

WIHAN QUARTET

Smetana & Dvořák - Works for String Quartet

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Loss of hearing forced Smetana to leave his position at the Provincial Theatre and withdraw from social life and his musical career. In 1876 he moved to his daughter Zofie's house in Jabkenice. Here he was able to enjoy the calm and quiet needed so that he could focus on his compositions. The change in his circumstances made him reflect on his life and he captured his feelings in his String Quartet No. 1 in E-minor From My Life. Smetana described the work as "intimate and private music for four instruments talking about my life". However, the opposite was true of this epic score of programme music. Until this time the techniques used by Smetana in this quartet had only been used by composers writing for symphony orchestra. He used symphonic techniques with brilliant effect for chamber music.

From 1892 to 1895 Dvořák was the director of the National Conservatory in New York. He composed many masterpieces during this time and one of them was his String Quartet in F Major, Op. 96, American. It is one of Dvořák's most played works and one of the most popular works in the chamber music repertoire. Filled with joy and optimism, Dvořák tried to capture the characteristics of American music, using pentatonic scales, syncopation and melodic themes of typical American revue music.

After the successful premiere of Dvořák's Slavonic Dances, German music publisher, Simrock, asked Dvořák to compose more pieces in the Slavonic style. At first Dvořák declined, but then changed his mind and he composed Eight Waltzes for Piano, Op.54. These waltzes are straightforward, jovial and uncomplicated. Dvořák arranged two of the waltzes for string quartet and they were premiered by an ad hoc ensemble with the first violin played by his friend Ferdinand Lachner. Simrock never published the Op.54 set of waltzes and yet they spread among musicians and became very popular. They were finally published in 1911 to mark what would have been Dvořák's 70th birthday. © Jaromir Havlik