Notes on the Program
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String Sextet in A major, Op. 48
Antonín Dvořák

Antonín Dvořák wrote his first piece of music when he was 14 or 15 and he continued to compose during his ensuing decade-and-a-half in Prague, while squeaking by as a violinist in a theater orchestra, a piano teacher, and a church organist. He received his first real break as a composer in 1874 when he was awarded the Austrian State Stipendium, a grant to assist young, poor, gifted musicians — which defined Dvořák’s status at the time. In fact, he had to present an official certificate of poverty in order to apply.

That he was given the award for four (perhaps five) years running underscores how little his financial situation was improving. Johannes Brahms served on the Stipendium panel and recommended the emerging composer to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock. Brahms wrote to Simrock in December 1877, in a letter accompanying the score of Dvořák’s Moravian Duets:

As for the State Stipendium, for several years I have enjoyed works sent in by Antonín Dvořák (pronounced Dvorschak) of Prague. ... Dvořák has written all manner of things: operas (Czech), symphonies, quartets, piano pieces. In any case, he is a very talented man. Moreover, he is poor! I ask you to think about it! The duets will show you what I mean, and could be a “good article.”

Simrock lost no time publishing the Moravian Duets, commissioning a collection of Slavonic Dances, and contracting a first option on Dvořák’s new works.

Dvořák composed his String Sextet, his only work in that genre, in just two weeks, from May 14 through May 27, 1878 — so just as his reputation as a composer was beginning to rise. However, he was very experienced with chamber composition, having already produced nine string quartets, a string quintet, four piano trios, a piano quartet, and a piano quintet, not counting works that are lamentably lost, such as a clarinet quintet and an octet for strings and winds. His String Sextet was embraced with interest. Already that July, the revered violinist Joseph Joachim, a key player in the Brahms circle, organized a private performance of Dvořák’s Sextet (which the composer attended), and that November his ensemble, joined by a pair of colleagues, took the piece public in a concert in Berlin.

On January 11, 1879, Dvořák wrote to Simrock, expressing that he was making good on his promise to provide new works for the publisher’s consideration. He listed a number of his latest, including “my new Sextet, which Mr. Brahms read through at my place with great interest.” Simrock promptly asked

In Short

Born: September 8, 1841, in Mühlhausen (Nelahozeves), Bohemia (now Czech Republic)
Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague
Work composed: May 14–27, 1878
World premiere: November 9, 1879, in Berlin, in a concert of the Joachim Quartet plus friends, played by violinists Joseph Joachim and Heinrich de Ahna, violinists Emanuel Wirth and Heinrich Jacobsen, and cellists Robert Hausmann and Hugo Dechert
Estimated duration: ca. 33 minutes
him to send a manuscript copy and — presumably after the composer effected some requested tightening — published it in September 1879. It was quickly picked up internationally, logging performances in London, Dresden, Cologne, Prague, Wiesbaden, and New York. An 1880 review in London’s *Daily Telegraph* weighed in with lofty tones:

We find originality in the character of its themes, especially in those of the second movement (elegy), the third (furiant), and the fourth, which is an air (varied) of the broadest national type ... . Not less original than the themes are, in many cases, their harmonic treatment, while nowhere is the higher mission of music neglected, in virtue of which it appeals to inner sense at the same time that it confers physical and intellectual gratification. ... Some of the details confer upon the work an exquisite piquancy and grace; and a first hearing of the entire composition involves a series of surprises, so unexpected and new are the abounding touches of the master’s hand. Clearly we must know much more of Dvořák, and that soon.

The second and third movements are cast respectively as Czech folk dances, the dumka and the furiant. When Slavonic composers began adopting dumkas for “classical” settings, they crystallized the dance as a work of ruminative character but with cheerful sections interspersed along the way. Sometimes the furiant, an energetic Bohemian folk dance, involves the alternation of triple and duple meters, but this furiant is all in triple time; most other composers would have called it a scherzo.

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**String Sextets from All Around**

Oh to have been a fly on the wall when Brahms read through Dvořák’s String Sextet, a session Dvořák mentioned to their publisher Fritz Simrock in his letter of January 11, 1879. About two months later, Dvořák requested that Simrock send him a copy of Brahms’s String Sextet in B-flat major, which had doubtless been referenced in that earlier read-through; he would certainly have wanted to dig into that score.

In fact, Brahms had written two such works, the one in B-flat major (Op. 18, premiered in 1860), which Dvořák was requesting, and one in G major (Op. 36, unveiled in 1866). Why Dvořák did not ask to see both is anyone’s guess, since Simrock had published both. In any case, Brahms’s sextets were the supreme examples of the genre at that time. Yet they were not the only ones. The earliest prominent examples, by Luigi Boccherini (an Italian employed in Spain), date to 1776, and more recent examples had been written by an international assortment of figures, including the Hungarian Mihály Mosonyi (1844), the German Louis Spohr (1848), the Russians Alexander Borodin (1860-61) and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1876), the Danish Niels Gade (1865), and the Swiss-born German Joachim Raff (1872), although there is no evidence that Dvořák was familiar with any of those works.

*From top: Brahms and Dvořák, ca. 1879*