

Insight into Dvorak's New World Symphony

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Antonin Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 in E minor, better known as the "New World Symphony," has become one of the most treasured works and popular pieces throughout the world. Its popularity stemmed from its acceptance as the new American music. Although many scholars claim he used distinct Indian and Negro melodies, many other supporters of Dvorak claim that he was merely influenced by their character and that the melodies are purely Czech in origin. No matter where the material for the work was pulled from, it gained high prestige among audiences in America and abroad.

Dvorak's first trip to America, where he composed and premiered the New World Symphony, began with an offer from Jeanette Thurber who founded and oversaw the National Conservatory of Music in New York. She needed to jump start the popularity of the conservatory in order to get back the \$1.5 million set up fees. Through a contact in Vienna, she was directed towards Dvorak as a suggestion for the next director of the conservatory. She offered several times through telegrams, offering a salary of fifteen thousand a year, much more than he was making in Prague. Finally, she sent the contract itself to be signed, requesting his employment in the position for two years with two four month vacations, and with the permission of the authorities, Dvorak was allowed to take leave and accept the agreement. He traveled with his wife,

two children, and a man named Joseph Kovarik, whom he met in a music shop, that was also traveling to meet his father in Iowa. (Robertson 62)

Ideas for the first few movements of the New World symphony were sketched only months after his arrival in New York, in January 1893. During these processes, he made his decision not to go back to Bohemia that summer and so he sent for his last four children still remaining in Bohemia to be sent to Southampton. On the last page of the score, he wrote, "Thank God, the children have arrived at Southampton. We received a cable at 1.33 this afternoon." He is said by his secretary, Kovarik, to have been overcome with the excitement of the moment and forgot to finish the trombones' closing bars for the Symphony. (Robertson 65) This is argued by scholars who claim that he finished it before the cable arrived about his children and that Kovarik's memory has proven on more than one occasion to be unreliable with the facts. The missing trombone parts were supposedly inserted when the discovery was made during rehearsal, but this is refuted by Burghauser because the manuscript shows three stages of print (blotting before each section) and the entire last section was completed with the same ink. (Clapham 120)

Just before deciding not to return to Bohemia for the summer, Dvorak was offered by his assistant, Kovarik, to join him in his hometown of Spillville, Iowa, where the community was almost completely Czech and he would feel very much at home. This would give him the chance to

escape the city atmosphere and take refuge in a beautiful area much closer to the rural environment that Dvorak was used to in his home country. He considered it without comment, asking for a map of the town and the names of the people living there. Finally, when some friends suggested he retreat to South Carolina for a vacation, he announced that they would be traveling to Spillville and sent for his other four children to come to America to join him.

While visiting Spillville, according to Kovarik, Dvorak was greatly intrigued by the Indians that came to town selling medicines, and despite his tendency to be absent from special events, he made it a point to be at all of the nightly performances the Indian tribe put on. He asked questions and examined their unique instruments. However, this was after the New World Symphony had already been completed in May of that year. Brahms, a close friend of Dvorak's, was asked by Dvorak's publisher, Simrock, to proofread the symphony along with a few other works in order to get them published quickly. This would speed things up because of the delay involved in sending the proofs back and forth overseas. (Robertson 69)

The premiere was on Dec. 16, 1893, by the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall, under the direction of Anton Seidl. This agreement was reached between the two at a café in the middle of November of that same year, by the witness of Kovarik. At one of the

meetings between Seidl and Dvorak at the Café Central on Madison Square, his son Otakar had been admiring a model ocean liner in a toy shop nearby. Seidl asked the boy about it, but Otakar replied that it cost too much and his father would not get it for him. Seidl promised that after the symphony's success, they would ask again. The meeting after the symphony's premiere, Otakar showed them both the toy and Seidl offered to pay half. This was a symbol of celebration for the symphony's huge success in its first performances in New York. Seidl even wrote, along with his signature, in Otakar's special autograph notebook a motif from the symphony inscribed with "To the Captain of the Majestic" (the name of the ocean liner. (Dvorak 32)

Dvorak was not asked to conduct the premiere with the New York Philharmonic nor the Boston Symphony along with numerous other compositions performed in New York. Speculation on this pattern can be attributed to the possibilities that there had been some concerts resulting in financial loss where Dvorak was concerned and professional organizations were leery about engaging in a risky endeavor, or that their own conductors were more suited to put on a polished performance than Dvorak since he was not well-known for his skills as a conductor. In Europe, however, he conducted the first performance of it at the National Theatre in Prague along with some of his other works, three days before he returned for his second trip to America. (Clapham 129)

At the premiere, each movement of the piece was given thunderous applause and Dvorak was prompted by the audience to stand and bow from his box where he sat with his wife, one child, Ms. Thurber, Adele Marguiles, the contact that led Ms. Thurber to Dvorak from across the Atlantic, and two of his pupils. He compared the treatment to that of a king. The piece quickly became a hot trend throughout the world after its publication and was performed in London, Bohemia, Prague, Vienna, Amsterdam, Russia, and Milan. (Clapham 132)

Kovarik is recorded as explaining that the title of the symphony alone creates great confusion and misinterpretation as to the contents of the music. He writes that Dvorak meant only “impressions and greetings from the New World” and quotes him as reacting to the reviews: “It seems that I have got them all confused ... at home they will understand at once what I meant.” (Schonzeler 154)

The public was well prepared to receive the symphony as America’s new work of art. Critics from the New York Herald did not make the distinctions between Indian inspired music and the American phenomenon the whole experience had become. Dvorak almost resented the remarks about it where they emphasized the use of “original American melodies” because he felt he wrote inherently Bohemian music wherever he went to compose it, and whatever inspired him to write. (Robertson 71)

Dvorak supported compassion for the oppressed people and deeply envisioned Negro music as becoming a basis for American national art. An interview with the New York herald quoted him: “ in the Negro melodies of America I find all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, bold, merry, gay, or what you will. There is nothing in the whole range of composition which cannot be supplied from this source...I am satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called the Negro melodies.” (Robertson 170)

Records suggest that one of Dvorak's African-American students contributed by influence to the ideas and process of the New World Symphony. He was known to be very interested in what the black students of the conservatory had to bring to the art world and encouraged them to use their own influences and ideas in their individual compositions. During the time in which he was primarily working on the New World Symphony, he repeatedly asked about and studied Negro spirituals from his student, Henry Thacker Burleigh. The time spent working on the piece added to his severe homesickness for his home country so that he jumped at the chance to visit the Czech community to get away from the city life he was so unaccustomed to.

Since the initial boom of the symphony's success, there have

been many critics of it, especially those scholars who have studied, in depth, some of his other works. According to Alec Robertson, Dvorak relied too much on his notebooks for the construction of this symphony because it lacks the “inner compulsion” that his other symphonies used. He is said to substitute a lot of his creative genius for mechanical and manufactured sounds. It is accused of dramaticism in presenting all the themes in various forms right before the grand finale. (Robertson 171)

The first movement is regarded as the most structurally brilliant, while the other three are labeled as beautiful and moving, but inherently weak in texture and form. It is also a work that is significantly overplayed and performed below its potential which subtracts from its impact as a spiritually powerful and colorful piece. (Hughes 161) There is an overall sense of anticipation and a little darker sound in the tonality. The movement does also lack a little substance compared to the other movements, although it has an air of imitating nature in some sections (landscape music) that is possibly a recounting of the beautiful features evident to Dvorak even while he had only traveled into the city before writing the piece.

Some of the melodies that are cited when criticizing Dvorak’s use of original American music are Deep River, Yankee Doodle, and Swing Low, Sweet Chariot. Most references to the “original American tunes” are in relation to the Indian melodies or Negro spirituals. One author, Hans-

Hubert Schonzeler, supports Dvorak's claims to purely original composition of the symphony by raising the question: to whom do pentatonic scales belong? Can they be associated with any specific nationality or culture? (Schonzeler 153)

The original version of the theme for the first movement was written in major, and therefore resembled somewhat a minstrel song called Little Alabama Coon. There is another section played by the violas in the last movement which is reminiscent of Yankee Doodle.

(Butterworth 102)

The solo at the beginning of the second movement is recognized to be a typical Negro melody. It must be observed, though, that many folk tunes use the pentatonic scale as the basis for their melody. This is common throughout Europe, Ireland, and many countries containing largely rural areas. Also, the rhythms used for some of the quoted "deep south" "plantation songs" are very closely related to original inflexions used in Slav folk music. (Hughes 160)

The second movement, on the whole, was based upon Longfellow's poem, Hiawatha, which he came across for the second time while collaborating with Ms. Thurber. Both intended for it to become an opera, but could not find a suitable libretto. Originally, Dvorak was taken by the poem when he found a translation in Czech earlier in his career. This idea for the material was strengthened by his exposure to the spirit in

local Indian music which flowed to other works created soon after. It is truly a remarkable collection of melodies transitioning into one another. It has an ambiguous nature by not conforming to traditional, classical forms of resolution, but this is also what allows it to play on the heartstrings as a deeply moving, spiritual piece.

The scherzo movement is based on Hiawatha's feast scene with a celebrative character and dance-like rhythms. This movement is greatly reminiscent of Czech music with its sudden changes in motion and syncopated rhythmic phrases. There is not evidence of heavy debate about this particular movement having taken Negro or Indian spirituals as its basis. It provides an interesting contrast by following the emotional second movement.

The last movement is a combination of all previously stated themes with variations on them. (Clapham 202) Synthesized into a series of contrasts with connecting rhythmic patterns and progressions, it brings the ideas together so that they are easily related to one another and similarities are brought out. It, like the first movement, lacks something in direction, however, frames the melodies presented in a manner that the audience can easily grasp.

In a newspaper interview with Dvorak, he states directly that he was interested in the Negro and Indian music and its spirit and tried to capture that in his ninth symphony, but he did not use any of the actual

melodies. He stuck to this claim for every encounter of the accusations that the melodies were not his own throughout the rest of his life. He only admits that he developed these themes as subjects and rewritten them using modern techniques. (Clapham 202)

According to other sources, while in America, Dvorak did not readily refute the claims that he used American folk songs and music as the basis for his symphony's themes. However, when he returned to Bohemia, he denied it completely. (Hughes 160)

The symphony's environment was set for it to become one of the most worldly known because Dvorak's popularity throughout his homeland and Europe was already generating him a good deal of wealth before he traveled to America and preparations for his arrival were constructed with high expectations and public anticipation. He was at a point in his life where his maturity developed into peak compositional genius.

No matter the source of the masterpiece or arguable influences of it, the piece represents an important part in American as well as Bohemian musical history. To the Czech people, it can be revered as a success of one its own that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries. For American music, it awakened a new movement toward nationalism and inspired the use of inherently American musical resources in composition. In all aspects, it is a wonderful work of art.

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