

Around Town

Musical sojourn

By Frank Kuznik
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Americans coming to Prague to play Smetana? Yes, and not just the Manhattan String Quartet (MSQ), which gave a fine rendition of Smetana's String Quartet No. 1 at the Rudolfinum's Suk Hall last Friday night. The quartet has nearly 90 students in tow, mostly from the United States, who are in town this month soaking up musical tradition and atmosphere while they study the fine points of Smetana's life and work.

This is the seventh "cultural expedition" led by the MSQ, which stages annual excursions to European cities, where the members immerse themselves and an enthusiastic group of students in a select composer's work and environment: Debussy in Paris, Mendelssohn in Leipzig, Bartók in Budapest. The MSQ was in Prague studying Dvorák in 2002, and found it so enriching that the group returned to study another Czech master.

"We want to walk down the same streets the composers did, see what they saw and eat what they ate," cellist Chris Finckel says over lunch at the Astoria Hotel.

It makes a difference in the quality of the music, according to viola player John Dexter. "Our premise is that there must be something Czech players have that we, coming from places like Vermont and Iowa, don't have a clue about," he says. "And we certainly get that feeling when we're here. We come away with very different knowledge than we've been playing with all these years."

That's an impressive statement coming from one of America's premier string quartets, which has been together for 36 years. It's also a nice counterpoint to the image the United States projects abroad these days: arrogant, self-centered, narrow-minded. This group is quite the opposite.

"American chamber-music players are geographically isolated from the repertoire they're playing," Dexter observes. "Visiting cities where the pieces were written brings us closer to the music."

The MSQ is nothing if not adventuresome, venturing around the world with a distinctive repertoire of its own. It was the first American group, for example, to record the entire cycle of 15 string quartets by Shostakovich. When it went to Tokyo to perform the cycle, it was forced to play all 15 pieces in one day — four consecutive concerts with short breaks in between.

The regimen for the weeklong sessions in Prague this month is less strenuous, and includes field trips to the Smetana Memorial in Jabkenice, the Smetana Museum in Prague and the celebrity cemetery in Vyšehrad, where Smetana is buried. The workshops offer some good guest instructors, too: Josef Kekula, an accomplished violinist with the Stamic Quartet, and Eduard Melkus, a noted violin player from Vienna.

But inspiration is to be found everywhere in Prague, according to MSQ members. Dexter says he's even found the quality of the musicians playing "tourist concerts" — the performances at churches and Obecní dum that typically feature crowd-pleasers like The Four Seasons — to be good.

"The difference with the U.S. is, if you're on Times Square in New York, some guy will come up to you and say, 'Wanna see some girls?' " he says. "Here, some guy will come up to you and say, 'Wanna see some Vivaldi?' "

But cultural exchanges work both ways, and hearing the MSQ perform is a totally fresh experience for anyone used to a steady diet of European players. The group has an exceptionally bright, clear sound, technically very precise and seamless. Its interpretations of the pieces it played Friday (string quartets by Beethoven, Shostakovich and Smetana) had more of an intellectual burnish than the emotional quality that typifies a lot of European styles.

Whatever your preference, this is a great opportunity to hear a first-class chamber ensemble put a New World spin on the classics. The MSQ plays at Suk Hall again Friday, Jan. 19, at 7:30 p.m.