



PROGRAM NOTES

Takács Quartet
Marc-André Hamelin, piano
January 23, 2024 – 7:30 p.m.
Disciples Christian Church

Italian Serenade

Hugo Wolf

Born: Windischgrätz, Austrian Empire [now Slovenjgradec, Slovenia], 1860

Died: Vienna, 1903

Composed: 1887

Hugo Wolf, the great master of the German art song, wrote only a few works of purely instrumental music during his tragically short life. Among these, the *Italian Serenade* for string quartet stands out both as the most brilliant and the best known. Wolf, steeped in the music of Richard Wagner and the German poetic tradition, was equally attracted to the Mediterranean region, witness his Italian and Spanish Songbooks. Like those song cycles, the Serenade also seeks to capture the sunlit southern regions of Europe that Wolf himself never had a chance to visit.

The one-movement work is cast in a modified rondo form in which the contrast between the rondo theme and the two episodes is tempered by strong thematic connections. In his biography of Wolf, Frank Walker gave a vivid description of the work, imagining a romantic story behind the music. The opening clearly evokes the strumming of guitars with which an enamored young man serenades his beloved. The expressive passage following the

main theme represents the voice of the passionate lover. The cello recitative after the first return of the rondo theme is the man's thrice-repeated plea for the lady's heart, surrounded by the "mocking comments" of the other instruments. Another episode—in turn humorous and dance-like—ensues, before the final return of the rondo theme and a coda, which brings back "the twang and the drone of guitars."

Five years after completing the *Italian Serenade*, Wolf arranged it for small orchestra. At that point, he thought of expanding the work by composing some additional movements, but these never progressed beyond preliminary sketches. Thus, the Serenade remained what it was: a delightful single movement that shows the brightest side of this complex and tormented composer. (Having contracted syphilis as a young man, Wolf suffered a complete mental breakdown in 1897 and ended his days in an insane asylum six years later). Romantic passion and a brooding, melancholy

disposition always co-existed with an unbridled sense of humor in Wolf's music. In the *Italian Serenade* he gave the first two a day off and

enjoyed the sunshine, dreaming only happy dreams.

Piano Quintet in A minor Florence Price

Born: Little Rock, AR, 1887

Died: Chicago, 1953

Composed: 1936, rev. 1952

The music of Florence Price, who was born in the year the other two works on our program were written, has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance in recent years, especially since 2009, when a large cache of manuscripts was discovered in the attic of an abandoned house that used to belong to the composer. Price was one of those composers who heeded Dvořák's advice from thirty years earlier and created a characteristically American idiom based on Black musical elements. As a native of Arkansas and a graduate of the New England Conservatory, she was thoroughly at home both in the European classical tradition and in the African-American folk music of the South.

Price's First Symphony was performed by the Chicago Symphony (a first for an African-American woman!) and many of her other works were positively received as well. Yet ultimately her late Romantic idiom did not find favor amidst the prevailing modernist climate. Her long-lost manuscripts came to light just at the right moment, when performers and critics found a new appreciation for music previously branded "conservative."

It appears that Price's Piano Quintet was written in 1936 but remained unperformed then. The composer revised the score in 1952, apparently planning to take it with her to Paris, where she was going to receive a major compositional prize. Tragically, she fell ill just before her scheduled departure, and died soon

afterwards. The quintet continued to languish; yet since its rediscovery, it has quickly found its place in the American chamber repertoire.

Many of the four-movement work's melodies are based, at least partially, on the pentatonic scale (playable on the black keys of the piano), which constitutes a shared heritage of many musical cultures around the world. Each member of the quintet is given important solo moments as those themes are developed. After a lyrical *Allegro non troppo* and a heartfelt *Andante con moto*, the third movement is a *juba*—or "pattin' juba," a popular dance of Black people from the antebellum South.

The dance was memorably described in the autobiography of Solomon Northup (1807-63), *Twelve Years a Slave*, on which Steve McQueen's Oscar-winning movie of the same title (2013) was based. Northup wrote: "The patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing." It is not hard to recognize the origins of the ragtime in this high-spirited dance, whose characteristic syncopations create a lively mood from beginning to end.

The last movement of Price's Piano Quintet is a vigorous scherzo in perpetual motion that ends the work on a cheerful note.

Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81

Antonín Dvořák

Born: Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841

Died: Prague, 1904

Composed: 1887

The German music publisher Fritz Simrock felt that the Czech form of his star composer's first name, *Antonín*, did not look good on the title page of a respectable German score. He tried hard to persuade Dvořák to use the German form, *Anton*, instead, but the patriotic composer insisted on the two extra letters. They finally struck a compromise by abbreviating the name to a neutral and non-committal *Ant*.

In a way, Dvořák's entire life and career revolved around the issue of Anton vs. Antonín. As a proud Bohemian whose country was part of the Austrian Empire, he always resisted the German culture of the rulers. And still, the road to recognition led through Simrock and the German-speaking world—at least until Dvořák was able to bypass that world by going first to England and then to the United States.

Yet Dvořák was much more than a Czech nationalist. His unique contribution lies precisely in the fact that he was able to express his Czech identity within what was essentially a Germanic tradition – forms of symphonic and chamber music he had inherited from Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann.

In his greatest works, Dvořák found the perfect balance between the nationalist Antonín and the universalist Anton. The A-major Quintet, for instance, overflows with beautiful melodies in a Czech folk style, and contains both a *dumka* and a *furiant* (see below). At the same time, it is without a doubt the only successor to the great piano quintets of Schumann and Brahms that is worthy of the great models in every respect.

The first movement opens with an unforgettable cello melody. The second theme, equally lyrical, is introduced by the viola. Both themes are eventually developed by all five players and acquire considerable rhythmic energy in the process, although the character of the entire movement still remains

predominantly lyrical. Only the coda strikes, all of a sudden, a more heroic tone.

The second movement is a *dumka*—a type of melancholy folksong of Ukrainian origin, that inspired Dvořák in many of his works, most famously in the “Dumky” Piano Trio of 1891. The trio contains six *dumka* movements, greatly varied in tempo and mood. The *dumka* of the A-major Quintet manages to fit some of the contrasting characters into a single movement: the brooding “Andante con moto” of the opening is followed by a second idea in a more fluid tempo. The opening melody is heard again, first in the original tempo and then in the form of a “Vivace” variation. The first two segments (the brooding opening and the more fluid second idea) return, and the movement ends *molto tranquillo* (“very calmly”).

The third movement is titled “Scherzo-Furiant”—a double label reflecting, once again, the Anton-Antonín duality. To German ears, this movement fits neatly in the category of the scherzo, familiar since the days of Beethoven. Yet Dvořák's immediate inspiration was the Czech folk dance, the *furiant*, whose classical pedigree was established by Bedřich Smetana's landmark opera *The Bartered Bride*. The most important characteristic of the furiant is its metric ambiguity resulting from the frequent duple articulations within an essentially triple meter (*one-two-three one-two-three one-two one-two one-two*). Dvořák's furiant in the quintet is based on two dance melodies, one energetic and one more tender. The trio (middle section) is in a slower tempo but its theme is derived from the energetic motif heard earlier. The recapitulation of the Scherzo is much abbreviated.

The last movement has the inflection of another folk dance, the *polka*, embedded in a rondo scheme with lyrical episodes and a lively

fugato (section with contrapuntal imitation).
The movement has a coda where the motion

momentarily slows down, only to pick up again
and end on an exuberant note.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.