

# **Antonín Dvořák and his Symphony No. 9 (New World Symphony) Piano arrangement**

Table of Contents

## **Antonín Dvořák and his Symphony No. 9 in E minor Op. 95 (New World Symphony) Piano arrangement**

During the last years of his life the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) was considered by many throughout the Western world to be the greatest of all living composers. And his popularity has never waned: his music still speaks to us today and occupies a conspicuous position in performance repertoire.

In part this merely reflects the fact that his oeuvre is extraordinarily large and varied. He was one of the most prolific of all great composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and left substantial outputs in practically all major genres from short piano pieces to operas. Even within genres, moreover, we find an astonishingly broad range of style – in string quartets [♪](#), for instance, from the mind-boggling chromatic intensity of some passages in early and middle-period works to the Finale of the “American” Quartet [♪](#) with its down-home, rollicking barn dance.

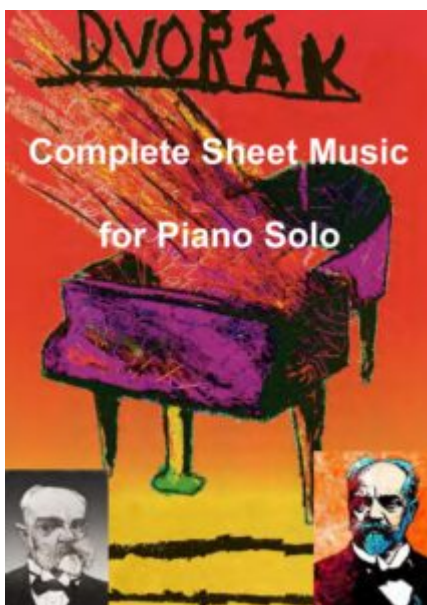
However, the quantity and diversity of Dvořák’s output are complemented by its generally very high quality, with many of his works holding a place among the greatest musical achievements of their time – or perhaps any time. His music probes the depths and all the nooks and crannies of our

emotions, making us cringe in agony and weep with sorrow, but also laugh and smile through tears of rapture. Further adding to his appeal is his life's story as a "self-made" man who, through talent, hard work, and indefatigable determination overcame poverty and low social standing to become an artist admired (and well compensated financially) all over the Western world.

## **1841-57: CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN NORTHERN BOHEMIA**

Oldest known photo (1888) of the house where Dvořák was born. Standing third from left: the composer.

Dvořák was born on 8 September 1841 in the Czech village of Nelahozeves, in the region called Bohemia – one of the two main Czech lands (together with Moravia to its east) in the Austrian (from 1867 called Austro-Hungarian) Empire of central and east-central Europe, having its main capital in Vienna. In Nelahozeves, lying on the Vltava River just thirteen miles to the north-northwest from the Bohemian capital of Prague, he spent the first twelve years of his life. For much of that time his parents operated a tavern in premises they had on lease which also included minimal space for their own living quarters.



It was in those premises (today housing the Antonín Dvořák Memorial in Nelahozeves) that the composer came into the world. But his father also ran a butcher's business, mainly in a building upstream along the Vltava no longer standing today with an apartment which was the family's residence for much of this period. Neither of these businesses thrived. Reportedly the father devoted more time and attention to his passion for music – mainly as a zither player – than to his enterprises.

The dance hall found in the tavern provided the young Antonín with vivid experiences of village dance bands and musical merriment. One should not imagine, however, that he was exposed only to music indigenous to rural Bohemia. His father had apparently learned to play the zither while wandering around the Empire from 1832 to 1840, spending most of that time in Hungary. Meanwhile in the village church in Nelahozeves the boy heard frequent performances of music by Mozart, and Italian workers brought in to dig a tunnel for the new railroad in 1847-48 liked to gather in the evenings around the Dvořák butcher shop where they would sing their favorite songs from home – one can imagine the famous chorus of the Hebrews from *Nabucco*, which was just then all the rage in Italy. Construction of the railroad – the first link between Prague and Dresden – may have planted the seed for Dvořák's passionate interest in railways and locomotives, well-documented for the last two decades of his life.

From 1846 to 1853 Dvořák attended the one-room elementary school in Nelahozeves – a type of school for which the law of the Austrian Empire on education prescribed a curriculum for the lower classes, expected to remain in their social place and have no higher ambitions. But the teacher Josef Spitz was a very skilled musician, like most school teachers in Bohemia in those days; he gave the boy instruction in violin (starting around the age of six, apparently) and singing.

In 1853 young Antonín moved about nine miles to the west to the somewhat larger town of Zlonice, where he lived with his

uncle and aunt. Here again he attended an elementary school, but of a somewhat higher caliber, with instruction given in the German language as was almost always the case in better schools in Bohemia at that time. It appears that he dropped out of school there early on, perhaps because of insufficient knowledge of German. But he remained in Zlonice a total of three years and bettered his musical skills there mainly under the tutelage of Antonín Liehmann, adding organ and piano to his abilities as a performer and undertaking his first attempts at composition, including a simple polka for piano (B. 1 – the first item in Jarmil Burghauser's thematic catalogue of Dvořák's works) and at least one other polka for instrumental ensemble now lost but described by the composer in later recollections.

Common in the Dvořák literature is the assertion that he worked as a butcher's apprentice in Zlonice and received a journeyman's certificate. This has proven to be erroneous, but apparently after the boy's parents and siblings themselves moved to Zlonice in 1855 he did help his father in the butcher's business he established there.

A brief but important phase in the budding composer's adolescence was the 1856-57 school year, when he lived with a German family in the small city of Böhmisch Kamnitz (today called Česká Kamenice), fifty-three miles north of Prague near the Bohemian border with Saxony in an area then inhabited almost entirely by ethnic Germans. Apparently his parents sent him there for him to learn the German language, which was essential for anyone in the Austrian Empire needing to communicate regularly with persons above the lower social strata. Here he also attended a purely-German school, where his marks in all subjects were 'sehr gut' – the highest possible grade. And he continued his training in music with the local church music director, Franz Hanke.

ANTON DVOŘÁK

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## 1857-71: YEARS OF STRUGGLE IN PRAGUE, COMPOSING IN A VACUUM

In 1857 at the age of sixteen Dvořák enrolled as a pupil in the Institute for Church Music in Prague, which city remained his principal residence for the rest of his life. (Even while in America from 1892 to 1895 he maintained his apartment in Prague.) After Vienna, Prague was the second-largest city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (bumped down one notch in 1872 by the union of Buda and Pest). Prague was cosmopolitan and thoroughly multi-cultural, with ethnic Czechs constituting the majority of the population but a large minority of Germans and a substantial population of (mostly German-speaking) Jews as well. Dvořák maintained friendly relations with all, but was strongly affected by the fervent nationalistic ambitions of his fellow Czechs – a Slavic people struggling to assert its cultural identity and accomplishments after centuries of forced "Germanization" by the emperors of the ruling Hapsburg dynasty. To some extent Dvořák sympathized with Czech nationalist aims – certainly he was proud of his Czech heritage, and sometimes offended by German attitudes of superiority – but he also saw the positions taken by many of his compatriots in these matters as being fanatical and intolerant.

The curriculum at the Institute for Church Music included all skills needed by a proper church musician at that time including composition. While a student there Dvořák composed several preserved organ preludes and fugues (B. 302) and also at least one mass (B. 2), which, however – like many more works he wrote through 1873 – he himself later consigned to the flames. He graduated in 1859 ranking second in his class of fourteen after one Sigmund Glanz (whose subsequent career was thoroughly undistinguished).

During his first year in Prague Dvořák attended concurrently a general school associated with the Church of Mary of the Snows. There, with German again as the language of instruction, he once more received high marks. But attendance at this school, still at an elementary level and for Dvořák essentially "remedial," marked the end of his formal education outside music.

One of Dvořák's fellow students at the Institute for Church Music, a year ahead of him in the curriculum, was Karel Bendl (1838-97) who became his close friend. Bendl soon emerged as a highly esteemed composer – until 1878 much more so than Dvořák. Bendl had relatively wealthy parents and, unlike his impoverished friend, could afford a piano as well as an extensive library of scores. He allowed use of both to Dvořák, who continued his musical education during the 1860s by studying the scores of works by great (mostly German) masters.

After graduating from the Institute Dvořák applied for a position as church organist but was rejected. Around that time he became violist in an entertainment orchestra playing in coffee houses and restaurants, which in 1862 was hired as the core of the orchestra for the newly opened Provisional Czech Theater. There Dvořák served as principal violist for nine years, playing in performances nearly every evening year-round. In this position he experienced, for example, the first performances of the first three operas of Bedřich Smetana under the composer's baton along with many other new works by

other Czech compatriots. Most of the repertoire, however, was Italian, French, and German.

To supplement his low salary as an orchestra member, Dvořák gave private piano lessons. Starting in 1864 two of his pupils were the sisters Josefina and Anna Čermáková, fifteen and ten years old at that time. Long after Dvořák's death his composition pupil and son-in-law Josef Suk (1874-1935) reported that the young composer had fallen in love with Josefina, a beautiful and very popular actress in the theater where he played, but, sensing no interest on her part, did not even tell her of his feelings. This was apparently around 1865, during which year he composed a cycle of eighteen songs to texts by Gustav Pflieger-Moravský about frustrated love known as *Cypresses* (B. 11).

In 1873 he married Josefina's younger sister Anna, a talented singer with whom by all indications he enjoyed a very happy marriage for the rest of his life. The couple maintained close contact with Josefina and her later husband Count Václav Kounic, and according to Suk the extensive passage of poignant nostalgia at the conclusion of Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B minor (B. 191), completed in 1895, was composed as a memorial to Josefina who died just at that time. This passage includes a quotation of Dvořák's own song *Leave Me Alone* (B. 157, No. 1), which according to his biographer Otakar Šourek (perhaps also based on information from Suk) was a special favorite of Josefina.

For his first sixteen years in Prague, Dvořák lived with relatives, save only a period in 1864-65 when he shared a single room with four other men, reportedly for the reason that one of them had a piano there. Paradoxically it was precisely while living in those cramped quarters, during the year 1865, that he produced an especially copious outpouring of music – besides the mentioned songs also his first two symphonies (B. 9 and 12) and a Cello Concerto in A major (B. 10) with piano accompaniment .

Throughout the 1860s and on through most of 1871 Dvořák composed prolifically – orchestral and chamber works, songs, and two operas – but without receiving a single performance to our knowledge, let alone a publication. He probably lacked the connections and the social skills to promote himself successfully, but another factor was undoubtedly the difficulty of his works for the performers and their often highly original, experimental style. For example, the style of his String Quartet in E minor / B minor from 1870 or earlier (B. 19) reminds one of nothing so much as Arnold Schoenberg's chromatic and tonally nebulous *Transfigured Night* – composed thirty years later!

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to Dvořák's success, though, was the fact that by comparison with Smetana, and even his friend Bendl, he made practically no attempt to satisfy the appetite of the Czechs for music they could consider distinctively their own. In recalling later what composers had influenced him he mentioned mainly German names: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann – and above all in the 1860s and early 1870s he was "perfectly crazy" about Wagner (though we must discount as undocumented and unlikely the frequent assertion that he played in an orchestra under Wagner's baton). His first opera *Alfred* (B. 16), composed in 1870, is symptomatically to a text in German (with a story set in England) – and was never performed during his lifetime.

## **1871-73: HOPES AROUSED AND DASHED**

Charles Plaza in Prague 1870. Through most of the 1860's until his marriage in 1873 Dvořák lived with relatives in a building at the upper right.

Composed in 1871, only a year after *Alfred*, Dvořák's second opera *King and Collier* (*Král a uhlíř*, B. 21, translated by Burghauser as *King and Charcoal Burner*) has a story set in Bohemia and a text in Czech. Yet he admittedly modelled its music on the style of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*. Even so



Smetana, now head of the Provisional Czech Theatre's opera company, accepted it for performance. Apparently encouraged, Dvořák left his position in the theater orchestra sometime during 1871 to devote more time to composition, and as far as we know had no regular employment for a period of nearly three years. Rehearsals for the opera were postponed until late 1873, but in the meantime some other new works by Dvořák were performed, starting modestly in December 1871 with a song to a text by Eliška Krásnohorská (B. 23, No. 5). Most significant was a seventeen-minute Czech patriotic *Ode* (in Czech called *Hymnus*, B. 27) for chorus and orchestra with which he scored a triumph in March 1873.

That spring he also achieved his first publication, of six songs (B. 30) to texts from the *Dvůr Králové Manuscript* – texts that played an important role in the Czech national revival movement, set to music also by several of his contemporaries.

It was probably around the beginning of July 1873 that he and Anna Čermáková conceived a child (born 4 April 1874), and also that he completed his joyous Third Symphony in E flat (B. 34), a masterful work, though in a style quite different from the familiar music of his maturity and still showing, among other things, the influence of Wagner.

In August 1873 rehearsals finally began for *King and Collier* – and the opera was pronounced unperformable! Royalties therefrom would have been Dvořák's only opportunity to earn income from his compositions; throughout this period, until 1878, he received no fees from publishers for works they issued. Merriment on the occasion of the wedding in November 1873, with a child already on the way, must have been dampened by great anxiety – as can perhaps be heard in the *Fourth Symphony* (B. 41), completed in March 1874. Later Dvořák recalled how during the early days of his marriage he was tempted to steal bread to feed his family.

## 1874-77: MODEST RECOGNITION AS A COMPOSER BY FITS AND STARTS, FAMILY TRAGEDY

In February 1874 Dvořák accepted a miserably-paid position as church organist, which he held for three years. The rejected opera *King and Collier*, like its predecessor *Alfred*, was never performed during his lifetime, but he took the extraordinary step of setting the same libretto to entirely new music (B. 42), not retaining a single motive from the first setting, and now employing a style that was simpler and more folk-like, which Czech audiences could accept as their own. This entirely new *King and Collier* (in the literature often called misleadingly a new version of the same opera) was performed four times from November 1874 to January 1875 and received enthusiastic reviews.

Dvořák followed it up immediately with the charming one-act opera *The Stubborn Lovers* (B. 46)—which, however, had to wait a full seven years for its premiere!

Meanwhile in July 1874 Dvořák applied for a grant offered by the Austrian government to talented but poor artists, and in February 1875 he received the first of five such annual grants. The jury was chaired by the influential Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, and starting with Dvořák's second application another member was Johannes Brahms. Both would later become instrumental in promoting his works in Austria and Germany.

The grants were by no means sufficient to support a growing family – Anna helped to some extent by performing as a paid church singer – but they apparently gave encouragement to the ever-hopeful composer. In 1875, the most prolific year of his life, he composed many works in which he may be said to have 'found his voice', including the earliest of his pieces to become an immortal 'hit' – the String Serenade in E major (B. 52) ♪ – but also for example the grand opera *Vanda* (B. 55) ♪,

presented on stage five times in 1876-77.

Many substantial and beautiful works from this period were not performed until years later, most notably the eighty-minute *Stabat Mater* ♪ for chorus, vocal soloists, and orchestra (B. 71), composed 1876-77, premiered 1880 in Prague but without making any great impact.

The *Stabat Mater* was not really 'discovered' until its performance in London in 1883 – the first of innumerable presentations of this work during the composer's lifetime in England where it was his most universally-admired composition.

Alas the first years of Dvořák's family life proved tragic: by August 1876 Anna had born three children, but by September 1877 they were all dead. And while his reputation as a composer did grow somewhat by fits and starts, it remained limited mainly to Prague and entirely to the Czech lands, apart from the jury members in Vienna who evaluated his annual grant applications.

## **BREAKTHROUGH IN 1878**

In December 1877 Brahms took the crucial step that opened the way to Dvořák's international fame when he recommended to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock in Berlin, one of the works Dvořák had submitted with his grant application: a set of duets for soprano and alto with piano accompaniment to texts of Moravian folk songs (B. 60 and 62), composed at the request of a successful Moravian merchant in Prague, Jan Neff, whose children were Dvořák's piano pupils.

Simrock issued them under the somewhat misleading but attractive title of *Klänge aus Mähren* (*Sounds from Moravia*, later known in English as *Moravian Duets*) ♪, and Germans were enchanted by their fresh, spontaneous-sounding music, relatively simple yet highly imaginative. Even more successful was a work Dvořák then wrote early in 1878 at Simrock's

behest: the first of his two sets of *Slavonic Dances* ♪ for piano four-hands (B. 78), which he orchestrated later the same year (B. 83).

By October 1879 the orchestral version had been performed in Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin, Nice, London, and New York, assuring Dvořák an international reputation that has never dwindled to this day. Now more and more of his works, mostly new but also some from earlier years, were published not only by Simrock but by other publishers in Germany then, starting in 1884, by Novello in London. And for the first time he received *payment* from publishers. After decades of living in tight financial straights he now saw a marked and permanent improvement in his financial situation.

Worth noting is that Dvořák's first two publications outside Prague both marketed him as a Slavic composer and displayed the traits Germans most admired in music of the Slavs: something fresh, spontaneous-sounding, and a bit exotic, with lively dance rhythms. The same was true of many more works that helped to establish his reputation. This was felt to be Dvořák's niche – the type of music for which he supposedly had the greatest talent and felt the greatest affinity. It is also important to note, however, that almost all these works were composed not on his own initiative but at the request of somebody else, that their Czech or Slavic titles were usually not his own, and that they almost never use actual folk melodies: in the case of the *Moravian Duets* Dvořák explicitly rejected Neff's request that he arrange the melodies of Moravian folk songs – he took only their texts. Dvořák proved to be extremely skilled at writing this kind of music, but it is certainly not his *only* style nor even the style to which he felt the greatest natural inclination. All the while he also composed, in fact *mainly* composed, works in a cosmopolitan style often of great sophistication and profundity, comparable in some cases with the works of the greatest German masters.

Another fact generally overlooked is that Dvořák's

international stardom launched by the *Moravian Duets* and *Slavonic Dances* came simultaneously with his first really penetrating and long-lasting success on the domestic front, which he achieved in the genre of opera: premiered in February 1878, *The Peasant a Rogue* (B. 67, *Šelma sedlák*, translated by Burghauser as *The Cunning Peasant*) was given fourteen times by the end of that year and more than eighty times within the composer's lifetime.

This work, too, made a contribution to his international reputation to some extent, with performances in Dresden, Hamburg, and Vienna during the 1880s.

To make the turnabout in Dvořák's fortunes in 1878 complete, Anna gave birth to the first of the couple's remaining six children, all of whom outlived the composer. This was Otilie, who in 1898 would marry Dvořák's composition pupil Josef Suk.

## **1878-86: GRAND PROJECTS OF A MAJOR PLAYER ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE**

Over the course of the next few years after 1878, Dvořák's biggest single project by far was the grand opera *Dmitry* ♪ (B. 127), to a story that is a sequel to *Boris Godunov*.

Premiered in 1882, this work was given sixty-six performances during his lifetime. But he also composed numerous works on a more modest scale including many requested by well-known musicians outside the Czech lands, such as the Sixth Symphony in D major ♪ (B. 112) for Hans Richter, conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic, and the *Gypsy Melodies* ♪ (or *Gypsy Songs*, B. 104, including as No. 4 the famous "Songs My Mother Taught Me") for the Viennese tenor Gustav Walter.

From April 1883 through the end of 1886 Dvořák devoted virtually *all* of his compositional efforts to satisfying various requests, which came mainly from abroad – from Simrock in Berlin, for example, for a second set of *Slavonic Dances*

(B. 145, orchestral version B. 147) and the four songs *In Folk Tone* (B. 146) – but above all from England: mainly the eighty-two-minute cantata *The Spectre's Bride* (B. 135), the Seventh Symphony in D minor (B. 141), and the two-and-a-half hour oratorio *St. Ludmila* (B. 144).

During the years 1884-86 he undertook five extended trips to England to conduct his works, spending a total of about a hundred days there during this period and reaping unprecedented ovations as one of the great composers of the time.

Some of Dvořák's works composed from 1883 through 1885 including two of his greatest – the Piano Trio in F minor ♪ (B. 130) and above-mentioned Seventh Symphony – convey a mood of intense struggle and drama.

This has been ascribed in the literature to feelings of inner turmoil he allegedly experienced as he considered proposals from his supporters in Vienna that he resettle there and compose operas to German texts – either of which would supposedly have constituted a betrayal of his nation. Examination of the evidence shows that this inner turmoil was experienced by some of his Czech supporters, who feared their newfound national hero might thus abandon them as it were, but that Dvořák himself, far less fanatical, saw no “betrayal” in choice of language or place of residence and was influenced more by practical considerations. A letter written in October 1887 by Simrock to Brahms, not mentioned in any Dvořák biography, tells how during a recent visit by the Dvořáks to Berlin Anna had said her husband suffered from the quarrels over national issues in Prague and would indeed have liked to move to Vienna but for the problem of their “numerous children” (five of them by this time), perhaps referring to Vienna's high cost of living. (Nine years later, in 1896, Brahms reportedly offered Dvořák financial support from his own personal resources if it would allow him to move to Vienna; we don't know whether Dvořák considered accepting that

offer.)

## VYSOKÁ

For at least several years now the Dvořáks had been paying frequent visits to the village of Vysoká, forty miles southwest of Prague, to visit Anna's sister Josefina and her husband Count Václav Kounic at their chateau as well as another of the Čermák sisters, Klotilda, who also lived there with her husband. The composer was enchanted by the place – its peace and quiet and the beauty of the surrounding fields and forests – and in 1884 he bought a farmstead from the Count which he had transformed into a modest summer residence for his own family. Each year through the end of his life they spent much or most of their time there from May through September, and it was there that he composed part or all of numerous works.

## 1887-89: DVOŘÁK TAKES A LOOK BACK AT EARLIER WORKS; HIS OWN NEW PROJECTS, AND REQUESTS FROM FRIENDS AT HOME

In 1887 Dvořák quite abruptly ceased accepting commissions from abroad, and through the end of 1889 he composed mainly to satisfy his own inner urgings – e.g. the famous Piano Quintet [♩](#) (his second, B. 155, in A major as was also the first, B. 28 from 1872), the opera *The Jacobin* [♩](#) (B. 159), and the Eighth Symphony (B. 163) – or at the request of personal friends as in the case of the Mass in D [♩](#) with organ accompaniment for the architect, builder, and philanthropist Josef Hlávka and his wife Zdenka (B. 153, later orchestral version B. 175).

During this same period he took a nostalgic look back at the many works from his early adulthood that lay unpublished and were performed only rarely if at all, several of which he now resuscitated in revised form and added to the canon of his works, most notably his magnificent Fifth Symphony [♩](#) from 1875

(B. 54).

## **1890-91: LOOKING ABROAD ONCE MORE, AND TEACHING**

In 1890, however, Dvořák again turned major attention to admirers abroad, traveling to his most distant destination yet when he conducted orchestral works of his in Moscow and St. Petersburg at the invitation of Tchaikovsky, and composing for England the largest of all his liturgical works, the ninety-seven-minute *Requiem* for chorus, vocal soloists and orchestra (B. 165).

Dvořák in his graduation gown upon receipt of his honorary doctorate in Cambridge, 1891.

He also journeyed to England in April 1890 to conduct his Eighth Symphony, then twice in 1891: in June to receive an honorary doctorate at Cambridge and in October to conduct the *Requiem* in Birmingham in its world premiere.

Meanwhile a major change in Dvořák's daily routine came when, for the first time since leaving his post as church organist in 1877, he took a regular position as an employee: effective January 1891 he became a teacher of composition, orchestration, and musical forms at the conservatory in Prague. He would continue in regular employment as a teacher through the end of his life. In Prague he trained such outstanding members of the upcoming generation of composers as Josef Suk, Oskar Nedbal, and Vítězslav Novák.

## **1892-95: THE AMERICAN ADVENTURE**

Already in June 1891, however, a telegram arrived from Jeannette Thurber, President of the National Conservatory of



Music of America, offering Dvořák a post as composition teacher and (nominal) director of that school in New York. Despite the fantastic offer of \$15,000 per school year as salary (more than thirty times his pay at the conservatory in Prague!) he vacillated until early 1892 when – prodded apparently by his wife Anna who had a greater sense for material matters and the financial needs of their large family – he finally signed the contract. As though the impending adventure across the ocean was not exciting enough, from January through May 1892 Dvořák embarked on another unprecedented project: playing piano in more than forty concerts of his own chamber works in a “farewell” tour of Czech towns in Bohemia and Moravia, with Ferdinand Lachner at the violin and Hanuš Wihan as cellist, always featuring his new trio *Dumky* (B. 166) and one or the other of his earlier trios for this combination of instruments.

Dvořák and family on the steps of their residence on East 17th St New York, 1893.

Surprisingly, neither this concert tour nor Dvořák’s regular teaching duties from January 1891 onward through many succeeding school years in Prague and New York had much effect on his fecundity as a composer: he continued turning out one major work after another including, especially in America, some of his best-known compositions such as the Ninth Symphony (B. 179, subtitled by Dvořák himself “From the New World”), the String Quartet in F and String Quintet in E flat (B. 180 and 181, both nicknamed by others, appropriately enough, “American”), the *Biblical Songs* (B. 185), and the Cello Concerto in B minor (B. 191) – perhaps the greatest concerto for cello ever composed by anyone.

Dvořák spent a total of about twenty-four months in America: three school years in New York from September 1892 through April 1895 plus one long summer vacation period in 1893 in the Czech village of Spillville, Iowa – birthplace of his constant companion throughout the American sojourn, the violinist Josef

Kovařík (1870-1951) whom he had met in Prague where he was studying at the conservatory. According to Kovařík's (perhaps slightly biased) testimony, Dvořák was so enamored of Spillville that he considered settling there permanently, dissuaded only by his wife's objections (for family reasons) plus concern that his Czech compatriots would again regard him as having betrayed his nation. During the summer of 1893 Dvořák also visited Omaha, the twin cities in Minnesota, Chicago where he conducted a concert of his works at the World's Columbian Exposition, and on his way back to New York also Niagara Falls.

Dvořák was fascinated by African-American spirituals, which he encountered in New York both in written form and as sung by the numerous Black students and faculty members at the conservatory (most notably Harry Burleigh). Also intriguing to him was Native American culture mainly as represented in Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (which he had already known in Czech translation), and apparently to some extent the music of Native Americans as well, which he heard in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in New York (timing unknown) and in Spillville. He himself pointed out the influence on some of his works composed in America of spirituals and of *Hiawatha*, as well as, according to three somewhat dubious articles in the *New York Herald* of 14-16 December 1893, Native American music.

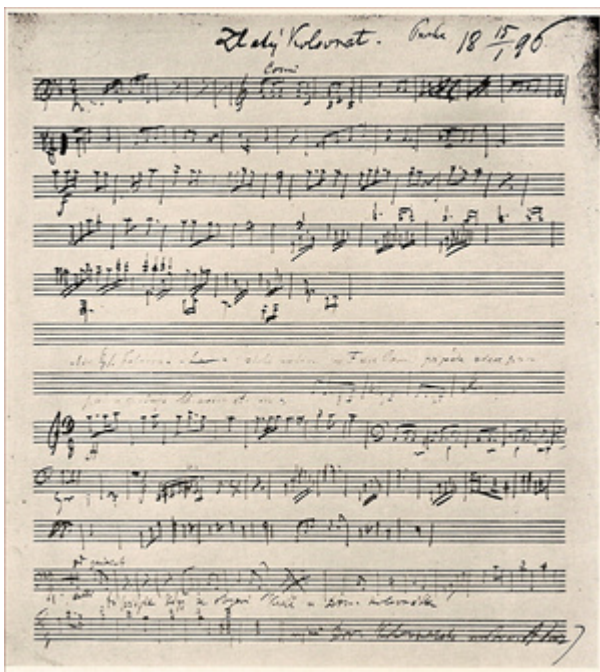
He also stressed, however, that he never actually quoted American melodies in these works, but rather wrote his own themes imbued with their spirit. Reportedly he came very close to composing an opera based on *Hiawatha*, thwarted only by the lack of a suitable libretto.

In America, too, Dvořák's composition pupils had an impact on the further development of music, in this case most remarkably via *their* pupils: his student Will Marion Cook became the teacher of Duke Ellington, Harry Rowe Shelley taught Charles Ives, and Rubin Goldmark taught both Aaron Copland and George Gershwin. More generally, Dvořák's public declarations of

appreciation for African American music may have given broad encouragement to the development of jazz.

Though enthusiastic about American music and the American way of life in general, Dvořák was intensely homesick during his last school year there, and his wife Anna even more so. It is unclear to what extent this was a matter of missing their children: during the first school year in New York they had had two of their children with them, then from June 1893 through May 1894 all six, then during the last school year (for reasons unknown) only one. Thurber wanted Dvořák to continue, and indeed he had signed a contract to teach in New York through the 1895-96 school year. However, in consequence of the financial "Panic of 1893" in America Thurber was in arrears in paying his salary. While home in Bohemia during the summer of 1895 he and Anna decided not to return to America.

## 1896-1904: BACK IN BOHEMIA



Sketch for the symphonic poem the *Golden Spinning Wheel*, 1896. Dvořák resumed his teaching duties at the conservatory in Prague, where in 1901 he was named artistic director. After completing his last two string quartets late in 1895 he abandoned forever the field of "absolute music" (instrumental music with no explicit extra-musical "program") which had

figured so conspicuously in his output to date, now composing five symphonic poems and then focusing almost exclusively on opera. Already in 1894 he had drastically revised *Dmitry*. In 1897 he did the same for *The Jacobin*, then in 1899-1902 he composed three new works in this genre: *The Devil and Kate* (B. 201), *Rusalka* (meaning *The Water Nymph*, B. 203, one of his very greatest works), and finally *Armida* (B. 206) which became his last completed composition.

In 1901 came the highest of all the many official honors bestowed on Dvořák during his lifetime, when Emperor Franz Joseph appointed this graduate of the humble school in Nelahozeves, intended for members of the lower class who would never amount to anything, as a lifelong member of the Austrian House of Lords. Though he attended only one session, this honor bears eloquent testimony to the long path he had travelled.

## **AGORAPHOBIA, RELATIVE INACTIVITY IN FINAL YEARS**

Many of those who knew Dvořák well recalled that during the last decades of his life he suffered from certain symptoms of neurosis; his close friend Jindřich Kàan (1852-1926) identified the disorder, accurately enough it seems, as agoraphobia – the experience of unreasonable anxiety in situations perceived as dangerous or uncomfortable, often in association with crowds. This condition may have first arisen in 1885-86 when he was composing *St. Ludmila* on commission for the English: he felt himself to be under almost unbearable pressure and, as he himself recalled, was nearly driven to insanity. In the last few years before his death in 1904, four months short of his sixty-third birthday, we observe a rather drastic and unexplained slowdown in all his activities. After *Rusalka*, completed in November 1900, his only work composed during the more than three years he had remaining was *Armida*.

He virtually ceased travelling. After conducting the world premiere of the *Cello Concerto* during his ninth and last visit to London in 1896 he never left continental Europe. After attending a concert in Berlin in 1899 he never left the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After appearances as conductor in Prague in the spring of 1900 he never again took up the baton in public. And after visits to Vienna in 1901, then possibly in May 1902, he never left Bohemia. Even his known correspondence becomes ever more sparse during his last few years. However his close friend Leoš Janáček, who saw him during the final months of his life, recalled that he was searching for a new opera libretto and predicted that had he lived he would have embarked on a new style.

## **AN IMMORTAL LEGACY OF STRONG CONVICTION AND AFFIRMATION OF LIFE**

Dvořák suffered plenty during his life, mainly during his difficult first thirty-six years of poverty and professional frustration capped by the deaths of his first three children, and his psyche had its share of foibles. In his music we find no lack of passages that are emotionally complex and sometimes deeply painful. Yet at root he appears to have been a man of strong mental disposition and great optimism, with a positive attitude toward life, strengthened by his firm religious conviction – as a Roman Catholic or perhaps, as his son Otakar asserted, a man of a broader religious outlook almost akin to pantheism; certainly he can be said to have virtually worshipped the beauty of nature. And one of his special talents was to write music that ‘snatches victory from the jaws of defeat’ – that leaves one with the feeling that, whatever pain and tragedy one might experience, in the last analysis the world is a wonderful place.

Dvořák’s death on 1 May 1904 – of somewhat unclear causes, though apparently from a stroke due to complications of influenza and a kidney ailment – came as a shock to the

musical world. But his rich legacy lived on and still lives today, provoking ever-new interpretations and insights.

## **EPILOGUE: DVOŘÁK'S IMAGE THEN AND NOW**

Despite the extreme popularity of many of Dvořák's works there are many more – including some perhaps equally as fine and others that, while imperfect, are fascinating – that have lain largely or totally neglected. In particular, he is often strangely overlooked, especially in America, as a composer of vocal music, which actually occupies about half his output in terms of performing time and which played a crucial role in the advancement of his career at several stages. And in the instrumental genres he is viewed too exclusively as a composer of “absolute music,” as opposed to “program music,” which makes explicit reference to something outside the music itself. Those who know his vocal music and his symphonic poems contend persuasively that their neglect cannot be ascribed to any lack of quality. The explanations are diverse; here let us mention only one. His compatriot Bedřich Smetana, seventeen years his senior, was and still is rightly considered the first great Czech composer of operas and instrumental program music.

By comparison, Smetana's output during his mature years left “absolute” music almost untouched. Dvořák filled the gap with a large quantity of superb absolute music, mainly symphonic and chamber works. Always ready to plug composers into convenient pigeon holes, commentators identified absolute music as Dvořák's specialty, overlooking such facts as that he actually composed more operas than Smetana, and the popularity of those operas in performing repertoire has never lagged far behind that of the older master. (Indeed, the boom in productions of *Rusalka* worldwide over the past few decades has probably now placed Dvořák ahead of Smetana.)

Another major misconception is that Dvořák's significance lies mainly in his status as a representative of his nation. We

must remember that he lived during a period of intense nationalism among the Czechs, struggling to assert the distinctive character and worth of their culture after centuries of domination by the culture of Germans. Naturally enough, when an artist like Dvořák who made no secret of his Czech ethnicity created something beautiful, Czech reviewers were eager to see it as being quintessentially Czech, or more broadly Slavic, as opposed to German or cosmopolitan. For different reasons a similar view of Dvořák's music was taken by the Germans themselves, who tended to see their own music as "universal" – along with music from France and Italy whose role in the formation of German music could not be denied – and everything else as "national." In Dvořák's case the supposedly inherent "Czechness" or "Slavicness" of his music was conspicuously blurred by the important works of his American period, which he himself plausibly claimed were influenced by music indigenous to the United States.

Yet the brand of a Czech or Slavic "national" as opposed to a "universal" composer stuck. In reality Dvořák's music was influenced almost from the beginning by, and indeed mainly by, works of the great French, Italian, and especially German masters. His approach was almost always cosmopolitan, and his music deserves to be measured against the standards of all Western culture, not only or even primarily those of his nation.

An unfortunate corollary to the "nationalist" misconception was the chauvinistic attitude of many Germans – who in turn influenced many in Britain and America – about what Slavic music was like. And here the story of Dvořák's life comes into play: the chauvinistic attitude was reinforced by knowledge that he came from and generally felt most comfortable in rural environments, among ordinary people – he was the perfect "rustic," which is to say one who conformed to the Germanic image of the Slav: one possessed of great musicality, but on a somewhat primitive level, with virtues consisting mainly in

freshness, spontaneity, and a whiff of the exotic. Some of his most popular works would seem – if one doesn't listen very closely – to support his conventional image as a happy-go-lucky rustic with an unfailingly sunny disposition. But the outline of his life's story presented above shows clearly enough the error of this view, and listening to any of his numerous profound works of great emotional depth and complexity gives the lie to the notion that his music is shallow or unsophisticated.

Endlessly quoted – without the appropriate qualifications – is Dvořák's characterization of himself in one letter as a "simple Czech musician." This was the reaction of an appealingly unpretentious composer to an expression of exaggerated praise on the boundary of deification. He was indeed simple in some respects as a person – a "man of the folk," perhaps a bit of a "country bumpkin," naïve in that when dealing with people he was always straightforward, sincere (his cousin Anna Dušková who lived in the same apartment or across the hall from him for almost his whole adult life said she thought he would suffer physically if he had to tell a lie), and he naïvely expected the same from others. However Janáček, for one, vehemently denied the often-heard opinion that Dvořák lacked intelligence. Nor, as mentioned above in our biographical outline, was his psyche free of mysterious "dark places." But above all, the notion that Dvořák was simple in his *music* is – "simply" *not true*.

Lest we ourselves be accused of prejudices concerning the inclinations of certain nationalities, be it said that in recent decades German musicologists have taken a leading role in portraying Dvořák as the complex personality and sophisticated composer that he really was. And even more recently members of the Dvořák American Heritage Association, Michael Beckerman and Maurice Peress, have made major contributions toward the understanding of Dvořák in the full richness of his psyche and his cultural bequest. Old habits of



thinking die hard, but with Dvořák we see a continuing trend toward ever-greater appreciation of his genius.

## **Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, is also known by its subtitle, *From the New World*, or as the *New World Symphony***

[Symphony No. 9 in E minor](#), Op. 95, is also known by its subtitle, *From the New World*, or as the *New World Symphony*. Dvořák wrote it between January and May 1893, while he was in New York. At the time of its first performance, he claimed that he used elements from American music such as [spirituals](#) and [Native American music](#) in this work, but he later denied this. [Neil Armstrong](#) took a recording of the *New World Symphony* to the [Moon](#) during the [Apollo 11](#) mission in 1969, and in 2009 it was voted the favourite symphony in [a poll](#) run by [ABC Classic FM](#) in Australia.

Many conductors have recorded cycles of the symphonies, including [Karel Ančerl](#), [István Kertész](#), [Rafael Kubelík](#), [Otmar Suitner](#), [Libor Pešek](#), [Zdeněk Mácal](#), [Václav Neumann](#), [Witold Rowicki](#), [Jiří Bělohlávek](#), and [Neeme Järvi](#).

[Adolf Čech](#) premiered more of Dvořák's symphonies than anyone else. He conducted the first performances of Nos. 2, 5 and 6; the composer premiered Nos. 7 and 8; [Bedřich Smetana](#) led Nos. 3 and 4; [Anton Seidl](#) conducted No. 9; and [Milan Sachs](#) premiered No. 1.

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