

The Prague Quartet

Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic, has always been famous for the excellence of its string quartets, and the Prague Quartet has for many years held its place at the top of the roster. Founded in 1955 by first violinist Bretislav Novotny, the quartet soon won recognition throughout Europe. Today the group performs extensively around the world.

The repertoire of the Prague Quartet is rich in the works of notable Czech composers, including Dvořák, along with the full range of standard works for string quartet.

Gloria Saarinen

New Zealand born pianist Gloria Saarinen is a soloist, chamber musician, impresario, television host (seven Can Pro Gold medals), recording artist and artistic director of the first Esther Honens International Piano Competition and the Okanagan International Festival of the Arts. She has won the Harriet Cohen Commonwealth Award and the Alberta Government Achievement Award. In 1994 she received "The Newsmakers of the Year Award (Canadian Trio)" from the Chamber of Commerce and Press Club, Minnesota.

She tours regularly throughout Canada, the United States and Europe as a soloist and with The Canadian Trio and The Chinook Trio. Her world tours as a soloist cover four continents and as many as 150 concerts in a season.



Dvořák
Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81

Mozart
Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, K. 478

The Prague Quartet
Gloria Saarinen, Piano

The Prague Quartet

Bretislav Novotny, *violin*

Karel Pribyl, *violin*

Lubomir Maly, *viola*

Jan Sirc, *cello*

Gloria Saarinen, *piano*

Antonín Dvořák

Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81

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|----|--------------------------------|-------|
| 1. | Allegro ma non tanto | 10:00 |
| 2. | Dumka. Andante con moto | 10:39 |
| 3. | Scherzo (Furiant) Molto vivace | 4:11 |
| 4. | Finale. Allegro | 7:47 |

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, K. 478

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|----|---------|-------|
| 5. | Allegro | 11:03 |
| 6. | Andante | 7:42 |
| 7. | Rondo | 7:13 |

Antonín Dvořák • Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81

In 1887 when Dvořák came to write his Op. 81 Piano Quintet, he was well practised in chamber music. He had, in fact, written another piano quintet fifteen years earlier.

But now he was at the height of his powers and of his fame. He was not only established in his native Bohemia, but he was also becoming a world celebrity. He had just finished a triumphant visit to the British Isles, and was considering a journey to the United States.

The quintet was an immediate success and still sounds perennially fresh. Alec Robertson describes it as "...simply one of the most perfect chamber music works in existence; perfect in that it accomplishes perfectly what it sets out to do, perfect as a whole and in all its parts." And the New Grove accurately describes this quintet as having "...the quintessential features of Dvořák's music: melody and counter-melody, vital rhythm, varied and colourful scoring, a variety of moods ranging from sorrow to gaiety, and the skill of a craftsman allied to the sensitivity of an artist."

In this quintet there is no mere stringing together of the great tunes that Dvořák wrote so well. Instead there is a marvelously structured composition shining with apparent spontaneity that hides brilliantly engineered formal plans.

The symphonic first movement demands a high level of energy from the players. At times the piano solos, only to take over an orchestral role, now massive, now gentle. At the same time, the string writing

is not what you usually find in string quartets. Each player in turn, solos, joins another player in a duet, or orchestrally reinforces its partners. There is no such thing as “second fiddle” here.

Remarkably, nothing in this huge musical tapestry is lost. Dvořák has an uncanny sense for spacing string instruments, and he has never written more felicitously and tellingly for the piano. In the opening bar, the piano floats gently around a broad, brooding cello solo. This is quickly brushed aside by the remaining strings who toy with it for a while, and then permit the viola to announce another equally poignant tune. Dvořák now allows room for improvisatory fantasies so surprising and so delightful that they alone are worth the price of admission!

Next, the Dumka, a meditation, which stands alone for sheer poetry. Undulating cross-currents shimmer like an impressionist image. But the opening tune turns out to be (wait a minute!) the introduction to the opening tune, played by a languishing viola. But if this is the main tune, what about this new piano tune? Or, for that matter, what about another new tune from the strings? Fortunately, the music is its own justification. But now, with a quickening of tempo, another strange and haunting tune appears, with an accompaniment as tricky as a jig-saw puzzle. Variations of these two sections and a lovely vivace interlude complete the movement.

A scherzo follows, called by Dvořák a Furiant, that is to say a bucolic peasant-like piece: not furious, as the name might suggest. Even so, the scherzo is fiendishly fast, but always light and frivolous.

The last movement captures some of the spirit of Dvořák’s homeland. The tempo is controlled to help sustain the riches of the counterpoint. Throughout, syncopated accompaniments and reinforced curious accents sparkle with vigour and excitement. At the end, Dvořák shows all his mastery in a gutsy, strong climax to this superb work of art.

Mozart • Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor, K. 478

In 1785 Mozart made an agreement with the publisher and composer Anton Hoffmeister. For a fee, Mozart was to provide three pieces of chamber music suitable for amateurs to play in their homes. By October 16, he had finished the first of these works, the piano quartet in G minor.

Unfortunately, the work was not a success with amateur musicians, who found it too difficult. Hoffmeister released Mozart from the contract and let him keep the money on condition that he should not write the other two quartets contracted for. Although Hoffmeister paid for three works and only received one, he got more than he bargained for, since this piano quartet is one of the greatest of Mozart’s works.

It was not only the technical difficulty of this highly charged and compressed quartet that must have frightened off the public. Mozart had, in effect, invented a new musical form. There is absolutely no significant earlier work for this combination of instruments. There are a fair number later on, all through the nineteenth century, but Mozart’s G minor piano quartet still stands at the head of the line as fresh and new as it did two hundred years ago.

The key of G minor was a favourite of Mozart, and when he chooses this key, he produces some of his most passionate, tragic and eloquent music. Throughout this quartet, the music is deeply serious, the writing for each instrument complex and intricately interwoven. In six terse notes Mozart lays the matter before us. The piano interjects a conciliatory response. But it is to no avail. Eventually even the piano's flurries add to the overall intensity of the prevailing mood. When the second group of tunes arrives it is a relief to be piloted into less turbulent waters. Soon dramatic scales herald a return to the fateful first motive and the powerful coda which ends the movement.

The gentle andante which follows is spelled out by the solo piano, then ornamented and caressed by the strings. Wonderful silences separate the serenely unfolding lines.

The finale is a lively rondo in which the theme is set down, taken up, passed about from one to another, all bristling with wit and courage; in short Mozart offers us a brilliantly animated discussion chaired by the Master himself.

Notes by Lister Sinclair

Credits

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