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## **Dvořák opus 61**

Antonin Dvořák was a great admirer of Franz Schubert. We are not accustomed to thinking of Dvořák as following in the footsteps of his great Viennese and German precursors, preferring to associate him with the "nationalist" movement of his generation of composers. And it is true that like his contemporaries Smetana, Mussorgsky, Grieg and others, he was dedicated to defining, glorifying and spreading abroad a musical character for his homeland. However, it is equally true that he could not have become the composer he was without meditating and absorbing the music of Bach, Mozart, Schubert and Wagner. He was especially enthusiastic in praise of Schubert, whose genius, he wrote, "was like a spring which nothing but exhaustion could stop from flowing." He ranked Schubert as Mozart's equal in many respects, declaring that "in both we find the same delicate sense of instrumental coloring, the same spontaneous and irrepressible flow of melody, the same instinctive command of the means of expression, and the same versatility in all the branches of their art." He wrote further, about Schubert's chamber works in particular, that they "must be ranked among the very best of their kind in all musical literature...Schubert does not try to give his chamber music an orchestral character, yet he attains a marvelous variety of beautiful tonal effects."

It should not come as a surprise, then, that when the celebrated Hellmesberger Quartet of Vienna commissioned a new work from Dvořák in 1881, his thoughts flew to the great chamber music tradition of that city, and to Schubert in particular. The result of this commission was the Opus 61 Quartet, and its first movement is an unapologetic homage to the first movement of Schubert's Cello Quintet. Like that movement, Dvořák's movement is grand in scope and length. The opening of Dvořák's work recalls strongly the opening progression of the Schubert, with its stillness and its powerful mixture of radiance and pain. Dvořák extolled Schubert's "quaint alternation of major and minor within the same period," which interestingly he called a "Slavic trait"(!), and here he does not hesitate to follow his example. In the second theme, too, Dvořák follows Schubert to E-flat major, and his theme hovers around the same pitches as Schubert's famous cello duet. Various other similarities in the form and trajectory of the two movements exist; but it would be a strain to try to map Dvořák's work onto Schubert's, and in fact the younger composer was too wise not to recur to his own genius in the main substance of what he wrote here. It is a big movement, with big, even occasionally symphonic gestures in it; but it does not attain to the Olympian quality of the Schubert Quintet, ultimately inhabiting a sweeter, more human sphere.

With the second movement, we might be saying farewell to Schubert and paying a visit to Beethoven, at least in certain superficial respects. The movement's marking, "Poco Adagio e molto cantabile," might have been pulled right from the older composer's stylebook, and the dotted-rhythm gravitas that dominates the landscape seems to hearken back to the slow movement of Beethoven's first Rasumovsky Quartet. But the mood here is light years away from the heartbreak of the Rasumovsky movement; Dvořák depicts a love duet between the two violins, borne forth on triplet zephyrs in the lower strings. A second melody, dark and lovely in D flat major, provides a quieter, more reflective mood as it passes from second violin to cello and finally to first violin. After the return of the main section, recapitulated over fluttering viola sextuplets and a plucked cello bassline, there is a surprise: the music loses momentum, comes almost to an absolute halt, and we find ourselves cast up on a barren shore, wandering amongst various foreign minor keys. Only gradually is the music able to grope its way back home, to a warmer, more reassuring conclusion.

The third movement reveals Dvořák in self-quotation. Here we have a melody from his own Polonaise for Cello and Piano, which he had composed a few years earlier; however, he has altered it from its original identity -- a proud, upright personality in a major key -- and sped it up to become a whirling, clever, minor-key dance. Rather than a Polonaise, we hear something more akin to a Czech Furiant, with its quicksilver motion and its fierce alternations between two-beat and three-beat patterns. The contrasting middle section presents a blither face, an innocent, sunny country tune which the composer puts through its paces, festooning it all the while with his inimitable richness of detail: skirling triplets, glittering pizzicati, bariolage and harmonics.

The Finale is exuberant, sunny, and full of bravura fiddling. The nimble opening phrase again features a motion from major to minor -- in the first three chords, no less -- but this time the effect is lighthearted, coy and flirtatious, a simple, stepwise melody in the first violin accompanied by a viola line in broken octaves. The broken-octave motif will go through several transformations of its own, taking on a melodic role and ultimately becoming an obsession played by the whole quartet in unison. Dvořák makes one more apparent nod to Vienna, with a quotation from Brahms' G Major Sextet as his second, more lyrical theme, which provides a rare break in the movement's bustling action. Ultimately the music climaxes triumphantly, and subsides to a quiet coda, wherein the first violin traces a wandering, almost improvisatory eighth-note line against shifting harmonies, a tired and happy reveler recalling

the night's festivities. He is not allowed to muse for long though, as a final burst of brilliance brings the movement to its emphatic close.

Note by Misha Amory