JANUARY 26, 2025

Cypresses for String Quartet, B. 152
ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born: 1841
Died: 1904
Composed: 1865

I. I know that on my love to thee
II. Death reigns in many a human breast
VIII. In deepest forest glade I stand
XI. Nature lies peaceful in slumber and dreaming
IX. Thou only dear one, but for thee

In 1865 Dvořák, then 24 years old and living in Prague, took several students to help support himself. He fell in love with one of them—Josefa Čermáková, the daughter of a goldsmith—and for her he wrote a cycle of eighteen songs on texts by the Moravian poet Gustav Pfleger. This cycle of songs, which Dvořák called *Cypresses* (or *Evening Songs*), was not a great success. Dvořák's biographer Karel Hoffmeister described Pfleger's texts as "somewhat tearful and effeminate," Dvořák neither published the cycle nor assigned it an opus number, and the young lady had no interest at all in the composer. But the experience appears not to have been a total loss, for Dvořák eventually married Josefa's sister Anna. The composer remained close to Josefa, and her death thirty years later caused him to rewrite the closing moments of his *Cello Concerto* in her memory, inserting a passage that contains some of the most beautiful, moving music ever written.

If *Cypresses* in its original form had little success, it is remarkable how this music seems to have haunted Dvořák throughout his life. He drew four songs from the cycle and published them immediately as his Opus 2; he revised eight more and published them as *Love Songs, Opus 83* in 1888; he used a melody from another in an aria in his little-known opera *King and Collier*; he used another as one of his *Silhouettes*, a set of twelve piano pieces published in 1879; and, as noted, he used a theme from yet another in his *Cello Concerto* of 1895.

But it was in 1887, when he was 45, that Dvořák made the most significant use of his early cycle. In the space of one month that spring (April 21–May 21) he arranged twelve of the songs for string quartet. Though he did not publish this arrangement (it did not appear until 1921, nearly twenty years after his death), Dvořák took great pains with the string version: he rearranged the order of the songs and gave most of the melodic material to either the first violin or the viola (his own instrument). The result is a set of lyric miniatures for string quartet, a cycle of twelve brief pieces that might almost be called quartet-songs. Almost unknown to modern audiences, the set of *Cypresses* is not just a charming addition to the quartet literature but offers continuing life to music that remained important to its composer throughout his own life.

Violin Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 75
CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Born: 1835
Died: 1921
Composed: 1885

I. Allegro agitato — Adagio
II. Allegretto moderato — Allegro molto

Saint-Saëns wrote his *First Violin Sonata* in 1885. At age 50, he was at the height of his powers. In that same year he wrote his *Wedding Cake Waltz*, and the following year he would write two of his most famous works: the *"Organ" Symphony* and the *Carnival of the Animals*. Although Saint-Saëns did not play the violin, he clearly understood the instrument–already he had written three violin concertos and the famous *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*; the *Havanaise* would follow two years later.

The structure of the sonata is unusual. It has four movements, but the first and second are connected, as are the third and fourth, dividing the sonata into two extended parts. Saint-Saëns' marking for the opening movement—*Allegro agitato*—is important, for this truly is agitated music. Beneath its quiet surface, the movement feels constantly restless. Its opening theme, a rocking tune for violin, alternates meters, slipping between 6/8 and 9/8; perhaps some of the music's air of restlessness comes from its failure to settle into a constant meter. The lyric second idea—a long, falling melody for violin—brings some relief, and the dramatic development treats both these themes. While the second movement is marked *Adagio*, it shares the restless mood of the first. The piano has the quiet main theme, but the music seems to be in continuous motion before coming to a quiet close.

The agreeable *Allegretto moderato* is the sonata's scherzo. It dances gracefully, skittering easily between G Major and G minor. At the center section, the violin has a haunting chorale tune over quietly-cascading piano arpeggios; as the movement comes to its close, Saint-Saëns skillfully twines together the chorale and the dancing opening theme and presents them simultaneously. Out of this calm, the concluding *Allegro molto* suddenly explodes—the violin takes off on the flurry of sixteenth-notes that will propel the finale on

its dynamic way. This is by far the most extroverted of the movements, and it holds a number of surprises: a declamatory second theme high in the violin's register and later a brief reminiscence of the lyric second theme of the opening movement. At the end, Saint-Saëns brings back the rush of sixteenth notes, and the sonata races to a close so brilliant that one almost expects to see sparks flying through the hall.

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 14

CÉSAR FRANCK

Born: 1822
Died: 1890
Composed: 1878-79

I. Molto moderato, quasi lento
II. Lento, con molto sentimento
III. Allegro non troppo ma con fuoco

Few works in the chamber music literature have produced so violent a reaction at their premieres as the *Piano Quintet* of César Franck. Franck, then 57 and a professor of organ at the Paris Conservatory, had written no chamber music for over 25 years when the *Piano Quintet* burst to life before an unsuspecting audience in Paris on January 17, 1880. Few in that audience expected music so explosive from a man known as the gentle composer of church music. Franck's students were wildly enthusiastic, and a later performance is reported to have left the audience stunned into silence, some of them weeping openly. But the acclaim was not universal. Franck had intended to dedicate this music to Camille Saint-Saëns, the pianist at the premiere, but when he approached Saint-Saëns after the performance to offer him the personally-inscribed manuscript, Saint-Saëns is reported to have made a face, thrown the manuscript on the piano, and walked away. Franck's wife hated the *Quintet* and refused to attend performances.

There appear to have been non-musical reasons for these reactions. Four years earlier, a twenty-year-old woman named Augusta Holmès had begun to study composition with Franck. She moved easily in the musical and literary circles of Paris. A striking figure, she attracted the attention and admiration of most of the leading musical figures of the late eighteenth-century, including Wagner, Liszt, Rimsky-Korsakov, and many others. Saint-Saëns, whose proposal of marriage she rejected, confessed that "We were all in love with her." Holmès (she added the accent to the family name) composed on a grand scale: among her works are four operas (she wrote the librettos for all her operas), symphonies, symphonic poems, choral music, and songs.

The details of the relationship between Holmès and her teacher remain unclear, but the premiere of Franck's Piano Quintet apparently brought matters to a head. The general feeling was that the mild-mannered Franck had made clear his love for Augusta in this music, and both his wife and Saint-Saëns knew it. For those interested, the relationship between Franck and Holmès is the subject of a 1978 novel by Ronald Harwood titled *César and Augusta*.

Despite the tensions at its premiere, Franck's *Quintet* has come to be regarded as one of the great piano quintets, along with those of Schumann, Brahms, Dvořák, and Shostakovich. Everyone instantly recognizes its power–this is big music, full of bold gestures, color, and sweep. Franz Liszt, one of Franck's greatest admirers, wondered whether the Quintet was truly chamber music and suggested that it might be better heard in a version for orchestra. Franck's first instruction, *dramatico*, sets the tone for the entire work, and Liszt was quite right to wonder whether this is truly chamber music: Franck asks for massed unison passages, *fortississimo* dynamic levels, tremolos, and a volume of sound previously unknown in chamber music. Beyond the purely emotional and sonic impact, however, this music is notable for its concentration: the *Piano Quintet* is one of the finest examples of Franck's cyclic treatment of themes, an idea he had taken from Liszt—virtually the entire quintet grows out of theme-shapes presented in the first movement.

The opening of the first movement is impressive, as Franck alternates dramatic passages for strings with quiet, lyrical interludes for piano. Gradually these voices merge and rush ahead at the violent Allegro, which listeners will recognize as a variant of the violin's figure at the very beginning. This and other theme-shapes will be stretched, varied, and made to yield a variety of moods. At the end of the movement, the music dies away on Franck's marking *estinto*: "extinct."

The slow movement begins with steady piano chords, and over these the first violin plays what seem at first melodic fragments. But these too have evolved from the opening of the first movement, and soon they combine to form the movement's main theme. Again the music rises to a massive climax, then subsides to end quietly. Out of that quiet, the concluding movement springs to life. Franck specifies *con fuoco*—with fire—and the very beginning feels unsettled and nervous, with the violins pulsing ahead. The main theme, when it finally arrives, has grown out of material presented in the second movement; now Franck gives it to the four strings, and their repetitions grow in power until the theme is hammered out violently. An extremely dramatic coda drives to the brutally abrupt cadence.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger