

Music@Menlo *LIVE*

7 Maps and Legends

Music@Menlo's eighth season, *Maps and Legends*, explored a wide compass of times, places, and universal phenomena. The season's offerings ranged from programs that celebrated a nation's identity to music composed in response to the changing of the seasons and the trauma of war. The 2010 edition of Music@Menlo *LIVE* chronicles this fascinating journey, preserving for listeners the exceptional performances that made *Maps and Legends* such a memorable experience.

Disc 7 celebrates "Dvořák's America." Universally renowned at the end of the nineteenth century as one of the supreme composers of his generation as well as the greatest champion of his native Czech music, Antonín Dvořák received an invitation in 1891 to lead the National Conservatory in New York and guide America's composers in discovering their own musical language. With the help of the African American singer and composer Harry T. Burleigh, whose arrangements and performances of Negro spirituals Dvořák lovingly absorbed, the Czech master became fluent in the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic traits of American folk styles. During the summer of 1893, while living in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa, Dvořák captured the essence of Americana in two classic chamber works: his Opus 96 String Quartet and Opus 97 String Quintet, both nicknamed *American*. The recording also illustrates the evolution of American song since Dvořák's time, featuring the great American composer Samuel Barber's Four Songs, op. 13.



Erin Keefe, Arnaud Sussmann, violins; Laurence Lesser, cello; Liz Freivogel, Beth Guterman, violas

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904): String Quartet no. 12 in F Major, op. 96, *American* (1893)

The *American* Quartet's beguiling evocation of the Midwestern countryside that has endeared it to generations of music lovers spills forth immediately from the first page of the score. The first theme bubbles with a folksy charm derived from Dvořák's use of the pentatonic scale, a five-note scale characteristic of much of the world's folk music. But the effect of the *American* Quartet ultimately relies on Dvořák's singular voice more than on his use of folk-like scales and melodies. In a manner reminiscent of his mentor Johannes Brahms, Dvořák fashions seemingly innocuous musical ideas into a

thrilling composition. Witness the *Allegro ma non troppo*'s development section, in which the movement's idyllic melodies are turned into Romantic *Sturm und Drang*.

The *Lento* is given over to a heartfelt aria, sung as a duet between the first violin and cello.

The third movement cleverly documents Dvořák's circumstances as a Czech expatriate. The joyful music that begins the scherzo emulates the song of the scarlet tanager, an American songbird that Dvořák observed in Spillville—but the syncopated rhythm also recalls the Czech folk dances that infuse much of Dvořák's music. The trio section slows the exuberant dance melody to a plaintive sigh, thus transforming a joyous evocation of Bohemia into melancholy nostalgia.

The brisk final movement echoes the first in its beguiling and uncomplicated mien. Its propulsive rhythmic figure has been thought by some to reflect Native American drumming, by others, the trains that so delighted Dvořák on his cross-country travels. A hymn-like chorale interrupts the finale's exuberant gait: a nod, perhaps, to Dvořák's sometime activity as organist for Spillville's Saint Wenceslaus Church, still the oldest Czech Catholic parish in the United States.

HENRY T. BURLEIGH (1866–1949): “By an’ By,” “Deep River,” “Wade in de Water”

Dvořák had invaluable help in getting to know the repertory of spirituals during his time in America: the African American composer and singer Henry Thacker Burleigh introduced him to numerous spirituals, singing them for him to demonstrate their proper style and character. “I’d accompany myself on the piano,” Burleigh wrote. “Dvořák especially liked ‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen’ and ‘Go Down Moses.’ He asked hundreds of questions about Negro life. He would jump up and ask: ‘Did they really sing it that way?’”

In addition to being a revelatory interpreter of spirituals, Burleigh made arrangements of them, which have become among the standard editions for generations of singers.

These arrangements provide a lens showing Dvořák's experience of American music while he was composing his own “American” works.

SAMUEL BARBER (1910–1981): Four Songs, op. 13 (1940)

Barber's significant oeuvre of vocal music, comprising songs, choral music, and three operas, demonstrates an instinctive understanding of the voice. The Four Songs, op. 13, reflect the qualities that have endeared Barber equally to singers and audiences: melodic eloquence, deference to text in rhythm and harmony, and overall sensitivity to the nuances of vocal composition. The first song of the cycle, “A Nun Takes the Veil,” illustrates the spiritual ecstasy of Gerard Manley Hopkins's “Heaven-Haven” with enraptured, harp-like arpeggios in the piano accompaniment. “Nocturne,” the cycle's finale, answers with a meditation on romantic ecstasy: the perhaps forbidden union described in the poem by Frederic Prokosch (“None to watch us, none to warn/But the blind eternal night”) finds voice in Barber's juxtaposition of sweet melody and mysterious harmony. In between come “The Secrets of the Old,” whose rhythmic quirks accommodate the natural meter of Yeats's text, and Barber's most famous and arguably most enchanting song, “Sure on This Shining Night.”

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK: Quintet for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello in E-flat Major, op. 97, American (1893)

Dvořák's *American* Quintet shares creative circumstances and general expression with the *American* Quartet, its elder sibling by roughly one month. Like the quartet, the quintet reflects Dvořák's absorption of American music in the character of its melodies and spacious textures. The Kneisel Quartet, with the violist Max Zach, premiered the quintet in New York on January 12, 1894, alongside the quartet, which had debuted in Boston less than two weeks prior. A review in the *New York Times* read:

Both compositions are as fresh and melodious in subject matter, as clear in form, as spontaneous in development, and as flexible in part writing as the

best works of the two earliest quartet writers [i.e., Haydn and Mozart]...[T]hat spirit of eternal sunshine in music which Rubinstein acclaims as the soul of Mozart's music is in every measure. These compositions are not of to-day; they are of yesterday. They are of the dawn of art, with the freshness of the dew and the voices of the birds in them. They are pure, sweet, wholesome, and from first to last, all through and through, beautiful.

In them Dr. Dvořák has once again proclaimed his belief in the possibility of imparting an American character to music. His themes are redolent of the cotton fields and the river valleys of the South...and in the finale of the quintet we are brought to realize that Dr. Dvořák has heard some of our music hall ditties and decided that they are of the people. Here, indeed, he approaches triviality: but it is the trifling of a genius that has found a new plaything. Whatever may be the general opinion as to the Americanism of these works, it can be safely said that Europe has given us nothing which resembles them in thematic material, and we may be thankful that Dr. Dvořák came to America if he was able to find inspiration here for such lovely compositions.

The quintet's *Larghetto* movement comes with an interesting side note: among his "American" projects, Dvořák apparently planned to compose a new national anthem. The second half of the slow movement's theme (followed by five subsequent variations) is said to be based on sketches for that project: it includes a chorale passage originally intended to set the words "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty..."

—Patrick Castillo



About Music@Menlo

Music@Menlo is an internationally acclaimed three-week summer festival and institute that combines world-class chamber music performances, extensive audience engagement with artists, intensive training for preprofessional musicians, and efforts to enhance and broaden the chamber music community of the San Francisco Bay Area. An immersive and engaging experience centered around a distinctive array of programming, Music@Menlo enriches its core concert programs with numerous opportunities for in-depth learning to intensify audiences' enjoyment and understanding of the music and provide meaningful ways for aficionados and newcomers of all ages to explore classical chamber music.