

# PHILADELPHIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

a life more beautiful

**Brentano Quartet**

**Wednesday, March 1 – 7:30 PM**

*American Philosophical Society, Benjamin Franklin Hall*

**PREVIEW  
NOTES**

## PROGRAM

### ***Dvořák and the American Identity***

When the Bohemian composer Antonin Dvořák was invited to New York to direct the National Conservatory of Music of America in 1892, he was charged with the unusual task of helping to establish an American musical identity. It is perhaps no surprise that this task should have fallen to a European, given that Europe was considered the arbiter of musical culture, but what Dvořák had to say turned the musical establishment upside down:

"In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music...There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source. The American musician understands these tunes and they move sentiment in him."

Dvořák proceeded to infuse his own compositions with these themes, yielding magnificent results; the pieces Dvořák wrote in America are among his most beloved. Dvořák's pronouncement revealed an open and deeply egalitarian spirit which resonated perfectly with the progressive mission of the Conservatory: to offer music education for all—including Blacks, women, and the disabled. During Dvořák's three-year tenure, tuition was waived for anyone who demonstrated need or possessed musical talent. If his conviction was that the future of American music lay with our own people, then he made certain that all of our people had the opportunity to learn.

Tonight's program pays tribute to Dvořák and his American legacy. Featured is his late Quartet in Ab, Op. 105, written largely in New York, but completed and published upon his return to Europe in 1895. In the spirit of an early 20th century recital, we have chosen some "encore" pieces for the second half to reflect Dvořák's simple wisdom: that the foundation of an American musical identity would be discovered in our own backyard. Included are some of the spirituals he found so moving, works by William Grant Still and George Walker that may never have been written had Dvořák not been an early champion of Black music, music by Charles Ives that quotes American popular songs, and one blues arrangement by Steven Mackey. If the program has an emblem, it is the soulful and evocative slow movement from Dvořák's "American" Quartet, which bridges the two halves as the music itself bridges two continents. The question of American musical identity may have yet to be resolved, but, whatever it may be, Dvořák and his music certainly influenced its trajectory. —*Serena Canin*