

The Red Bank
Chamber Music Society
presents

The Verona Quartet

Jonathan Ong, Violin

Dorothy Ro, Violin

Abigail Rojansky, Viola

Dmitry Kousov, Cello

(Guest cellist in place of Jonathan Dormand)

Dvořák's "American" String Quartet

Concert Available for Viewing

Sunday, January 17, 2020 • 4:00 PM

This concert was pre-recorded because of COVID-19.

Brookdale Community College will air it on its community access TV channel (Comcast 21 and Verizon Fios 46) on Sunday, January 17 at 4:00 PM, and again on Monday, January 18 at 2:30 PM and 8:00 PM.

The concert will also be available online via the Society's website,

<http://www.rbcms.org>,

at your convenience starting at 4:00 PM on January 17

Recorded at Oberlin College

Video/Audio Production by Doug Clark

Notes on the Program

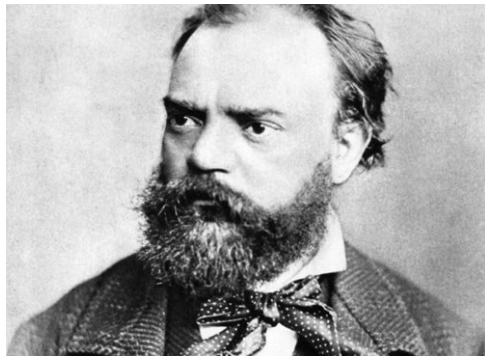
The Red Bank Chamber Music Society and the Verona Quartet had originally planned on presenting a full concert consisting of the Antonín Dvořák “American” String Quartet, as well as a Brahms String Quartet. Unfortunately, the group was only able to complete recording of the Dvořák quartet before a member of the recording staff came down with COVID-19. Because of the difficulties and uncertainties in rescheduling another recording session, the RBCMS Board of Trustees has decided to share the recording that was completed with our membership rather than waiting. Our view is that anytime is a good time to hear the “American” Quartet and that it will be especially appropriate in January in anticipation of the Martin Luther King Day celebration and the Presidential Inauguration. We hope you enjoy the performance.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

String Quartet No. 12 in F, Op. 96, “American” (1893)

- I. Allegro ma non troppo
- II. Lento
- III. Molto vivace
- IV. Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

(~25 minutes)



Son of a poor but musical butcher and innkeeper, Dvořák escaped that destiny and went instead to Prague where he began composing immediately after completing his studies at the Organ School. He was a violist in the orchestra of the National Theatre in Prague and little known as a composer until he was befriended by Brahms who recognized his rare genius and championed him throughout his life. Dvořák traveled to England in 1844 where he was immediately acclaimed and then to America in 1892 where he won fresh approval. He returned to his native Bohemia in 1895 where he became professor of composition and later director at the Prague Conservatorium until his death in 1904. He was given a national funeral and buried with other national heroes in Vyšehrad cemetery.

Chamber music permeated Dvořák’s compositional life from his Op. 1 String Quintet of 1861 to his Op. 106 String Quartet of 1896. While his love of folk music is ever present in his some forty chamber works, he was not confined in them by his nationalistic interests. More important than any national identification are the freshness, spontaneity, and sense of exploration which pervade his chamber music.

No greater compliment has been paid Dvořák than by Brahms himself when he said, “I should be glad if something occurred to me as a main idea that occurs to Dvořák only by the way.” Brahms does not stand alone in his admiration of Dvořák. Janáček said of him: You know that feeling when somebody takes the word out of your mouth before you have time to form it? That was always my experience in Dvořák’s company. In him, his person and his work were interchangeable. And then his melodies were as if he had taken them from my heart. Such a bond nothing on earth can sever.

Threading its way through all of these compliments is admiration for Dvořák’s freshness of musical ideas, particularly in terms of his beautiful melodies, colorful harmony, rich sonorities,

and rhythmic inventiveness. Interspersed are an awareness and a respect for the strong national identity and richness he brings, in different ways, to both his symphonic and chamber music outpourings.

Despite its national flavor, a word should be said about Dvořák's transcendence of nationalism in his music. For all his championing of the Czech folk spirit, Dvořák was not slave to it. Dvořák scholar Michael Beckerman noted Dvořák's own words in a Harper's Magazine essay of 1895: "I know that it is still an open question whether the inspiration derived from a few scattered melodies and folk songs can be sufficient to give a national character to higher forms of music, just as it is an open question whether national music, as such, is preferable." Beckerman poses the interesting question: "If Dvořák could put on the mask of American national composer so easily, was he putting on a similar mask when he acted as a Czech national composer?"

The specific American qualities of the so-called "American" Quartet are not easily identifiable. Some like to hear Dvořák's use of the pentatonic scale (the five black notes of the piano) in many of his themes as reminiscent of Negro spirituals. Others refer to the birdcall of the third movement as that of an American bird. Better to look upon the subtitle as simply one assigned to the work because of its composition during Dvořák's American tour from 1892 to 1895. The F Major Quartet was completed in June of 1893 in Spillville, a Czech community in Iowa where Dvořák and his family spent the summer. It was premiered in Boston on January 1, 1894 by the distinguished Kneisel Quartet.

More telling than any national reference in the work is Dvořák's comment about his compositional process upon its completion: "Thanks be to the Lord God. I am satisfied. It went quickly." Indeed, the F Major Quartet has about it a certain easy genius that is most satisfying to both the players and the listeners. A some twenty-five minute work, it seems over in a breath from its shimmering opening statement.

The opening of the first movement seems like the best of Schubert and Brahms although it is attributed more to the beginning of Smetana's First Quartet. Despite all these references it remains uniquely Dvořák. In a lovely statement, the viola sings the first of the many wonderful melodies that will occur throughout the work. A fugue is artfully included between the two main themes of the movement.

The second movement Lento is an exception to the otherwise cheerful mood of the piece. Here the first violin and the cello carry the melodic line while the second violin and the viola sustain the flowing rhythmic line. The movement builds to a climax, then slips away.

It is in the third movement that we hear the birdcall, supposedly that of a scarlet tanager that kept interrupting Dvořák's work and described by the composer as "a damned bird (red, only with black wings)." Despite his annoyance, Dvořák created yet another fresh melody filled with life in this brief, scherzo-like movement.

Although the tempo marking of the Finale is slower than the preceding Molto vivace, the movement sails along with such ease and forward motion that one senses something between a lively folk dance and a race. Melody sings over a propulsive rhythmic underpinning. The motion is interrupted briefly by moments of brave unison playing before a rousing conclusion.

This is surely Dvořák at his most satisfying.

Artists

Acclaimed for its “bold interpretive strength, robust characterization and commanding resonance” (Calgary Herald), the **Verona Quartet** has spellbound audiences worldwide, unlocking the secrets of the music through the “intimate way they communicate with each other and the audience.” (Boston Arts Fuse)

Delicate craftsmanship, luminous sound and a dramatic poise are all hallmarks of the virtuosity that fuses together violinists Jonathan Ong, Dorothy Ro, violist Abigail Rojansky and cellist Jonathan Dormand to create the Verona Quartet. The group’s singular sense of purpose earned them Chamber Music America’s coveted Cleveland Quartet Award 2020, and a reputation as an “outstanding ensemble...cohesive yet full of temperament.” (The New York Times) Deeply committed educators, the Verona Quartet serves as Quartet-in-Residence at the Oberlin College and Conservatory in Oberlin, Ohio.

A string quartet for the 21st Century, the Verona Quartet champions the storied history of the string quartet alongside music that reflects the current world in which we live, including those commissioned and written for them by composers Julia Adolphe, Sebastian Currier, Corey Dundee, Texu Kim and Michael Gilbertson. The VQ has cultivated a dynamic approach to collaboration and programming that includes cross-cultural and interdisciplinary enterprises. Recent projects feature performances with dancers from Brooklyn’s Dance Heginbotham, artistic exchanges with traditional Emirati poets in the UAE and collaborations with Grammy-winning folk supergroup I’m With Her.

The Verona Quartet has appeared across four continents enchanting audiences at venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Wigmore Hall and Melbourne Recital Hall, in addition to appearing at festivals including La Jolla Summerfest, Chamber Music Northwest, Caramoor, Bravo! Vail, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. As Ensemble-in-Residence with the Chamber Orchestra of the Triangle in North Carolina, the VQ curates the *UpClose Chamber Music Series*, bringing the visceral energy of classical music to diverse audiences in venues ranging from concert halls to craft breweries.

In addition to their Oberlin residency, the Verona Quartet holds residency positions at the Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance (Lunenburg, NS) as well as Indiana University Summer String Academy (Bloomington, IN). Each year, reaching thousands of people, the Verona Quartet’s community and educational workshops inspire new listeners and performers through the joys of chamber music.

The Verona Quartet rose to international prominence after rapidly sweeping top prizes at the Wigmore Hall, Melbourne, Osaka, M-Prize International Chamber Music Competitions and the Concert Artists Guild Competition.

The ensemble’s “thoughtful, impressive” performances (Cleveland Classical) emanate from the spirit of storytelling; the Quartet believes that the essence of storytelling transcends genre and therefore the name "Verona" pays tribute to William Shakespeare, one of the greatest storytellers of all time.