Antonín Dvořák
Born September 8, 1841, Mühlhausen, Bohemia (now Nelahozeves, Czech Republic).
Died May 1, 1904, Prague.

String Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 97 (American)

Dvořák composed the E-flat major string quintet between June 26 and August 1, 1893, while he was living in Spillville, Iowa. The first performance was given in New York City on January 12, 1894.

Today, Spillville, Iowa, a small town (population 386 in the 2000 census) nestled in the gentle hills of the Turkey River valley, boasts Saint Wenceslas, the oldest Czech Catholic church in the United States; the Bily Clocks Museum, showcasing the elaborately carved early twentieth century creations of the Bily brothers Frank and Joseph; and an exhibit, located on the second floor of the museum, dedicated to Antonín Dvořák’s summer holiday there in 1893. (The special Dvořák clock the Bily brothers designed as a tribute to the composer is on display.) Some years ago, a memorial to Dvořák was erected in Riverside Park, and a plaque marks the house where the Dvořák family lived in town.

Dvořák first learned about Spillville from Jan Josef Kovarík, an American-born Czech violist who was Dvořák’s assistant and companion during his visit to the U.S. Kovarík’s father lived in Spillville and was a prominent member of this rural farming community that was established in the 1850s and had quickly become a haven for Czech immigrants. From the day he arrived, Dvořák realized the wisdom of choosing this isolated Midwestern town for his summer holiday after his first season in New York City. He played the organ in church every morning and went bird watching along the Turkey River. “I was walking in the woods by the stream,” he wrote with obvious delight and relief, “and heard the singing of birds for the first time in eight months!” Spillville turned out to be more than a vacation spot; it renewed Dvořák’s spirit, released the unfamiliar stress of hectic urban life, and returned him, once again, to music. Shortly after he arrived, he sketched a new string quartet—the one that is known as the American—in just three days. (The Emerson Quartet plays that work in its chamber music program here tomorrow.) And during the month of July, he composed this quintet for string quartet and viola that also has been given the nickname American.

Dvořák said he wanted to write “something really melodious and simple” that summer. The first part of his claim can hardly be contested, but the second aim has frequently been misunderstood. Both the quartet performed tomorrow and the quintet performed this evening are abundantly tuneful in a way that music had scarcely known since Schubert. But neither piece unfolds and develops in quite the same way as traditional European works in the same form. In fact, it is not the musical details—such as the melodic lines, said in many cases to be inspired by the music Dvořák heard in America—as much as the overall manner of the music that merits the American nickname: openhearted, untroubled, straightforward, unlearned in the best sense of the word. This was the America Dvořák found in Spillville, and it was a sensibility that he embraced wholeheartedly—one in which he found himself after his big-city adventure. The string quintet, like the quartet written before it, is pastoral music, inspired by the vastness and plainness of the Iowa farmland. Like Vysoká, his own plot of land in Bohemia, Spillville inspired an outpouring of music, in this case some of Dvořák’s sunniest and most bucolic. The entire first movement of the quintet seems to be reaching for a state of joy and contentment that is beyond national identities. There have been many attempts to pinpoint specifically American features in the quintet—the Indian drumbeat in the scherzo, the way the theme of the slow movement set of variations was cut to fit the rhythms of “My Country ’Tis of Thee”—the result of Dvořák’s after-hours effort to compose a new American anthem to the familiar words. And there have been efforts, as desperate as they are futile, to find evidence in Dvořák’s score of the Kickapoo medicine show that passed through Spillville just before he began the quintet, trailing the echoes of phony, show-business Indian music. But chamber music is among the most intimate and confidential of musical approaches, and what Dvořák’s quintet reveals most
of all is the heart of Dvořák’s musical nature, both its Bohemian roots and the bracingly fresh air of his Iowa summer experience.

Dvořák cherished his days in Spillville, as this music testifies. After returning to the crowds and noise of downtown Manhattan, he said that he would have liked to spend the rest of his days in Spillville. Reportedly, he even considered buying a place there, although it is unlikely he actually looked at real estate. But a year before his death, he told a friend that Spillville “was an ideal spot, that’s when I felt happy, and I should have stayed there.”

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