

Antonin Dvorak's *American Quartet*

Antonin Dvorak (DVOR-zhahk)

Born – 1841– Czech Republic

Died – 1904 – Czech Republic

About the Composer

Dvorak always loved music – even as a young boy. When he was six he began studying music and very soon he was able to play the violin and viola quite well. He continued playing until he was 30, at which time he decided to focus on teaching and composing.

He soon became well respected as a composer, writing chamber music, orchestral music, vocal music and piano music. He loved the folk music of his native Bohemia, and used the different rhythms and melodies of his homeland in his music, giving it a very distinctive sound.

Between 1892 and 1895 Dvorak was the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. While in NYC, Dvorak met one of the earliest African-American composers – Harry Burleigh (1866-1949) – who introduced him to the American Spirituals. Dvorak loved these American “folk songs” and used some of their characteristics in the works he wrote in the America.

Dvorak returned to his homeland and was the director of the conservatory in Prague until his death in 1904.



Antonin Dvorak's "American" Quartet

What is the "American" Quartet?

The **String Quartet in F, Op. 96**, nicknamed the "**American**," is one of the most popular pieces of chamber music by Dvorak.

In 1893, Dvorak decided to take a vacation from his teaching position in New York City. He traveled to the small town of Spillville, Iowa, where a number of Czech immigrants lived. While relaxing in a comfortable cabin, Dvorak wrote this famous string quartet. He was inspired by his surroundings: the birds, the wide open spaces, the trains and the influences of the African American spiritual that he was recently introduced to.

The string quartet is about 30 minutes long has four movements:

- *Allegro ma non troppo* – a fast tempo, but not too fast
- *Lento* – a slow tempo
- *Molto Vivace* – a very fast tempo
- *Finale: vivace ma non troppo* – very fast, but not too much!



What is a String Quartet?

A string quartet is a musical ensemble of four string instruments – usually two violins, a viola and a cello. This is one of the most popular chamber ensembles in classical music, with nearly every major composer writing for this grouping.

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Activity 5 – The Spiritual in Classical Music

A cellist and violinist from Chamber Music Charleston will visit with smaller classes to discuss the importance of African American composers and the Spiritual to American music of the 20th century. Musicians will introduce students to African American composers William Burleigh (and his relationship with Antonin Dvorak) and William Grant Still. Musicians will perform selected spirituals, and discuss how the spiritual was used in such standard classical music forms as the string quartet. Influences of the Spiritual in Dvorak's "American" Quartet will be discussed.



South Carolina State Standards

General Music:

VI.A,B,C,D,F

VIII.A,C

IX.A,B

Materials:

In-class demonstration
by violinist and cellist of
Chamber Music
Charleston

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Activity 6 – The Pentatonic Scale

The Pentatonic Scale is a five note scale that was a building block of the African American Spiritual. Redefine simpler. ~~If you were to play only the black keys on a piano, you would have a pentatonic scale.~~

Musicians will perform the spirituals *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, which are both written using the pentatonic scale. If live musicians are not available, you may play the following from the accompanying CD:

Track 4: pentatonic scale played by the cello

Track 5: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* played on the cello

Track 6: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* singer

Track 7: *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* singer

One way Dvorak captured the spirit of the Spiritual was to use this scale frequently in the "American" Quartet.

Musicians of CMC will demonstrate this scale and how it is used in the "American" Quartet. If Musicians are not present, you may use the three examples on the accompanying CD (tracks 8, 9 and 10). Track 11 is a performance of the complete final movement of the Quartet.



South Carolina State Standards

General Music:

VI.G

Materials:

In-class demonstration by violinist and cellist of Chamber Music Charleston or accompanying CD tracks 4-11.

Pentatonic Scale Sheet (from *Supplemental Worksheets*)