

Musica Viva speech, before a concert given by the Skampa Quartet,

Llewellyn Hall, Canberra, 13 September 1999

By Don Aitkin

I start tonight with the idea of a concert program, and the art of programming. We modern concert-goers are accustomed to concerts which start at around eight o'clock, and finish at half past ten, or thereabouts. We are used to concerts that have a first half and a second half, with an interval or so in between in which we can have a drink and talk to one another. In that two and a half hours we will hear three or four substantial pieces of music — tonight, three. What we will finally hear is the outcome of some bargaining between the musicians and the management. The musicians have music which they have prepared and want to play; the management want to make sure that the customers will come, and will have perhaps different ideas about what will be popular. All this seems very fixed and familiar, but it isn't especially old.

The institution of public concerts to which the public is invited and for which a fee is charged is not much more than a couple of hundred years old, and the timing and structure of these concerts took some time to settle down. Beethoven put on a concert in 1808 the music of which lasted for more than four hours. The audience heard premiere performances of the 5th and 6th symphonies, the first performance in Vienna of the 4th piano concerto, portions of the Mass in C and, for a finale, a work which he composed for the occasion from bits and pieces of work already done: we know it now as the Choral Fantasy. It was not a tremendous success as a concert, partly because the orchestra was not in great shape and the last work was inadequately prepared. People came and went, there was a lot of talking, and one of Beethoven's friends lamented that it did the composer more harm than good.

One of Mozart's concerts, in Frankfurt in 1790, is similarly heavy: each half had a piano concerto and a symphony. The first half added two arias; the second a fantasia and a duet. Large and 'bitsy' programs, with the movements of symphonies interspersed with overtures, vocal items and arrangements by composers of popular pieces of the day, were common throughout the 19th century. In the 20th century, perhaps because of transport changes, concert programs became shorter and more serious; it would now be thought utterly frivolous to break up a symphony, a concerto or a string quartet.

Tonight we are hearing a concert provided by a quartet of string players, supplemented for the final work by an extra viola, which makes the quartet a quintet. We are to hear a very well-known Mozart quartet, the first of the so-called 'Haydn' set of six, and the second of Bedrich Smetana's two quartets. They are followed by Antonin Dvorak's last quintet for strings (he wrote three, and the first is his Opus 1). The one we hear tonight, is somewhat confusingly called 'the American', as is the work which immediately precedes it in his works, the 12th string quartet. Apart from the fact that they were both written while the composer was living in the USA I cannot suggest why both bear the same nickname.

We hear these works in the order of their composition, which is common enough. It could be done differently: the last concert given in Canberra by the Emerson Quartet offered us four quartets, the order being (from memory) Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, Bartok. On that occasion the older work preceded the

younger in each half. There is now an elaborated history of Western music, and this history affects how we hear music and how we read about it as well. So it is usual to proceed from the oldest work to the youngest.

Why these three works? None of them needs any defence in itself. The Mozart is delightful, the Smetana wonderfully melodious despite the circumstances of its composition, and the Dvorak, probably the least familiar of the three works, just what you would expect a late Dvorak work to be like — tuneful, well-crafted and always enjoyable. But what do we gain by hearing them together? That is really a question to be addressed to the members of the quartet themselves, and no doubt we will all have somewhat different answers after the concert is over. My task is to find some connections between the composers, and to provide a bridge to the music.

We can start with the obvious: while Mozart and Smetana were pianists first, and Dvorak a viola-player, the first two were competent enough to play the viola with friends. All of them had to survive at one time or another by taking in pupils and teaching them. I think it is fair to say that all three are much better known for other works than chamber music. I know that as an adolescent I became acquainted with the music of Mozart through the divertimento 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik', with the music of Dvorak through his 9th or 'New World' Symphony, and with the music of Smetana through his symphonic poem 'die Moldau'. Indeed, at about this time I went to an evening of recorded music put on by one of my lecturers at University, where the major works were Beethoven string quartets. Asked what I thought of them I made some kind of dismissive remark, to which my host replied in an unexpectedly kindly way that I was probably just too young to appreciate them. Never mind, he said, they'll still be there when you're ready for them. And indeed they were, and how glad I am that I grew up to them. At the age of 18 I knew little more of Beethoven than the Fifth Symphony.

Nonetheless, and despite their fame elsewhere — Mozart for his piano concertos, Dvorak for his symphonies, Smetana for his operas - each composer is now well known for the quality of his string quartets: in the world of chamber music concert programs they are mainstream people. How else can we connect them? Well, Mozart and Dvorak both fell in love with older sisters but married younger ones: that is a singular enough connection. Smetana and Dvorak were both 'nationalist' composers, and together (along with Janacek) are regarded as the founding fathers of modern Czech music. Smetana conducted the first performance of one of Dvorak's overtures. Dvorak used ideas from Smetana's first quartet when he was writing his own 'American' quartet, his most famous. Dvorak and Mozart were both 'universal' composers, meaning that they were prepared to have a go at every form that was about at their time, producing wonderful examples of the type. And each was blessed with the gift of melody as well as the gift of composition: all their music is good to listen to. When he was young Smetana promised his diary that one day he would be as proficient as a pianist as Liszt and as proficient as a composer as Mozart.

What can we say about the differences? Mozart died young, at 35, from a kind of rheumatic fever; Smetana at 60, from syphilis; Dvorak at 63, probably from cancer. Dvorak had the sort of life you would want Mozart to have had: from humble beginnings he won his way to the top through ability and the fact that his ability was recognised by the great and powerful, in his case Brahms and the critic Eduard Hanslick. He was internationally famous and much admired in his own time, he seems to have had a happy marriage, and most of his children lived into adulthood. At the end of his life he was composing as well as he had ever done, and one wishes that he had been given another ten years or so.

Smetana had Beethoven's problem, the onset of deafness in adulthood, and at the end of his life he too could only imagine what was being played by watching the conductor's baton, or the movements of the players. His first wife died of tuberculosis and his favourite daughter died of scarlet fever. His increasing illness towards the end of his life made his marital life unhappy, and made composing especially difficult; he found it hard to get on with those who were important to him in having his operas staged. I'll say more about his illness in a moment, when talking of the work we will hear tonight.

As for Mozart, the play and film of 'Amadeus' have given most people a sense of what Mozart's life was like, although Salieri comes out of it all undeservedly badly. Of all the early deaths in music, Mozart's at 35 in 1791 is surely the one we regret the most. Had he lived to Dvorak's 63 he would have died in 1818; had he lived to Haydn's 77 he would have died in 1832, after both Beethoven and Schubert. What music we would have had! And what effect would Beethoven and Schubert have had upon him, as he lived and worked into the 19th century? What effect would the old Mozart have had on younger composers?

Let us now consider the works we are going to hear tonight, remembering what we know of their composers. Mozart published a set of six string quartets in 1785, and dedicated them, very respectfully, to Joseph Haydn, whom he had met some years before, and with whom he had played string quartets on at least one occasion. On that occasion the other players were also established composers, Ditters von Dittersdorf and Johann Vanhal, both of them accomplished quartet writers as well as players. Haydn had published his own set of six, the Opus 33 set, in 1781, and these were the stimulus to Mozart's. Haydn's quartets are most important in the development of the string quartet form, because for the first time each player makes a more or less equal contribution to the musical discourse, rather than simply accompanying or starring, as the case might be.

Mozart's dedication says that he regards Haydn as someone to whom he can entrust his quartets, and we know from that dedication that Haydn had already seen them in manuscript form. Although Mozart's reputation is that the music flowed effortlessly through him, and that he wrote in a kind of 'first draft, final draft' way, there is abundant evidence from the drafts which remain that he worked and worked at these quartets, over the best part of two years. Though we don't know for sure, it is probable that Haydn had been able to play at least some of them. It seems that Haydn was much impressed by Mozart's six, and his own later quartets show this, just as Mozart's later quartets show the further influence of Haydn.

The one we hear tonight is the first one in the set, K387 in G Major. Those who love string quartets know it well, even if they cannot name the Koechel number. The first movement proceeds at once into the theme, one of Mozart's easiest and most flowing, and thereafter we are musically cajoled and persuaded. The final movement is a grand fugue, not unlike the last movement of the 'Jupiter' symphony in manner, but most listeners will neither know nor care. This quartet is a brilliant example of the dictum that the purpose of art is to conceal art.

Smetana wrote only two string quartets, and a very fine piano trio, written in memoriam for his daughter. The first quartet we heard last year, performed by the Shanghai Quartet. Subtitled 'From my life', it was professedly autobiographical, and was regarded as too difficult and too advanced for public performance. It included a musical representation of the composer's deafness, notably a high-pitched scream that was the

sound he heard in his head each evening. The second quartet is also autobiographical, but now deafness is simply reality, and the music is what is in his head. His deteriorating health made the writing of this quartet an agony. He suffered from loss of memory, so that he could not remember what he had just written. He was under medical supervision that included injunctions about not composing, not reading and remaining quiet. He twice lost his memory and the power of speech. He died only a year after completing the second quartet, in a lunatic asylum. In his last days he could not recognise his own family, had attacks of great anger, and tried to escape.

But Smetana's second string quartet contains nothing of all this. It is wonderfully musical. Knowing what we know now, we might want to say that the somewhat episodic quality of the music is suggestive of ideas running around the composer's head, but never in the one place long enough for him to control them, develop them, finish them. But by the late 19th century long developments were disappearing from musical composition whether or not the composers had poor health. What this quartet does for me is to serve as a reminder that musical ideas, musical competence and musical outcomes are usually independent of the composer's financial or marital or health concerns. So Mozart's delight in scatological correspondence, Richard Strauss's fondness for playing poker with the orchestra after concerts, Tchaikovsky's anxiety about homosexuality, Smetana's appalling slide into tertiary syphilis, Beethoven's anger, irritability and personal slovenliness - these are interesting aspects of the person. But the music came from somewhere else. That is the art and the craft of the composer, and we learn little or nothing about it from knowing that composers are human. You could not tell, from Smetana's second string quartet, that its composer was two parts deathly ill and two parts mad, at least in the conventions of the time.

So to Dvorak's String Quintet. The jury is still out on whether or not the music that Dvorak composed in the USA contains 'American' themes; there is a school of thought that proclaims his music to be firmly embedded in Czech culture, wherever he wrote it. Another view is that Dvorak heard new musical ideas, but then composed in the new style, rather than simply writing the ideas down, as was becoming common at the time. Composers like Bartok, Kodaly, Grainger and others were beginning to record what they heard, especially in country areas, in the fear that these melodies and styles would disappear. But Dvorak seems not to have been interested in such an endeavour. From this perspective, the famous 'spiritual' theme in the second movement of the New World symphony, though it attracted words ('Goin' Home') after its composition, is a case of Dvorak's having a go at a spiritual, rather than recording one.

In the case of this quintet, we know that it was written in the USA, but in a Czech community in Iowa, Spillville (where else than the USA would you find a village with such a name?), where he went to spend his summer holidays. It is also important to know that he loved chamber music, and his first two published pieces were in that genre. Over the whole of his life he wrote some 40 works for various combinations, including 14 string quartets. In this fondness for chamber music he was unusual among composers of the second half of the 19th century. Most avoided the genre, seeing in it an outmoded form of the 18th century, in which all that could have been done had already been done, the best of it by Beethoven.

But Dvorak was a viola player, and there is not much written for the viola alone! He was also a great admirer of the composers of the classical period, and held Mozart and Haydn in particularly high regard. Not all his quartets are memorable, but his best, especially the 'American', the 'Indian', and the last two, written after he returned from the USA, are concert staples. Why did he conceive of this piece as a quintet? Well,

variety was a characteristic of Dvorak's music: he wrote an octet for strings, a sextet for strings, quintets for strings, a quintet for clarinet, a quintet for piano, piano quartets, piano trios, string trios... 'But what effect does it have, compared to a string quartet?' you might ask. Well, if the extra instrument is a viola the effect is to provide a smooth and mellow 'middle' to the ensemble. Tonight we have a rare opportunity to compare the weight and tone of a string quintet with the same qualities of a string quartet. It is an opportunity that I am looking forward to.

The quintet we will hear tonight is the last string quintet that Dvorak composed, the one in E Flat, Op. 97. He composed it immediately after completing the 'American' quartet: the quartet took him just over two weeks in the middle of June 1893, the quintet the next five weeks. The authorities seem to agree that in the first movement you will hear 'a transformed fragment of Indian song'. The scherzo comes next, and that has primitive dance rhythms. Are they Indian? Does it matter? The slow movement, which is one of his most beautiful, is a set of variations on two themes, the second of which Dvorak composed as the tune for the American national song 'My country, 'tis of thee'. The whole work is recognisably mature Dvorak, and its combination of good humour, nostalgia, sprightliness and harmony is characteristic of him and of no one else.