

## Takács Quartet and Marc-André Hamelin at Cleveland Chamber Music Society (Jan. 23)

By Peter Feher



The Takács Quartet and pianist Marc-André Hamelin put pleasure first in their January 23 performance for the Cleveland Chamber Music Society. In a program that could have been bogged down by questions of national pride and identity, these players instead chose to convey all the charm and character of their repertoire from a cosmopolitan perspective.

Hugo Wolf's *Italian Serenade*, the first piece on Tuesday's concert at Disciples Christian Church, set the tone for the evening. After some initial stiffness, the Takács players warmed up to the romantic atmosphere imagined by this Austrian composer who, in his short life, would never actually visit the Mediterranean.

Hamelin then joined the Quartet for a pair of more substantial works by Florence Price and Antonín Dvořák, two composers who have become inextricably linked for American audiences in recent years. Go to any U.S. orchestra, and if you see a piece by Price on the program, you'll likely hear some of Dvořák's music, too.

The reason for the connection is historical. Dvořák served as a mentor and model for the burgeoning school of American composers that he helped promote during his time in the U.S. in the 1890s. The Czech composer already had an international reputation for works that incorporated his country's folk music into symphonic forms, and he thought the formula could be replicated in America. He would even demonstrate the process to a certain extent in compositions like his "New World" Symphony.

Price is one of the 20th-century composers who continued in this vein, taking inspiration from African American folk music. You can hear spirituals, elements of ragtime, and bits of the blues in her chamber and orchestral scores, many of which were rediscovered and prepared for publication only recently, within the last 15 years.

The project of restoring Price's achievements is ongoing, and her Piano Quintet is one piece central to the endeavor. It's a major work that invites direct comparisons with Dvořák. Neither composer was happy with his or her original contribution to the genre — Price revised her score two decades later, and Dvořák didn't find success until his second attempt. His Piano Quintet No. 2, which concluded Tuesday's concert, is the sort of gem that emerges only from painstaking development.

Dvořák more fully develops his material beginning with his first movement, which is built up by degrees from the simple gesture of an ascending perfect fourth. In contrast, Price's first movement has the seed of a great idea — this catchy syncopated motif — but doesn't fully explore it. All the same, Hamelin savored the motif whenever it popped up in his part.

This isn't to say form is everything. In fact, Dvořák gives free rein to his enthusiasms in his quintet's second movement, "Dumka," a kind of Slavic folk song. Here, it's used beautifully and unconventionally and repeats so many times that you might think the composer didn't want the music to end, though it was always a treat to hear violist Richard O'Neill pick up the melody again. Price's second movement shares some of the soulful qualities of a spiritual, but the melody is transformed too soon and too often to be completely recognizable.

Both quintets go out on a pair of fun fast movements — Dvořák includes a Czech *furiant*, and Price writes one of her signature Juba dances. That movement by Price, in particular, let Hamelin and the Quartet be downright playful with their interpretation, proving that the best music needn't always be serious.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 7, 2024.*

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