

# Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Quartet in G Minor, K. 478

*Allegro*

*Andante*

*Rondo. Allegro*

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** is regarded today as the most universal composer in the history of Western music, along with J.S. Bach. He excelled in every genre current in his time and his music is distinguished by its melodic beauty, its perfect forms, rich harmony and interesting textures. A child prodigy, his experiences travelling through Europe left their marks on his personality as well as on his music: his mature musical idiom represents a homogenous synthesis of stylistic elements from a great variety of sources. Mozart's greatest achievements were accomplished in his chamber music for strings, his piano concertos and his operas.

From a historical perspective, the genre of the piano quartet is generally thought of as a descendant of the baroque trio sonata for two violins, cello, and harpsichord. With the evolution of the keyboard instrument came the emancipation of the piano part, and the second violin was eventually replaced by the viola. In Mozart's output however, the novel genre of the piano quartet takes on a very personal meaning and value. Between 1782 and 1785 he had composed 11 piano concertos (mostly for his personal use as a celebrated virtuoso in Vienna) and six string quartets that were dedicated to the great Joseph Haydn, in whom Mozart had found a deeply appreciative, fatherly friend. Mozart's first piano quartet in G Minor, from the year 1785, quite naturally seeks to merge his outstanding achievements in the genres of the concerto and the quartet. Thus symphonic dialogue and brilliant virtuoso gestures on one hand, and subtle refinement and intimacy on the other, are beautifully synthesized and account for the enduring charm of this work.

But, at the height of his success as a piano virtuoso, the composer's visionary artistic goals started to diverge too far from the receptive capacity of his audience, and Mozart seems to have ventured too far ahead of the taste of his time... His new publisher, Hoffmeister, who immediately and enthusiastically produced the G Minor Quartet, is also reported to have protested against its technical difficulty: it did not sell well, because it was too difficult for use by amateurs in home music making. Thus Mozart's rising star (his opera "Le Nozze di Figaro" was in the works then as well) was kept in check by a fickle Viennese audience that did not easily grant the composer's artistic achievements financial rewards. It was in the year 1785 that Mozart felt compelled to ask friends for monetary loans, as his economic situation was deteriorating quickly.

The opening movement of the *G Minor Quartet* features the concerto-derived dramatic dialogue between piano and strings, and bears some resemblance with the two piano concertos in C and D Minor that were composed in close proximity to the quartet. The opening theme contrasts a forceful - one might even say fateful - unison gesture with a lyrical plea in the piano part, and thus the opening four measures actually contain in

themselves the conflict that usually is brought about with a second theme. The rather dark mood that permeates this first movement is relieved in the following *Andante* in Bb Major. Its simplicity and innocence resemble the sun rays melting the ice after a long winter. Gradually, the dramatic 'knot' of the first movement untangles, and within the simple two part song form, greater intimacy between the voices is achieved. The final *Rondo* bubbles with childlike playfulness and thus perfectly balances and eases the overwhelming impression that is left by the first movement's inherent drama.

The immense treasure of Mozart's musical characters has often been attributed to his extended travels all across Europe as a young child and adolescent. Certainly, these trips offered him the opportunity to absorb multitudes of musical styles: he sorted out what pleased him and discarded what didn't suit him, thanks to his enormous musical ability and infallible memory. However, a keenly sensitive and receptive person like Mozart probably found much inspiration round about him at all times. As Maynard Solomon states in his biography, Mozart was, "despite his immense productivity and devotion to his work ... not isolated from the world, and the richness and variety of his social contacts and friendships is extraordinary to contemplate".

At the end of 1784, Mozart had become a freemason, which allowed him to frequently socialize with some of the leading intellectuals, scientists, artists, and philosophers of Vienna. The liberal environment at his lodge presented no conflict with his Catholic faith, and it seems that the preoccupations of Mozart's fellow Masons were less political than philosophical in nature. Mozart's identification with Freemasonry was fuelled by the society's idealism, its undogmatic approach of religion, its humanitarian and enlightened aspirations, and its vision of salvation through love and reason.

Mozart's *G Minor Quartet* beautifully captures the composer's visionary sense of reconciliation. By merging two seemingly disparate genres and their stylistic idiosyncrasies, Mozart achieved something greater than the sum of its parts. The expressive quality of the music reached far beyond the technical accomplishment: "This quartet in G Minor presented performers with the added difficulty of dealing with unwonted earnestness, passion, and depth. For this is no longer in any sense music of mere sociability, which can be listened to superficially and with a smile." (Alfred Einstein)

Mozart, who believed deeply in the goodness of man, in the power of love and reason, aspired to write music that expressed his optimism. Thus his compositions anticipate a better world, at the same time as they contribute to its beauty.

- *Notes by Rebecca Hang*

## **William Grant Still (1895-1978)**

“Danzas de Panama” for String Quartet (1953)

*Tamborito*  
*Mejorana y Socavon*  
*Punto*  
*Cumbia y Congo*

William Grant Still grew up in Little Rock (Pulaski County) and achieved national and international acclaim as a composer of symphonic and popular music. As an African American, he broke race barriers and opened opportunities for other minorities. He was a strong advocate for the performance of works by American composers.

William Grant Still was born on May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi, the only son of William Grant Still Sr. and Carrie Lena Fambro Still. Still’s mother moved to Little Rock with her infant son shortly after the death of her husband that same year. Still and his mother lived with his grandmother, and his mother worked as a teacher. In 1904, Still’s mother married a railway postal clerk, Charles Benjamin Shepperson, whose own interest in music influenced the young Still. With Shepperson’s support, he studied violin in 1908 with violinist William Price, who lived for a short time in Little Rock.

Still attended M. W. Gibbs High School in Little Rock and graduated in 1911 as class valedictorian. That fall, he enrolled at Wilberforce University in Ohio [ ], where his mother hoped he would pursue studies in medicine. His interest in music, however, led him to leave Wilberforce in early 1915, without graduating, in order to play in bands and orchestras in Ohio.

On October 4, 1915, he married Grace Bundy. The couple had four children, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1939.

In 1916, Still was in Memphis, where he met blues musician W. C. Handy, who provided Still with the opportunity to arrange and perform with his band. The next year, he entered the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio to pursue a formal education in music. Still’s education was interrupted during World War I, when he served in the U.S. Navy. He served as a mess hall attendant and violinist for officers’ meals. He returned to Oberlin after his discharge but did not receive a degree.

Instead, in 1919, he moved to Harlem in New York City, where he worked for the Pace and Handy Music Publishing Company and performed with bands and orchestras. He also studied music with George Whitefield Chadwick, director of the New England Conservatory of Music, and Edgard Varese, the French modernist. These diverse experiences provided Still with professional contacts and valuable insight to performing, arranging, orchestrating, and composing popular and symphonic music.

*From the Black Belt* (1926), *From the Land of Dreams* (1924), *Darker America* (1924–1925), *From the Journal of a Wanderer* (1924), *La Guiablesse* (1926–1927), and *Levee Land* (1925) are

among the noteworthy works Still composed during his developmental period. The *Afro-American Symphony*, completed in 1930 and first performed in 1931 by the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra under conductor Howard Hanson, is Still's best-known composition. It was the first symphony composed by an African American that was performed by a major orchestra, and it is still performed today.

While living in New York Still met Paul Whiteman, who hired him to arrange music. When Whiteman took his orchestra to Hollywood, California, in May 1929, Still went, too. During the course of a year, Still completed more than 100 arrangements for Whiteman. Still moved permanently to Los Angeles, California in 1934.

The 1930s and 1940s proved to be quite successful for Still, as major orchestras increasingly performed his compositions.

Two days after his divorce from Grace Bundy on February 6, 1939, he married Verna Arvey in Mexico where interracial marriages were legal. Arvey was an accomplished pianist and excellent writer, talents that served Still well for over forty years. They had two children.

Still's compositions include symphonies, ballets, operas, chamber music, and works for solo instruments. Together, they number almost 200 pieces. His lengthy list of honors and awards includes: the William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement among Negroes in Music in 1928; the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1934, 1935, and 1938; the Julius Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship in 1939 and 1940; and a Freedoms Foundation Award in 1953. He received honorary degrees from the following institutions: Wilberforce University in 1936; Howard University in 1941; Oberlin College in 1947; Bates College in 1954; University of Arkansas in 1971; Pepperdine University in 1973; Peabody Conservatory of Music in 1974; and the University of Southern California in 1975.

Still's health began to decline in 1970. He spent his last years in a convalescent home and died in Los Angeles on December 3, 1978. His ashes were scattered over the Pacific Ocean.

- Excerpts from the article "William Grant Still" in *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*.

# Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

## Slavonic Dances for Piano 4 Hands

*No. 16: Sousedská. Grazioso e lento, ma non troppo, quasi tempo di Valse*

*No. 12: Dumka. Allegretto grazioso*

*No. 10: Dumka. Allegretto grazioso*

*No. 8: Furiant. Presto*

**Antonin Dvořák**, the son of a Czech butcher and innkeeper, discovered his love for music as a young child, learning to play the violin. His father, who played the zither well, nurtured his son's musical talent - until the boy expressed the desire to make music his profession. Unable to imagine how the oldest of his nine children could ever earn a living from making music, father Dvořák sent the thirteen-year-old off to the nearby town of Zlonice to learn the trade of butchery and improve his German, an important skill for all Czech subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Over the course of the next two years, living with his uncle, young Antonin completed his apprenticeship as butcher, to my knowledge the only composer in the history of Western music to be so trained. But the boy also had the good fortune to find a determined supporter in all matters musical in his German teacher: Anton Liehmann was a well-rounded musician and a strict instructor, something young Dvořák didn't mind, but expressed gratitude for. Liehmann competently taught the teenager piano, organ, viola and music theory. He also introduced Dvořák to the great music of the German tradition, in particular the music of Beethoven. When father Dvořák became suspicious, he sent his son a little further away, to the German speaking town of Kamnitz, where he lived with the family of a local miller, whose son in turn moved in with the Dvořáks. Antonin was happy in Kamnitz and quickly discovered in the church's choir director a "second Liehmann," who continued to further his studies of music, on the organ and in theory.

Upon his return home, father Dvořák insisted that the sixteen-year old practice his trade as butcher. Eventually though, he was swayed to let his talented son move to Prague, where he could study to become an organist, the most solid and practical of musical callings. For two years Dvořák attended the organ school in Prague, and earned his degree as a church musician, living all the while in abysmal poverty. After graduation (as the second best student) he looked for work in one of the many churches of Prague, but couldn't find any.

During the next decade, Dvořák would cover many pages of music manuscript paper with his creative ideas, while trying to make a living playing the viola in a small private orchestra that would entertain the patrons of various inns with waltzes, polkas and the like. When this orchestra was engaged as the theatre orchestra in 1862, Dvořák became its principal violist (one of two...) and earned a salary so meager it wouldn't even cover his very modest living expenses. In order to get by he taught individual music lessons and substituted as organist.

Outside poverty and inner growth of musical riches signified this period of twelve years which ended in 1871, when Dvořák quit his theater job because he needed more time for composition. The year saw the first public performance of one of Dvořák's works, which soon led to his first big success with the cantata "Hymn: The Heirs of the White Mountain," in a performance by the 300-member-strong *Hlahol Choir* in 1873. This setting of a patriotic poem by the Czech poet Vítězslav Hálek yielded a composition of strong emotional resonance, in which Beethovenian humanism is put in the service of Czech nationalism - with all the optimistic belief that the young composer had in humanity in general, and in his Czech people in particular!

Even though his opera "King and Charcoal Burner" was rejected shortly thereafter by the theater administration on grounds of "un-playability," the now thirty-year-old was not discouraged. In November he married his former piano student Ana Čermáková, and undeterred, set out to re-compose the entire opera...

There are a only few instances in the history of music, where rejection leads to such a complete and productive turn-around in a composer's creative approach as in Dvořák's case: he shed his (self-proclaimed) "crazy period," which was largely influenced by the music of Wagner and Liszt, and rewrote his opera in a style that must be deemed as more representative of his "true self". In November of 1874 an entirely new and improved "King and Charcoal Burner" was given at the theater and Dvořák's career took a decisive turn.

After Dvořák had won the Austrian State Stipendium (established to assist talented and impecunious artists) for several years in a row, the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick informed the young composer that the eminent Johannes Brahms, who had served on the jury, was recommending the submitted *Moravian Duets* to his own publisher, Hans Simrock. Simrock immediately proceeded to commission Dvořák to write piano duets, and thus the *Slavonic Dances* were begun in 1877 and published the next year. They were an immediate success, in their original version for piano duet, as well in the symphonic version that appeared around the same time and were performed frequently all across Europe and the U.S.. Dvořák was happy to accommodate Simrock and the music-loving public with a second set, published in 1887, and sometimes joked that the *Slavonic Dances* had bought him the cherished peace and quiet of his beloved country house, the *Villa Rusalka* at Vysoká.

- *Notes by Rebecca Hang*