

Notes on the Program

By Nicky Swett

Henry Thacker Burleigh

***Southland Sketches* for Violin and Piano**

- Born December 2, 1866, in Erie, Pennsylvania
- Died September 12, 1949, in Stamford, Connecticut
- Composed in 1916
- Duration: 11 minutes

Singer and composer Henry “Harry” Thacker Burleigh began his first full year at the National Conservatory of Music in the fall of 1892. He quickly drew the attention of the school’s new director, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, whom the institution’s founder Jeannette Thurber had brought to New York City to help develop a national approach to writing classical music. Dvořák was not officially one of Burleigh’s teachers, but the two developed a friendship partly rooted in the older composer’s interest in the music of African Americans from the South.

In a 1941 interview, Burleigh describes a colorful scene from early in his time at the conservatory, when Dvořák:

asked me to come to his house to sing Negro folk music. He was in his shirtsleeves, with all his kids around him. There were lots of them. He had birdcages all over the house with thrushes in them. He kept the cagedoors open so the thrushes flew about freely and joined in the singing. I’d accompany myself at the piano. Dvořák especially liked *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen* and *Go Down Moses*. He asked hundreds of questions about Negro life. He would jump up and ask: ‘Did they really sing it that way?’

Dvořák encouraged Burleigh to “give those melodies to the world” by making arrangements of these folk tunes and writing original music inspired by this repertoire. In the decades following his graduation from the National Conservatory, Burleigh produced well over 200 art songs and spiritual transcriptions. He also wrote a few pieces of instrumental music, including a set of six piano sketches called *From the Southland*, completed between 1904 and 1910. He dedicated the volume to his friend Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the Black British composer who visited America several times at the start of the 20th century and who produced a groundbreaking, large-scale book of piano arrangements of spirituals (*24 Negro Melodies*, Op. 59) in 1905. In *From the Southland*, Burleigh prefaced each of six numbers with an epigraph credited to the poet Louise Alston Burleigh, the composer’s wife, which explicitly tied his instrumental creations to their source material in African-American folk music.

In 1916, Burleigh released another set of *Southland Sketches*: four entries, this time for violin and piano. The first in the group, an optimistic tune that builds on a skipping rhythmic gesture, starts in quite a stately manner, and gradually picks up energy as if hurried along by some unseen hand. The second, a melancholic *Adagio*, begs the violin to be as vocal as possible. Here, articulations in the score show the player how to pronounce each note with crystal-clear diction. In the third of these sketches, Burleigh weaves together a snappy ditty with strains of Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” (also known as “Swanee River”). He appropriates just enough of Foster’s hook for it to be recognizable, but turns it in new harmonic directions, smoothly folding it into his own novel invention. The final number, an up-tempo romp, is a bit too quick to be singable, but the ragtime middle section calls back to the piano sketches of *From the Southland* and out to the broader musical environment of New York City in the 1910s.

Antonín Dvořák

Trio in G minor for Piano, Violin, and Cello, Op. 26

- Born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, Bohemia
- Died May 1, 1904, in Prague
- Composed in 1876
- Duration: 32 minutes

In 1874, Antonin Dvořák submitted a substantial portfolio, including overtures, symphonies, and songs, to the Austrian State Prize for Composition and won an award of 400 gulden. He began to apply every year and built up a good track record, particularly when Johannes Brahms joined the jury and offered great encouragement. Dvořák had to write a prolific amount to keep up with these regular deadlines—for example, for his successful submission in 1876, he sent in a string quartet, another symphony, and his Piano Trio in G minor.

These portfolio submissions were often made well before official premieres of the works. The Trio in G minor didn't see its first public performance until 1879, with the composer playing together with violinist Ferdinand Lachner and cellist Alois Neruda. Dvořák likely had informal readings of the pieces before handing them off, but his willingness to submit such fresh works indicates a growing confidence in his craft and his individual style. In this trio, we can hear hints of the approach to blending Czech folk music with Classical forms and structures that would be a distinctive feature of the composer's work from the late 1870s until his death in 1904.

Many scholars and critics have suggested that Dvořák wrote his G-minor Trio in conversation with the trio in the same key by his teacher, Bedřich Smetana. Smetana wrote an elegiac Piano Trio in G minor in 1855 while mourning the death of his beloved, musically talented daughter Bedřiška. There is something direct and searing about the grief contained in that piece. It is specifically dedicated to her memory, there is scarcely a complete theme in a major key, and the final movement is even interrupted by a haunting funeral march.

Dvořák had likewise suffered a terrible loss around the time he wrote his G-minor Trio: his first daughter, Josefa, died two days after birth in August of 1875. But if his trio is likewise a piece of mourning, it expresses that process in a much less deliberate way than Smetana's trio. The minor-key themes Dvořák writes in his first movement are angry, searching for some sense of purpose, but also matched by outbursts of joy and playfulness. It is only in the recapitulation section, when the violin plays an agonizingly slow version of the opening tune, the cello plucks out sorrowful statements, and the piano provides understated triplets, that a heavy sense of loss begins to emerge. For the remainder of the movement, each theme, presented in turn, is in some way halted or stretched; what was confident in the exposition is made to sound full of doubt.

The tune of the slow movement starts in E-flat major but keeps making its way to darker tonal regions. The repetition and the nature of the theme give the movement the feeling of a Mendelssohnian *Song Without Words*, an expression of some sentiment that is too specific to communicate in language. In the first measures of the *Presto*, the composer forces several moments of metrical re-evaluation, with the result that everything feels syncopated, in multiple ways, even though it's not. A momentary *moderato*, which acts like a miniature contrasting trio section in the middle of the scherzo, creates playful confusion about where we are in the movement. The trio proper, a jollier dance that sounds a bit like a Christmas carol, points forward to the trios in the massive symphonies Dvořák would write at the end of his career.

The theme of the final movement, like the second, starts in swaggering E-flat major, but quickly wanders off into other tonal spaces. The mood of this *Allegro non tanto* is generally positive—a starkly different atmosphere than the finale of Smetana's trio. But in the swinging coda at the end, there are many questioning digressions, as if Dvořák is drifting away for a moment or two to dwell on some forgotten sadness before returning to the celebratory outlook that dominates the movement.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Quintet in C major for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Cello, Op. 29

- Baptized December 17, 1770, in Bonn (likely born December 16)
- Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna
- Composed in 1801
- Duration: 35 minutes

String quintets with two violins, two violas, and one cello were somewhat uncommon in the 18th century. Fortunately, Michael Haydn, younger brother of Joseph, wrote a couple of them, which purportedly inspired Mozart to try his hand at the genre. The results of Mozart's experiments were some of his best pieces of chamber music. At times, his viola quintets manage to simultaneously achieve the intimacy of his string quartets and the orchestral power of his symphonies. This is the promise of what we might call augmented string quartet chamber music: works that reach beyond the efficient, interactive force of four players and point to the sound of a much larger band of musicians.

Ludwig van Beethoven wrote his lone viola quintet in 1801 at the request of Moritz von Fries, a Viennese patron. A major publishing kerfuffle followed, in which Beethoven came off rather badly. He wrote a letter of complaint when an edition from the publishing house Artaria emerged with numerous errors, but had to walk back his negative comments on the matter after a police investigation found that he was acting in a "dishonorable and unjust manner." The episode tells us something about his cranky character and his critical eye for editions, but quite little about his ideas regarding the remarkable music we find in the piece itself.

Was Beethoven gesturing toward a more symphonic form of chamber music in the C-major Quintet? I would suggest he goes a step even further, composing a small ensemble work with an ear toward opera. The first movement has the quality of an overture or prelude. Three of the strings—a violin, viola, and cello—start with music that is not so much a theme but a mood, wavering between a couple of pitches and very gradually climbing a scale. After a cadence, the violins launch into a flurry of triplets, a striking call to attention (or perhaps to take your seats), but not music that sticks in the ear. It is the impressive sense of atmosphere in this work that many later composers of augmented string quartets latched onto. Franz Schubert, in his Cello Quintet (also in C major), wrote a corresponding, majestically placid opening *Allegro ma non troppo*; Johannes Brahms, under the influence of Joseph Joachim, started the grand, gradually developing first movement of his Op. 18 String Sextet with the same three-instrument texture as Beethoven's quintet. There is something provocative to the inviting, almost naked sound at the start of this piece, as if the composer is daring us to expect something bombastic and making us wait for it until much later.

In the slow movement, Beethoven clearly gestures to Mozart. There is an astonishing range of textures in this *Adagio molto espressivo*, which means that though the music is always expressive and tender, it is not actually always so slow. The Mozartian melodies are full of simple yearning, though there is an outburst close to the end of the movement that reminds us that this was *not* written by that other Viennese master. The *Scherzo* is based on triumphant trumpeting gestures played by all members of the ensemble, which are usually supported by hurdy-gurdy drones in some voice or other. This is the impish Beethoven, the kind of scoundrel who might just badmouth his publisher without cause.

The quintet is sometimes assigned the posthumous nickname "Storm" for the final *Presto*'s dramatic opening tremolos, which sit under the violin's lightning-quick outbursts (a very Rossini-like theme if we're listening anachronistically). There are sudden fermatas;¹ the emergence of an absurd, marching fugue; and a jolly, drunken *Andante scherzoso* in a new time signature that pops up twice. It has all the madness of an act-ending finale from a Mozart opera, but it's presented by just five string players in under ten minutes. It's also quite a detailed, intricate movement, so the composer was admittedly right to be picky about details in the score.

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¹ Fermata: a prolongation of a note, chord, or rest beyond its written time value. From the Italian for "stopped."