

# ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)



## Cypresses (Echo of Songs) B. 152

- **Já vim, že vsladké naději (I know that in my love there is hope): Moderato (1841-1904)**
- **V tak mnohém srdci mrtvo jest (The dead heart awakes again): Allegro ma non troppo**
- **Ò duše drahá jedinká (My dearest one): Moderato**
- **And krajem vévodi lehký spánek (Maydawn over the landscape): Allegro scherzando**

*Composed: 1887*

*Approximate duration: 12 minutes*

Dvořák's gift for lyricism is much reflected in his Cypresses of 1887, originally a setting of eighteen songs on poems by Moravian poet, playwright, and novelist Gustav Pflieger Moravský (1833-1875). The poems are a twelve-piece ode to unrequited love which, in Dvořák's hands, becomes an exquisite expression of his gift for melody. The later string quartet version of twelve of the songs adds his talents for instrumental writing to his lyrical gifts. The combination is irresistibly beautiful. Apparently, the works were inspired by Dvořák's unreturned love for his piano student Josephina Čermáková, interestingly, the sister of the woman he would marry. Scholarly debate persists today on whether or not Dvořák ever got over his love for Josephina. At her death many years later, Dvořák added a quotation from the songs to the last movement of his famous B Minor Cello Concerto.

The title of each song is reflected in its musical treatment. Thus we have the lovely lyricism with an edge of sadness and tension that is expressed in "I Know That On My Love There is Hope." The minor key and repeated notes of "The Dead Heart Awakes Again" suggests a dark tension, but here death is ultimately sweet. The moving "My Dearest One" is especially effective in its simplicity and in the way Dvořák translates vocal writing for the string quartet. Each instrument has its chance to sing. The brief "Maydawn Over the Landscape" is the liveliest of this set suggesting a folk dance but still with a strong lyrical sense. © 2022 Lucy Miller Murray

# ETHEL SMYTH (1858-1944)

## String Quintet in E major, Op. 1

(for 2 violins, viola and 2 cellos)

- 7:37 I. Allegro con brio
- 2:01 II. Intermezzo. Andantino poco allegretto

- 5:45 III. Scherzo  
3:43 IV. Adagio con moto  
7:50 V. Allegro molto



Dame Ethel Mary Smyth (which rhymes with Forsyth, not Smith) was born on April 23, 1858, in Kent, to a Major-General in the Royal Artillery who would later be strongly opposed to her pursuit of a musical career.

Despite her father's disagreement, she studied privately with Alexander Ewing before moving to the famous Leipzig Conservatory, where she was able to meet such celebrities of the day as Dvorak, Grieg, and Tchaikovsky. Surprisingly, she spent only a year there, "disillusioned with the low standard of teaching", says Wikipedia, and continued her studies, again privately, under Heinrich von Herzogenberg, through whom she met Clara Schumann and Brahms.

Smyth was also a figure in the women's suffrage movement and apparently had a career of sorts toward that cause, giving up music for a few years to spend more time there, even being arrested at least once, spending a few months in prison as a result. Ultimately, though, as the opening quote expressed, life was not easy as a female composer, although she did have a large degree of success. Her opera *Der Wald*, staged by the world famous Metropolitan Opera in New York, was the only opera by a female composer to be staged there. Smyth's *The Wreckers* was also considered by some critics to be "the most important English opera composed during the period between Purcell and Britten," which is quite a compliment.

But today we will look at her opus one, the very beginning of this fine career. The quintet is for two violins, viola, and two cellos, in five movements, and was published in 1884. This piece very much has the warmth, approachability, and simple beauty of the 'American' works of Dvorak while predating those works by a decade, and while still retaining something unique to Smyth.

The first movement, in sonata form, gives us two distinct themes that are equally charming, and the tension seems to arise from trying to decide which is the more beautiful, as they come and go and morph in the development. The writing is pleasant, tasteful, expressive, reserved, fragrant, full of detail and life. Just wait until the second theme appears. We've been convinced that the first is the gem of the piece, bowled over by its beauty, and yet it's as if a curtain is drawn and yet more sunlight washes in. Just gorgeous. There's such perfection at every turn, every gesture, and one can perhaps hear, just in this movement alone, how the composer admired Brahms. Just a stunning first movement, and a real chance to relish an exposition repeat and recapitulation.

The second movement of this five-movement work is an andantino, an intermezzo of sorts, at only about two minutes in length, full of pizzicato and slightly darker, more mellow charms. Again, we hear a stunning, mature delicacy in the writing for the ensemble, the color and texture that emerge are multifaceted and intoxicating but not in the least overwhelming or too dense. It just sweeps you right along, and after the quiet ending of this small departure from the typical four-movement structure, we find ourselves in the central scherzo and trio of the work.

It's vibrant and exciting, buoyant, folksy, and playful, but with the faintest echoes of the melancholy leftover from the intermezzo. The trio is like a rare glimpse of solitude, one of those moments in the day when everyone in the house is gone, and it's quiet, and there's sunshine and a breeze, and you can heave a relaxed sigh before life starts going again. The bouncy scherzo returns, and I realize this piece leaves me with such a simple satisfaction, an appreciation of the pure unadulterated beauty and sheer exquisiteness of the writing here.

Here [in the Adagio con moto] we hear Smyth committing to a darker, more somber mood, something we got a glimpse of in the intermezzo, and while this movement is one of the shorter of the work, it too is effective, convincing, and not removed from the overall direction of the piece.

In contrast with that we have the finale, and how, pray, does one finish a work like this? Beautifully, of course. We begin with a fugue, perhaps the most rigorous musical statement in the whole work, but even here, it's not academic or dry. In fact, at every turn the music is bursting with life, with energy, with perfectly-executed, balanced emotion and passion. ©2017 Fugue for Thought Blog

## BELA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

### **String Quartet No. 1, Op. 7, BB 52 Sz.40**

(for 2 violins, viola and cello)

- 9:13 I. Lento
- 9:11 II. Allegretto [Poco a poco accelerando all'allegretto]
- 11:18 III. Introduzione. Allegro - Allegro vivace



For the young Béla Bartók, the period of 1906-1909 marked a time of enormous change, experimentation, and turmoil.

At the beginning of this period, he might fairly be described as a disciple and admirer of the German composer Richard Strauss. By its end he was conversant with the works of Debussy, thanks to his friend Zoltán Kodály, and had embarked on his career as one of the earliest ethnomusicologists, collecting and recording folk music in his notebooks and on Thomas Edison's wax cylinder. Folk music was also becoming a central force in Bartók's own compositions, whether in the form of direct quotations or more obliquely. In later years, his own ideal as a composer would be to absorb the spirit of folk music so internally that his writing would simply carry its essence, rather than alluding to it artificially on the surface; he hoped to construct the edifice of his own music on the foundation of the basic expressive truths that he perceived in these melodies. Over the years, he was to range all over eastern Europe and as far as Algeria in his quest to collect and catalogue folk tunes.

In his personal life, too, Bartók was experiencing upheaval. He rejected the Roman Catholicism of his upbringing and proclaimed himself an atheist, a state of belief that he was to profess for several years. At the same time, he was passionately in love with the talented young violinist Stefi Geyer, a pupil of Jenő Hubay. He wrote her long letters in which he railed against Roman Catholicism and the middle class; Catholic and middle-class herself, she may not have responded well to his point of view. In the end, his love was unrequited, and the Violin Concerto that he had written for her was locked away in a drawer and not published until after the composer's death. It was 1908; within a year of their parting, Bartók married another girl.

In the meantime, he had composed his first String Quartet. It is arguably his first masterpiece as well and depicts vividly the warring impulses and influences from this time in the composer's life. In a letter to Geyer, he described the first movement as a "funeral dirge"; the opening motif, shared between the violins, is a melody from the Concerto he wrote for her, and so this movement may symbolize the death of that passion. It is a movement written certainly from a full heart and a large soul, pensive and grieving; the music is suffused throughout with a sense of yearning and loss. The rhythmic cadence and the harmonic feeling still carry a flavor of Germanic Romanticism, as do the two monumental climaxes.

It is a truism that youth will recover more quickly from a blow than advanced age. Certainly, as the last sad notes of the first movement are fading in the violins, there is already evidence of new life in the viola and the cello. Moving seamlessly into the second movement, we are lifted by a gentle *accelerando* to a new state of grace, a lilting, dancing world that is miles distant from the heavy burden of the previous one. It is probably not meaningful to say that the music of this movement feels "more like Bartók"; but it is hard now to hear the imprint of a Strauss or a Bruckner. Twisting and twirling from lighter textures to darker ones, now singing airily, now stamping with great force, turning easily from major and minor harmonies to completely atonal ones, and back again: before our eyes a composer is finding a voice, integrating seemingly disparate influences into a taut and compelling narrative.

The second movement reaches an ethereal and quiet ending, only to be interrupted by silliness: a noisy tableau that evokes three mischievous children (the upper strings) taunting a grumpy old man (the cello). Once this brief encounter has played itself out, we are ushered into the third movement proper. This is energetic music with a sometimes rustic flavor, evoking the feeling of a peasant dance. Although there is plenty of tension and urgency in the air, the prevailing mood is one of high jinks and good humor. We hear, too, the influence of the folk music that Bartók was beginning to catalogue: the two climactic passages of the movement, set in a broader tempo, feature a melody very much like the pentatonic Magyar folk songs he had collected that year. The composer was still quite a few years away from the period when he would aspire to subsume the folk idiom into his creative bloodstream; this is still the music of a man visiting the countryside, fascinated by the exotic otherness of the folk melodies he encounters. But at the same time, we can feel that he is hooked. Under the quaintness, the humor and charm that sometimes verges on the precious, there is an authentic response: the composer of these rhythms, these textures and these intervals has just begun to dent the surface and will be digging ever deeper in future works.

Note by Misha Amory