



**2024/2025
77th SEASON**

**Friends of Chamber Music present the Pražák Quartet in concert
at the Vancouver Playhouse, Sunday, November 10, 2024 – 3:00pm**

Pražák Quartet

Jana Vonášková, violin
Marie Fuxová, violin
Josef Klusůň, viola
Pavel Jonáš Krejčí, cello



The Pražák Quartet, one of today's leading string quartets, was founded in 1972 by students at the Prague Conservatory. The ensemble quickly established itself on the international stage and has since toured regularly worldwide. They are frequent guests in major music venues in cities such as Prague, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Milan, Madrid, London, Berlin, Munich, Tokyo, Sydney, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

This is their 18th Vancouver concert for us since their first in 1986. That number includes a trio of quintet concerts (with guests including Menahem Pressler, Roberto Diaz, Gary Karr, and Sharon Kam) celebrating the Friends' 50th anniversary in 1998. They have been invited to numerous international festivals, where they have collaborated with artists who include: Menahem Pressler, Jon Nakamatsu, Gérard Caussé, Roberto Diaz, Josef Suk, and Sharon Kam. Since the Quartet last played for us in 2019, Marie Fuxová and Pavel Jonáš Krejčí joined the ensemble.

Their recordings cover much of the standard repertoire from the 18th through the 20th Centuries. In 2022, Praga Digitals released a 50 CD box set of recordings to mark the 50th anniversary of the Pražák Quartet. The ensemble's latest recording (with soprano Helen Kearns), "The Seven Last Words of Christ" by Joseph Haydn, was released in August 2024.

The Pražák Quartet is represented in Canada by Christina Daysog Concert Artists.

Programme

String Quartet No. 1, Opus 5

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974)

Rhythmique
Intime, contenu
Vif, très rythmé

Darius Milhaud was a prolific French composer, completing over 400 compositions including 18 string quartets - more than any other classical composer to date – and employing a vast array of compositional styles. Quartets 14 and 15 can be played together as an octet, and this has been done in performance on numerous occasions.

Milhaud composed his String Quartet No. 1 when he was twenty years old and dedicated it to painter Paul Cézanne. It is said that the composer modelled it on Debussy's string quartet. The work is quite conservative in form, consisting of the traditional four movements. Overall, the music is very lyrical. The outer movements (1 & 4) are rhythmically up tempo and charming, with the introduction being exceedingly joyful. The inner movements (2 & 3) are slow, containing wonderful long melodies. Despite its traditional structure, Milhaud employs a modern harmonic repertoire, using augmented chords and parallel fifths. Later in life Milhaud edited the work and discarded the third movement, and it is the edited, three-movement version that we will hear this evening.

String Quartet No. 2 in D Minor

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

Allegro

Allegro moderato

Allegro non più moderato, ma agitato e con fuoco

Finale. Presto

Although Smetana's first string quartet ("From My Life") is well known to audiences, the second quartet is rarely heard. In June 1882, after composing *Ma Vlast* - a set of six symphonic poems, the operas *Tajemství* (The Secret), *Certova stena* (The Devil's Wall) and other works, Smetana decided to embark on the creation of his second string quartet. Although he finished the first movement a month later, increasing deafness and depression impaired progress, and the work was not finished until March 1883. Several minor changes were made after the work was completed. The first public performance took place on 3 January 1884, at the Konvikt Hall in Prague and the quartet was published posthumously, in 1889.

Smetana said that the second quartet takes up from where his first quartet finished: "...after the catastrophe, it represents the turbulence of music in a person who had lost his hearing". The musical construction and language are entirely new and unusual. At first, the composition was received by listeners and critics with hesitation, even objections. However, thanks to many successful interpretations by groups of musicians, the quartet is now highly regarded within Czech music history and culture.

Intermission

String Quartet in F, Opus 96 "American"

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Allegro ma non troppo

Lento

Molto vivace

Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

As a youth, Dvořák, who was a chamber music player, greatly admired the works of the classical masters. However, in his early twenties he was strongly drawn to the folk idiom of Bohemia, which he realized could be a source of inspiration for his own music. On Dvořák's arrival in New York in 1892 to take up position as director of the National Conservatory of Music, it is not surprising that he was drawn to Black

American music. In the summer of 1893, while residing in Spillville, Iowa, he listened with great interest to Black plantation songs and the songs of the American Indians. In this small Bohemian-American farming community, he wrote the “American” Quartet, Opus 96, and the Viola Quintet, Opus 97, both of which show distinct American influences.

The well-loved “American” Quartet, which is characterized by Dvořák’s impressions of American folk music, does not contain direct quotations from songs he heard. Rather, it was written in the spirit of those American folk melodies. It reveals his depth of feeling, the resourcefulness of his technique, and his boundless imagination. Subtle contrasts of texture and tone colour, along with melodic charm, combine to make Opus 96 one of his finest works. The official premiere was played by the Kneisel Quartet in Bonn on January 1, 1894. Written just after his “New World” Symphony, it was nicknamed the “American” Quartet.

In the introduction to the Allegro, the viola sings a jaunty melody against a rustling tremolo chord in the violins. The second theme, played by the first violin, is more tentative and subdued. The development is based on the first theme and is followed by a fugato derived from the second theme, which serves as a transition to a repeat of both themes.

The Lento, largely considered the best movement of the quartet, is distinguished by its lyrical beauty, depth of expression, and transparent harmonies. It is a lovely flowing melody, played by the first violin and cello, under which the second violin and viola maintain a murmuring accompaniment.

The third movement Moderato is a simple and delightful bagatelle built on a single theme, with a vivacious rhythmic opening clause and a gentle rocking close. Structurally, the movement can be divided into two parts arranged in an ABABA sequence. The first part “A” is thought to have been inspired by bird songs in the Iowa woods. The second part “B” theme is a slower version of “A” and has a mysterious mood that contrasts with the first.

The final Vivace is a happy rondo with a continual skipping rhythmic pattern. Other high-spirited melodies follow. Finally, after a short chorale-like strain, thought to have been derived from the hymns Dvořák enjoyed playing at the church services in Spillville, the quartet ends in a burst of good spirits.

* * * * *

Next Concerts, both at the Vancouver Playhouse

Takács Quartet

Sunday, December 8, 2024 - 3:00 pm

Haydn: String Quartet in C Major, Opus 54, No 2

Britten: String Quartet No 2 in C, Opus 26

Beethoven: String Quartet No 16 in F Major, Opus 135

Schumann Quartet

Tuesday, February 11, 2025 - 7:30 pm

Mozart: String Quartet No 20 in D Major, K499 “Hoffmeister”

Prokofiev: String Quartet No 1 in B Minor, Opus 50

Smetana: String Quartet No 1 in E Minor “In My Life”