

Quartet in F op.96 ("American")

Antonin Dvorák
(1841-1904)

Allegro ma non troppo

Lento

Molto vivace

Finale, Vivace ma non troppo

In September 1892 Dvorák arrived in New York, bringing with him as his secretary Josef Jan Kovarík, a young violin student at Prague Conservatory, whose home was in a small Bohemian community in Spillville, Iowa. Dvorák took up a two-year contract as Director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, a philanthropic enterprise of a millionaire's wife, Mrs Jeannette Thurber. His duties were not arduous, and he had time to familiarise himself with American music: in particular with spirituals, which he learned from a gifted young black student at the Conservatory, Harry T. Burleigh. By the following May Dvorák had



composed his ninth symphony, *From the New World*, with its unashamed echoes of Americana, and that summer the Dvorák family holidayed in Spillville. Here the String Quartet in F was composed, a work which Dvorák was able to play through with the Kovaríks. It received its première in Boston on 1st January 1893.

Dvorák's output during his American years included a String Quintet, also known as the American, and the Cello Concerto. Although he accepted a renewal of his contract in 1894 he returned to Prague after only a year, the Thurber millions having vanished during the panic of '93, and the post of Director of the National Conservatory having become financially somewhat insecure.

The opening theme of the first movement is more Bohemia than Iowa, but the New World asserts itself later. The *Lento* has a passionate melody for first violin, echoed by the cello, if anything even more expressively. If it is not in memory of something or someone it ought to be. The insistent theme of the third movement is famously based on the call of an Iowa bird, heard by Dvorák on an early morning walk. The quartet ends with a rondo which includes an episode recalling Dvorák's guest appearances as organist in Spillville church, but the mood is one of sustained movement: inspired by one of Dvorák's beloved trains, perhaps, steaming across the Iowa plain?