

**Monday, July 19, 2010**

Notable 4

Vina Robles

*Quintet in G major*, op. 77 (1875)

Allegro con fuoco

Scherzo

Poco andante

Finale: Allegro assai

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

**Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)—*Quintet in G major*, op. 77 (1875)**

Ah, wily music publishers! When the German firm Simrock accepted Antonín Dvořák as a new client (thanks to an enthusiastic recommendation from Johannes Brahms), Dvořák sent them a prize-winning quintet he had composed in 1875 for a Prague-based “Artistic Circle” competition. While writing the quintet, Dvořák had been financially supported by an 1874 Austrian State Stipendium; when he applied to renew his stipend in 1875, Brahms had joined the panel of judges, and was quite impressed by the young Czech composer. However, year after year went by before Simrock finally published the quintet, and it was 1888 before the quintet was ready to go to press. Although the work *had* undergone some revisions in the intervening period (such as the elimination of a fifth movement), it was largely the same piece Dvořák had submitted many years before—and if it had been published when first written, it would have been properly numbered as Dvořák’s opus 18. Simrock was reluctant to admit the work was so old, so they arbitrarily designated it as “Opus 77” to make the quintet seem like a recent composition—a move that undermined Dvořák’s reputation slightly, since knowledgeable critics could tell that it didn’t resemble the other pieces he was writing in the late 1880s.

This is not to say that the youthful *Bass Quintet in G* was an inferior piece—but music, like clothing, goes through changes of fashion, and the quintet belonged to an earlier time. The combination of instruments was quite unusual: Dvořák called for a string bass to supplement the standard string quartet of two violins, viola, and cello. There had been earlier chamber works with bass, such as Schubert’s well-known “Trout” quintet in 1819, but Schubert had employed a piano instead of a second violin. Nevertheless, the addition of the low bass voice gives Dvořák’s quintet extra robustness, which suits its sometimes folksy quality—for Dvořák was one of the Romantic Era’s “nationalists,” meaning that he celebrated the music of his (often beleaguered) native land by incorporating its folksongs and idioms into his art music. Dvořák’s Slavonic heritage is especially apparent in the “Scherzo,” a rollicking dance that interweaves sharp string blows and racing melodic lines around a more peaceful central “Trio.” The slow movement is fluid and tender, much like a *romanza*, and the “Finale” is filled with the energy we would expect from a composer in his early thirties.

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