kennedy Center, and he worked directly with the Dover Quartet in preparing **From Amber Frozen**. The composer provided the following description of the quartet.

“This brief quartet forms itself gradually, growing its melodic and textural ideas at an evolutionary pace as if viewed by an insect from the Jurassic, forever sealed in a crystal of dried amber on a tree. So, the ensemble hatches from its shell in embryonic form, a lopsided groove of plucked out-of-tune notes and woody rustlings, with bell-like sustained notes foreshadowing the coming melody. This texture of shattered lines that weave in and out of each other is as much informed by today’s electronica as it is from Indonesian gamelan – all passed through the prism of the string quartet’s rich and varied textures. As the ensemble evolves from rhythmic pointillism to more sustained lines, a melody asserts itself. This lyrical urge very gradually infects the group, melting the crystalline beats into warmer, more emotive thoughts—and by the work’s center, the core of animal warmth has succeeded in fusing the shattered lines of the opening into a single lyrical expression. The long-lined melody that follows reaches its expressive peak at the exact moment that the work begins to devolve, as bowed lines become dancing, detuned grooves dispersed throughout the group. By the work’s end, it has morphed well-beyond full circle, having returned to its initial rhythmic space, it ultimately loses pitch altogether.”

Antonin Dvořák composed the **Quartet No. 12 in F Major (the American Quartet)** in 1893 during a summer vacation from his position as director (1892–1895) of the National Conservatory in New York City. He spent his vacation in the town of Spillville, Iowa, which was home to a Czech immigrant community. Feeling very much at ease in Spillville, Dvořák described to a friend his state of mind away from hectic New York: “I have been on vacation since 3 June here in the Czech village of Spillville and I won’t be returning to New York until the latter half of September. The children arrived safely from Europe and we’re all happy together. We like it very much here and, thank God, I am working hard and I’m healthy and in good spirits.” Dvořák sketched the quartet in three days and completed it in thirteen more days, finishing the score with the comment, “Thank God! I am content. It was fast.” The *American Quartet* proved to be a turning point in Dvořák’s chamber music output: for decades he had toiled unsuccessfully to find a balance between his overflowing melodic invention and a clear structure. In the *American Quartet* the two finally came together. Dvořák defended the apparent simplicity of the piece: “When I wrote this quartet in the Czech community of Spillville in 1893, I wanted to write something for once that was very melodious and straightforward, and dear Papa Haydn kept appearing before my eyes, and that is why it all turned out so simply”

Throughout the quartet, Dvořák utilizes melodies constructed on the pentatonic scale, a five-note scale (which, on an F tonal center, is denoted F-G- A-C-D). It has been suggested that the prevalence of this scale in much of American folk music is the basis for the nickname “American” for the quartet. However, because Dvořák used the same pentatonic scale in other music composed before coming to America, it has also been suggested that the nickname comes simply from Dvořák’s inscription, “The second piece composed in America.” Nevertheless, Dvořák heard, and was attracted by, African-American spirituals during his time in America, and he wrote the melodies down. He also said of this quartet, the New World Symphony, and a quintet, “I should never have written these works ‘just so’ if I hadn’t seen America.”

In the first movement of the quartet, the famous angular, pentatonic theme is introduced by the viola under a tremolo figure in the violin. About 1½ minutes in, the violin introduces the lush second theme, a song in A major, over simple chordal harmonies. The development section utilizes motives from the opening theme and concludes with a short fugato. The recapitulation is followed by the coda that ends the movement.

The second movement is not structurally complicated: it consists of a broad, arching, melancholic song—a lament, perhaps—also based on the pentatonic scale. The melody is introduced initially in the violin but passed among the other instruments. This melody is superimposed on an ostinato figure in the other three instruments, initially in d minor, that provides the somber tonal underlay. Some analysts see in this movement a reflection of the homesickness and loneliness that might affect someone isolated in the middle of the vast, open prairies of the Midwest.

The third movement is a lively scherzo in A-B-A-B-A form. The theme of the “A” sections is pentatonic in F major, and the theme of the “B” sections is in F minor. Throughout the “A” sections we hear the first violin play chirping variations of the main theme that is said to be the call of a scarlet tanager that Dvořák heard in the countryside.

The final movement is a rondo on A-B-A-C-A-B-A form. The first two themes are spirited, with the second of the two more lyrical. The middle section has a peaceful, chorale-like character. The movement's rhythm was inspired by Dvořák's experience riding on trains and hearing them chugging on tracks while traveling across America, as heard in the “chugging” of the second violin and viola throughout the piece.

If you want to preview the quartet, you can find an excellent performance played with a scrolling score at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_rwtDIUXA

Tchaikovsky wrote only three string quartets. In the **String Quartet No. 1**, Tchaikovsky gives us a textbook example of classical string quartet writing: taut, noble, and tasteful.

In 1871, teaching at the Moscow Conservatory and running low on cash, Tchaikovsky decided at the urging of his friend Nikolay Rubinstein (brother of Tchaikovsky's former teacher, Anton, and founder of the Moscow Conservatory) to earn some money by presenting a concert of his own chamber music (chamber music being less expensive to present than a concert by a full orchestra). Remarkably, the quartet was completed just weeks before the March 1871 premier concert.

The first movement of this quartet is unusual in three respects: First, it is a gently rocking, rather quiet, composition, and not an *Allegro* movement such as we find in a large number of classical quartets; second, its time signature is a very unusual 9/8; and third, while a measure in this meter is normally divided into three equal pulses of three notes (that is, 123-123-123), in this movement Tchaikovsky, by using tied notes, subdivides the nine beats into four chords with pulses 12-123-12-12, which disorients us for the first fifteen measures until he begins to superimpose melismatic passages of three beats each over this foundational rhythm. Adding to this rhythmic puzzle in each section is a single measure of 12/8 (that is, four pulses of three notes each), so that we want to wonder, “Is this movement in 3 beats or 4 beats?” In the recapitulation, this unusual meter is used again, but with the three-beat running passages superimposed, so that we are no longer rhythmically disoriented. As the movement nears its conclusion, the gentle movement is transformed into a sense of increasing urgency as it rapidly accelerates to its conclusion.

The second movement takes its first theme from a Ukrainian folk song, “Vanya sat on the sofa,” about a besotted and inebriated peasant daydreaming about his love. The lovely tune is

introduced with muted strings. The movement was an immediate hit at its first performance and has since become renowned as one of music's sentimental, romantic favorites. Six years later, Tchaikovsky wrote in his diary after a performance of the quartet at the Moscow Conservatory: "Never in my life have I felt so flattered and proud of my creative ability as when Leo Tolstoy, sitting next to me, heard my andante with tears coursing down his cheeks." Tchaikovsky's fondness for the melody is further underscored by his arrangement of it for cello and string orchestra in 1888.

The Scherzo is in typical A-B-A form. The main section of the Scherzo, in d minor, is a highly accented dancelike movement in triple meter, whereas the second section (Trio) is more lyrical, in B-flat major.

The final movement an outpouring of joyful exuberance in D major. In the middle of the movement, there is a sudden transition to a more restrained section in B-flat major that features the introduction of a lovely melody in the viola. Throughout the rest of the movement, this melody appears in different instruments and is weaved in and out of the main idea in different keys. The movement becomes increasingly virtuosic, accelerating to its exciting D-major conclusion.

An excellent performance of this quartet superimposed on a scrolling score can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa1uv6pUMjQ>