

Cypress String Quartet
American Album
Notes by Richard Aldag

A fusion of divergent cultural influences has created a rich palette from which American composers may draw. From the ritual music of Native Americans, to African American slave songs and spirituals, New England shape note singing, and varied European, Latin American, and Asian musical traditions, indelible influences abound in American classical music. With the expansion of the nation from coast to coast accomplished and the horrors of the Civil War behind them, American composers found their voices – as individuals and as a collective group – toward the turn of the 20th century. Along the way, the string quartet emerged as a vital resource for artistic expression. The collection on this CD represents one viewpoint of the journey that American classical music has taken from the late-19th century to the early 21st century, through the lens of the string quartet. The influences and stylistic differences may vary, but the music is timeless and American.

The Call

The journey begins with the Bohemian composer **Antonín Dvořák** (1841-1904), whose String Quartet in F, Op. 96 “American,” is universally acknowledged as the first great string quartet composed in the United States. As a proponent of the European nationalist movement of the second half of the 19th century, Dvořák had created a substantial body of music inspired by the rhythms and folk tunes of his homeland.

In 1891, Dvořák was recruited to serve as Director of the National Conservatory of Music, an institution that had been founded by the prominent New York socialite and philanthropist Jeanette Thurber. As Dvořák and his Bohemian compatriots had created a national school of music composition by incorporating folk melodies and rhythms of their homeland, the composer arrived in New York prepared to urge his American students to follow a similar path, both in the classroom and in a series of articles that he penned for New York newspapers. Dvořák advised his students to incorporate melodies and rhythms borrowed from spirituals, Native American song, and other folk traditions to create an “American” sound in their compositions.

In summer 1893, Dvořák and his family departed the hustle and bustle of Manhattan to vacation in the small town of Spillville, Iowa. Largely comprised of recent Czech immigrants, arriving in Spillville was like a return home for the composer. Dvořák responded positively to this serene environment, sketching his “American” quartet over a period of just three days. The heightened angst of much of 19th century chamber music was replaced in his new work by straightforward, joyful music of the highest artistic quality. Writing for the New York Daily Tribune, critic (and Dvořák supporter) Henry Krehbiel commented that Dvořák’s “American” quartet “will not cause any brain-racking to the listener, but make its appeal directly and compellingly.”

The search for specific references to American folk traditions in this quartet has met with divergent viewpoints. While some musicologists assert that there are motifs based on Negro spirituals and Native American ritual music, others find no substantiation to these claims. The

one confirmed American element can be found in the first violin in the third movement, where Dvořák transcribes the song of a scarlet tanager that had serenaded the family from a nearby tree.

Whether or not references may be found to American folk traditions, the “American” quartet captures the simplicity of life in rural Iowa in summer 1893. And, while no direct quotes can be substantiated, a spirit of American enthusiasm is certainly evident throughout the quartet, particularly in the jubilant and carefree finale. Most importantly, Dvořák’s “American” quartet became a model from which subsequent generations of American composers drew inspiration.

The Response

Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920) is representative of a generation of American composers active at the turn of the 20th century. Griffes, like most American musicians of the late 19th century, travelled to Europe to complete his training, studying composition for four years with Engelbert Humperdinck at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin. Returning to the United States in 1907, Griffes turned to teaching at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, NY to support himself. By the middle of the 20th century, academic positions emerged as a primary source of fiscal support for American artists in nearly every discipline. Griffes held this position for 13 years, until his untimely death from influenza at age 35.

Like many artists of his generation, Griffes often referenced global cultures as sources of inspiration. Indeed, much of the composer’s reputation is based on Impressionist works with exotic influences, compositions such as *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan* (1912, rev. 1916 – originally for solo piano, but later orchestrated) and *Roman Sketches* for Piano (1915). The *Two Sketches Based on Indian Themes* (1918-1919), however, is unique in his oeuvre as the only composition that incorporates elements of Native American music into a classical music fabric.

Two Sketches for String Quartet Based on Indian Themes was premiered by the Flonzaley Quartet in April 1919 for the Modern Music Society of New York. The quartet was not published until 1922, after Griffes’ death, edited by Adolfo Betti, the first violinist of the Flonzaley. It was at the premiere performance that critics began to hail the composer as a new voice of American music. *The Musical Leader*, April 10, 1919 wrote that Griffes was the “...manifestation of a school of American composition with the courage of its convictions, sincere and of high ideals”. The first sketch, titled *Lento e mesto* is based on a “Farewell Song of the Chippewa Indians,” and is appropriately slow and wistful throughout. An elder of the Chippewa tribe advised members of the Cypress String Quartet that the song may have been sung by warriors as they left for battle, and then sung by the tribe’s women and children as they walked back to their village from the battlefield. At one point in the piece, Griffes instructs the lower instruments to make their pizzicato notes sound “like Indian drums”. The second movement, *Allegro giocoso* is the composer’s impression of a Hopi festival dance.

Kevin Puts (b. 1972) was commissioned by the Cypress String Quartet in conjunction with the Lied Center of Kansas, the Mendelssohn Performing Arts Center and the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation in the Library of Congress. *Lento Assai* was premiered at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. on February 6, 2009.

Lento Assai was commissioned for the CSQ's ongoing *Call & Response* project, a program in which composers write works in response to timeless masterpieces. Puts was asked to respond were Mendelssohn's String Quartet in A, Op. 13 and Beethoven's String Quartet in F, Op. 135.

The composer wrote of his commission: "Like Felix Mendelssohn...I have found a wellspring of ideas flowing from the slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 135. Beethoven begins with the introductory building of a D-flat major chord followed by a haunting melody played by the first violin. The first several minutes of my piece can be heard as an expansion of these two ideas. I begin in exactly the same manner and then elaborate on Beethoven's opening by continuing to build chords of my own in a 'glacially' deliberate manner. Once returning to D-flat, my melody begins like Beethoven's and then takes its own path. "

"As in several of my recent works, my intention— by way of the meditative quality of much of this piece—was to create a kind of musical refuge for the listener, a temporary place of peace and tranquility."

Although known more widely for his orchestral music and operas, **Samuel Barber** (1910-81) is one of the few American composers of the post-World War I era to contribute a string quartet that has found a place in the standard repertoire. He achieves this with his String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11 (1936), which was premiered provisionally at the Villa Aurelia in Rome in 1936 by the Pro Arte Quartet, and presented with a revised finale by the Budapest String Quartet at the Library of Congress in 1943.

Barber was one of a growing number of American composers in the period between the two World Wars to establish an "American" voice without reference to folkloric and/or vernacular source materials. The evolution of a distinctively American speech pattern, influenced by the waves of immigration to the United States in the late 19th century, played a major role in this phenomenon, with rhythmic patterns of American English finding their way naturally into the music of classical composers, as well as into jazz and popular song.

The slow movement of Barber's Quartet has become an iconic piece in the American canon, known universally as the *Adagio for Strings*. Few audience members know the *Adagio* in its original context as the most accessible movement of a string quartet that is predominantly modernistic. The complexity of Barber's String Quartet is representative of the urban landscape that emerged as the America of the mid-20th century. This is the America of mid-century New York, Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles – a far different nation than the one which greeted Dvořák on his arrival in 1892.

This album is dedicated to the memory of Todd Donovan.