



Program Notes
Chamber Concert,
February 20, 2022

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ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET • FEBRUARY 20

“PROGRAM NOTES BY ERIC BROMBERG”

Antonin Dvořák

Born September 8, 1841, Muhlhausen, Bohemia

Died May 1, 1904, Prague

Bagatelles for Two Violins, Cello, and Harmonium, Op. 47

Dvořák’s *Bagatelles* come from a very specific moment in his life and were scored for an ensemble that includes a very specific instrument. The year 1878 was crucial to Dvořák’s success as a composer. After decades of obscurity and struggle, that year he composed the first set of his *Slavonic Dances*, the music that would send his name around the world. He was 37 years old, and success – however late it came – would be sweet. He finished the *Slavonic Dances* in March 1878, and during the first twelve days of May he composed a much more modest work, written for the pleasure of amateur musicians and scored for a quartet made up of two violins, cello, and harmonium. Dvořák called this piece *Maličkosti*, Czech for “bagatelles.” He felt no reservations about writing lighter music for amateur musicians—a few years later, while writing a different work, he said: “I am now writing some small Bagatelles for two violins and viola, and this work gives me just as much pleasure as if I were composing a great symphony.”

The distinctive instrument in this quartet is the harmonium, a small (often portable) reed organ operated by a treadle pumped by the player’s feet. Invented as recently as 1842, the harmonium became popular in the late-nineteenth century, particularly for the many transcriptions of orchestral music made for it. Curiously, Arnold Schoenberg was one of those most attracted to this instrument, and he arranged a number of orchestral works for it for performance in Vienna early in the twentieth century. The harmonium makes a rich but gentle sound, and that subdued sound is an important part of the character of the *Bagatelles*, for it nicely complements the sound of the strings above it.

The *Bagatelles* may have been written for amateur musicians to play at home but those amateurs had better be pretty good: the first violin part in particular is often set in the instrument’s highest range, and it demands an accomplished player. All five movements have considerable melodic charm, and music this attractive hardly requires detailed description.

Perhaps a line or two will suffice. The opening movement, marked *Allegretto scherzando*, makes use of the Czech folk-tune *Hrally dudy*, and this melody will recur in various forms throughout the *Bagatelles*. This opening movement, with the two violins weaving effortlessly between unexpected keys as the cello offers pizzicato accompaniment, is particularly appealing. The second movement is a minuet, but the most distinctive thing about it is its fundamental pulse: the rhythm of a dotted quarter can be heard in every single measure of this piece. The third movement is based on a variant of the folk-tune heard in the first movement, while the fourth is a canon. This canon proceeds at first on a dialogue between first violin and cello (the second violin sits out the opening section of the piece), then grows more complex in the latter stages of the movement. Dvořák makes the concluding *Poco Allegro* a crisp polka; its middle section recalls the folk-tune from the first movement, then the polka returns to dance the *Bagatelles* to their graceful close.

It was Brahms who called Dvořák to the attention of his own publisher, Simrock in Berlin. Simrock had been reluctant to take on an unknown Czech composer, but the international success of the *Slavonic Dances* quickly got his attention, and he published the *Bagatelles* in 1880.

String Quartet in D minor, Op. 34

Dvořák wrote his *String Quartet in D minor* in the fall of 1877, just as he was on the edge of the most important transition of his life. At age 36, he had labored for years in obscurity (and sometimes on the edge of poverty). He supported his young family by giving music lessons, playing the viola in orchestras, playing the organ in church, and trying to compose. His music was performed locally, but true fame eluded him, and as he moved through his thirties Dvořák was known in Prague but almost nowhere else.

And then his luck began to change. Through the 1870s Dvořák repeatedly entered the competition for the Austrian State Compendium, an award instituted to assist poor young artists. Brahms was one of the judges, and he was so impressed by Dvořák's music that not only did he help him receive several grants, he did something much more valuable – he alerted his own publisher, Simrock in Berlin, to Dvořák. On November 30, 1877, the critic Eduard Hanslick, another of the judges for the Compendium, sent Dvořák a letter telling him that he had just been awarded 500 gulden and also encouraging him to make use of Brahms: "The sympathy of an artist as important and famous as Brahms should not only be pleasant but also useful to you, and I think you should write to him and perhaps send him some of your music."

Dvořák did indeed send more of his music to Brahms, but he also made a much more personal gesture of thanks to the Viennese master. The following week, he began composing

his *String Quartet in D Minor* and completed it very quickly (December 7-18, 1877). When it was done, Dvořák wrote to Brahms, asking permission to dedicate the new quartet to him. Now it was Brahms' turn to be grateful, and he told Dvořák that he would be honored by the dedication. Three months later, in March 1878, Simrock commissioned the first set of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*, and their success was immediate, with performances across the continent, as well as in England and the United States. By the end of 1878, Dvořák was a famous composer.

Almost unknown to general audiences, the *String Quartet in D Minor* is a little jewel, full of lovely music and showing some unusual thematic relationships within and between movements. Even at the specified *piano* dynamic, the opening *Allegro* is full of tension, slipping quickly between major and minor tonalities – these unexpected key shifts will mark the entire quartet. There are surprises in this music: when the second subject arrives, this flowing and sunny music is clearly derived from the closing phrase of the first theme, yet now that same figure sounds transformed. Another surprise comes at the start of the development, where the music modulates upward unexpectedly. That development section is busy, and the movement drives to a dramatic close.

Dvořák marks the second movement *Alla polka*, and he writes this movement – essentially a scherzo – in that form. A scherzo is usually in a three-beat pulse, but this one dances easily along the two-beat pulse of the polka, spilling over with happy energy as it goes. The trio section is a *sousedska*, an old country dance from Eastern Europe, and now the music does move into the expected 3/4. A pizzicato transition leads the way back to the polka.

Dvořák takes us into an entirely different world in the *Adagio*. He mutes the instruments here, and the heartfelt main theme is richly harmonized throughout this movement, which slips between D major and minor. The central section features a soaring, elaborate episode for first violin, and then Dvořák springs yet another surprise: he rounds this music off with the thematic figure that had appeared in the opening movement's first and second themes – in this context, that little figure sounds disconsolate. The quartet concludes with a finale full of slashing energy and high spirits.

Quartet for Piano & Strings in E-flat major, Op. 87

Dvořák was compulsive about dating his compositions. As he began work, he would note the date at the top of the blank page, and as he finished, he wrote the date at the end of the manuscript. And so we know that he began the *Piano Quartet in E-flat major* on July 10, 1889, and completed it six weeks later on August 19. This was a very rich time in Dvořák's life:

surrounded by a large and happy family, he was composing steadily, conducting, and being honored throughout Europe. Earlier in 1889 he had seen his opera *The Jacobin* premiered in Prague, and a week after completing the *Piano Quartet* he would begin composing one of his finest works, the *Eighth Symphony*. The composition of the *Piano Quartet* went well, and on August 10, Dvořák wrote enthusiastically to his publisher: “I’ve now already finished three movements of a new piano quartet and the Finale will be ready in a few days. As I expected it came easily and the melodies just surged upon me. Thank God!”

The second of Dvořák’s two piano quartets, the *Quartet in E-flat major* has been much admired for its variety of moods, the deft fusion of piano and string instruments, and Dvořák’s easy modulation between surprising keys. Other critics have been less generous, and some have criticized this music for its quasi-orchestral writing and huge effects, one of them even going so far as to call this quartet “disagreeably melodramatic.” But one person’s disagreeable melodrama is another’s beauty, and for every critic who has complained about this music’s grand sweep, countless audiences have loved the quartet just for that excitement.

The opening *Allegro con fuoco* is aptly named, for there is plenty of fire here: at the very beginning the strings make a fierce declaration, only to be answered by the piano’s almost whimsical reply. Both these ideas will figure importantly in the development, and the yoking together of such dissimilar ideas is typical of the quartet. The viola, Dvořák’s own instrument, has the haunting second theme, and the movement fluctuates between the quietly lyrical and the dramatic.

In a similar way, the *Lento* is mercurial in its mood shifts. Sectional in structure and unusually long, it is based on five different themes: the cello’s wistful opening quickly gives way to a heated episode introduced by the piano, which in turn is followed by sequences of varied tonality and mood. The third movement is in ABA form, but this is no minuet. The outer sections are based on a waltz rhythm, and some have heard Eastern influences here: the piano’s waltz tune sings languorously, and Dvořák soon has it tinkling in high registers in imitation of the Hungarian cimbalon. The trio dashes along agreeably on its omnipresent dotted rhythm.

The *Finale* is the movement most often criticized for sounding orchestral. A dramatic unison passage launches the movement on its vigorous way, and once again a lovely viola melody lessens tensions – in fact, some of the most attractive music in the quartet comes in this movement’s quiet passages. The coda begins quietly but soon gathers force, and the quartet rushes to a knock-out conclusion.