

The Pražák Quartet (March 10, 2017):

Polka and Pride: The Pražák Quartet plays the Czech masters

The Pražák Quartet appeared in Edmonton on March 10 to present a wide-ranging program that put the spotlight on some of the most important essays in the Czech musical canon. Performers feel a special duty to present their own national musical heritage to the international audience, and this can be said for the Pražák Quartet; their reading of string quartets by Janáček and Smetana, two thirds of a triumvirate of Czech musical heroes that would also include Dvořák, conveyed to the audience the group's deep, collective sense of pride and commitment to this music.

The evening's concert didn't immediately launch the audience into the hills and dense forests of Bohemia, however; the night's first performance was of music written by an Austrian, for concerts in England. Josef Haydn's B-flat quartet (Op.71, Nr.1) was a pleasing, uncomplicated primer to the emotionally disheveled Janáček work that followed it. The group's playing was smooth and unified, and gave a bright and witty performance of this late work, the artistic merits of which easily place it on equal footing with any of Mozart or Beethoven's statements in the quartet genre. We must remember the tremendous influence of this older genius on his two younger mentees (both of whom he knew personally), and how staggering a creative force Haydn was.

The Pražák Quartet has strong connections to the Czech Republic; all the players are themselves Czech, and three of its members are graduates of the Prague Conservatory. This helps to explain the palpable comfort and closeness with which they performed the difficult and highly personal *Kreutzer Sonata* quartet of Leoš Janáček. The string quartet is a genre which lends itself to conveying the most emotional statements of a composer, and this work is a supreme example of that communicative potential. Janáček's quartet is angular and fragmented, presenting more like a stream of consciousness than a meticulously plotted, formal construct that it is; the organic texture of this composition is even reflected in the vaguely intuitive *Con moto* ("with motion") marking, which pervades nearly all sections of the piece. Yes, there is a pronounced Czech folk influence detectable in this music, as one might expect from a nationalist like Janáček, and it is used to facilitate expression of the highly volatile emotional world of the novella for which it is named.

The group closed the evening with a presentation of Smetana's buoyant, folksy E Minor String Quartet. Intriguingly titled *From My Life*, this work was conceived as an autobiographical tone poem, though scored for instrumental forces far more modest than the full orchestra required for the composer's mighty symphonic cycle *Má vlast*. Whereas the latter work ambitiously aims to narrate the biography of the entire Bohemian people, its landscape and culture, the string quartet illustrates the life of a single Czech, namely Smetana himself. Spontaneity pervades this music from its opening movement. Though immersed in compelling romantic urgency, is seamlessly blended with the attractive folk rhythms and melodic germs for which this composer is so well known and loved.

Remarkably, in the last moments of this quartet, the composer manages to turn pain into art, scoring a persistent harmonic high "e" for the first violin, to be held over the final bars of the music. Here, Smetana paints a deeply moving metaphor for his listeners, setting the gentle warmth of the quartet's closing utterances against the foreground of that persistent held note –

a musical expression of his then encroaching deafness treated with resigned acceptance, rather than fearful rejection.

Clearly affected by the group's powerfully intimate reading of this music, the audience at Robertson-Wesley United Church refused to let the musicians depart without an encore, which they provided graciously. The Pražák Quartet's rousing rendition of the finale from Dvořák's famous *American* String Quartet rounded out an excellent program that managed to feature all three of the great trio of Czech composers, and which brought the grateful audience to its feet for long and enthusiastic applause. Cultural ambassadorship, especially in these times, is an important pursuit, and the artists of the Pražák Quartet work toward this end with admirable dedication and love; Edmonton thanks the group for an enriching survey of Czech musical culture. More than a few in the audience likely went home humming — I know I did.