Notes on the Program
By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, From the New World

Antonín Dvořák

In June 1891 the American philanthropist Jeannette Thurber asked Antonín Dvořák to consider directing the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, which she had been nurturing into existence over the preceding several years. Dvořák was persuaded. He served as the conservatory’s director from 1892 through 1895 (spending the summer of 1893 in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa), building the school’s curriculum and faculty, appearing as a guest conductor, and composing such masterworks as his String Quartet in F major (Op. 96, American), the String Quintet in E-flat major (Op. 97), and the Symphony No. 9, From the New World, which occupied him during the winter and spring of 1893. Its premiere that December, with Anton Seidl conducting the New York Philharmonic, was a huge success, a peak of the composer’s career. The New York Evening Post proclaimed it “the greatest symphonic work ever composed in this country.”

The title came to Dvořák as an afterthought, and he added it just before delivering the score to the Philharmonic, later explaining that it signified nothing more than “impressions and greetings from the New World.” But for that subtitle, a listener encountering the piece for the first time might not consider it less demonstrative of the “Czech spirit” than any of the composer’s other symphonies. Syncopated rhythms and modal melodies are emblematic of many folk and popular musical traditions, those of Bohemia and the United States included. Still, the work’s title invites listeners to recall how interested Dvořák really was in African American and Native American music, and musicologists have found in its melodies echoes of such American tunes as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Massa Dear.”

The African American presence in the musical scene was immense during Dvořák’s American years. Ragtime left him cold, but he was fascinated by the repertoire of Negro spirituals. So far as Native American music is concerned, it’s known that he attended one of Buffalo Bill Cody’s “Wild West” shows in New York in the spring of 1893, which would have included more or less authentic singing and dancing from a group of Oglala Sioux. Since Dvořák was just then completing this symphony, it is impossible that the music he heard on that occasion could have inspired the work’s material in any direct way; the same must be said of the Iroquois

In Short

Born: September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, near Kralupy, Bohemia
Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague
Work composed: from December 1892 through spring 1893
World premiere: December 15, 1893, with Anton Seidl conducting the New York Philharmonic in a “public rehearsal” at Carnegie Hall (then called simply The Music Hall); the official premiere took place the following evening
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: September 27, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor
Estimated duration: ca. 42 minutes
performers Dvořák encountered a few months later at a performance given by the Kickapoo Medicine Company during his summer in Spillville.

The ethnic influences on the Symphony From the New World become interesting in light of the composer’s own assertions. In a New York Herald article Dvořák emphasized its purported Native American connections, citing parallels to Longfellow’s poem “The Song of Hiawatha” (itself a Romantic effusion rather than an authentic expression of any Native culture). The Scherzo, he said, related to the section of Longfellow’s poem that describes the dance of Pau-Puk-Keewis:

> It was he who in his frenzy
> Whirled these drifting sands together,
> On the dunes of Nagow Wudjoo,
> When, among the guests assembled,
> He so merrily and madly
> Danced at Hiawatha’s wedding.

The dance is introduced by a motif borrowed from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. The final movement (Allegro con fuoco) evolves out of a march theme that seems perfectly appropriate to a mitteleuropäische symphony.

Dvořák is generally thought of as broadly resembling Brahms in his musical inclinations, although Dvořák’s finale offers reminders of the composer’s early infatuation with Wagner. The musical world of Dvořák’s day had become polarized between what was viewed as Brahmsian conservatism and Wagnerian experimentalism. One of the great achievements of Dvořák’s late music — and certainly of the Symphony From the New World — is the extent to which it bridges even that politically charged divide.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, and strings.

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**Dvořák in New York**

Dvořák’s activities during his years in New York City were largely centered in the Stuyvesant Park neighborhood. The National Conservatory of Music, which he helmed, was located at 126-128 East 17th Street, on a site now occupied by Washington Irving Campus. The composer and his family took up residence in a nearby townhouse, at 327 East 17th Street, between First and Second Avenues. That’s where he wrote the Symphony From the New World, among other works.

The house no longer stands, but the block is named Dvořák Place. In 1997 a statue of the composer, which had been donated to the Dvořák American Heritage Association by the New York Philharmonic a few years earlier, was installed in Stuyvesant Square Park, across the street.

*Ivan Mestrovic’s sculpture of Dvořák in Stuyvesant Square Park*