

Notes on the Program

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

Carnival, Op. 92

Antonín Dvořák

Antonín Dvořák developed rather slowly as a composer and was still laboring in poverty and obscurity as he approached middle age. His lucky break came when the influential Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick took a shine to some of his pieces. In 1877 Hanslick encouraged the 36-year-old Czech composer to send some scores to Johannes Brahms, with whom Hanslick enjoyed warm relations. Brahms was so delighted with what he received that he recommended Dvořák to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock, who immediately issued Dvořák's *Moravian Duets*, commissioned a collection *Slavonic Dances*, and contracted a first option on all of the composer's new works. After being befriended by Brahms, Dvořák quickly gained the support of other important figures of the eminent composer's circle, including the violinist Joseph Joachim and the conductors Hans Richter (to whom Dvořák would dedicate his Sixth Symphony) and Hans von Bülow (who made Dvořák's *Hussite Overture* a mainstay of his repertoire).

Thus was launched the career of the man who would be embraced as the quintessential Bohemian composer, both in his native land and beyond. In 1883 he was invited to conduct in London on what would prove to be the first of nine visits to England; during one of them, in July 1891, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University. This he added to a growing shelf of awards that already included the Austrian Order of the Iron Crown (bestowed in 1889) and an honorary doctorate from the Czech University of Prague (in 1890).

Dvořák was a professor of composition and instrumentation at Prague Conservatory in June of 1891 when he was approached by Jeannette Thurber, a Paris-trained American musician who was by then a New York philanthropist bent on raising American musical pedagogy to European standards. She had founded the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, incorporated by special act of Congress in 1891, and she set about persuading Dvořák to serve as its director. Thurber succeeded, and in September 1892 Dvořák and his family moved to New York, where he remained until 1895.

His popular *Carnival* overture dates from this period when honors began falling on his

IN SHORT

Born: September 8, 1841, in Mühlhausen (Nelahozeves), Bohemia (today Czech Republic)

Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague

Work composed: July 28–September 12, 1891; dedicated to the Czech University of Prague (in the composer's manuscript, though not in the printed score)

World premiere: April 28, 1892, at the Rudolfinum in Prague, with the composer conducting the Orchestra of the National Theatre

New York Philharmonic premiere: October 21, 1892, with the composer conducting

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 1, 2016, Christoph Eschenbach, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 9 minutes

The New York Philharmonic Connection

MUSIC HALL,
Friday Evening, October 21st, 1892, at 8.15.

GRAND CONCERT,
UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE
National Conservatory of Music of America
AND FIRST APPEARANCE IN THE UNITED STATES OF
DR. ANTONIN DVORAK
The Eminent Composer and Director of the National
Conservatory of Music of America,
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF
Mme. Clementine De Vere-Sapio,
Mr. Emil Fischer,
Mr. Anton Seidl,
Orchestra of 80, selected from the Sym-
phony and Philharmonic Societies,
and Chorus of 300 Voices,
Mr. RICHARD HENRY WARREN, Chorus Master.

In the course of the proceedings, an oration
will be delivered by
Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

PROGRAMME.

1. NATIONAL HYMN, "America."
2. ORATION, "Two New Worlds," The New World of
Columbus and the New World of Music,
COL. THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.
3. SYMPHONIC POEM, "Donquixote Tasso," - Lieck
4. TRIPLE OVERTURE, "Nature, Life, Love,"
(now, first time,) - - - - - Dvorak
a. Nature.
b. Life (Bohemian Carnival.)
c. Love (Shakespeare's Othello.)
CONDUCTED BY THE COMPOSER.
5. TE DEUM, (expressly written for the occasion) DEONIS
MME. DE VERE-SAPIO, MR. FISCHER.
ORCHESTRA, CHORUS.
CONDUCTED BY THE COMPOSER.

Detail of the program for Dvořák's first US appearance

The first performance of Dvořák's *Carnival* overture in the United States was part of a Grand Concert by the National Conservatory of Music of America, celebrating the first appearance in this country of its director, billed as Dr. Antonin Dvořák. The concert on October 21, 1892, involved musicians of the New York Philharmonic and the New York Symphony (which would later merge with the Philharmonic), a chorus of 300, and an oration by Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson titled "Two New Worlds, The New Worlds of Columbus and the New World of Music." Dvořák conducted his own *Nature, Life, and Love* triptych, which included the work performed tonight, then titled *Life (Bohemian Carnival)*, and his *Te Deum*, which was composed for the occasion.

The *New York Times* review was not overly impressed with the composer's conducting, reporting that "his beat is so uncertain it is impossible to see how any body of players or singers could follow it with confidence." However, the reviewer continued:

interpreters are many, creators are few ...

He has given the world plenty of finer music than that which he brought forward last night, yet both the new compositions bore the unmistakable stamp of productive power."

The review continued that first two movements of the triptych,

display the composer in his engaging mood of geniality. It is the geniality of vigorous manhood, and has the force of a masculine will behind it ...

The second is beautified by a serenely lovely middle episode of rare tenderness.

— The Editors

shoulders, just as he was weighing Mrs. Thurber's flattering offer. It was the second of a triptych of concert overtures meant to portray impressions of what a human soul might experience, in both positive and negative aspects. *Nature, Life, and Love* was his original name for the set, which was to be published under the single opus number 91, and it is in that form that the pieces were presented at their joint premiere. But the composer soon decided to publish them as three separate works: *In Nature's Realm* (with the opus number 91 all to itself), *Carnival* (Op. 92), and *Othello* (Op. 93).

Dvořák started with the title *Life (Carnival)* in sketches for the second of these pieces, and then gave it the provisional name *A Czech Carnival*, finally opting for the more general *Carnival*. It does indeed depict the high-spirited tumult of a festive carnival setting — barkers and vendors, boisterous crowds, and

even, in a gentle passage, what Dvořák said was “a pair of straying lovers.” In a letter to the publisher Simrock, Brahms judged this work to be “merry” and remarked that “music directors will be thankful to you” for publishing the overtures — which they are. Dvořák conducted the joint premiere of the three pieces in Prague in April 1892, and six months later he included them in the program he led at Carnegie Hall. That event was billed as a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's “discovery” of America, but it was surely of more compelling interest for officially introducing musical New York to its distinguished new member.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, harp, and strings.

Listen For ... the “Theme of Nature”

Although the three overtures Dvořák envisioned as the triptych *Nature, Life, and Love* ended up assuming discrete identities, the composer did conceive of them as a cycle. The musical result is that, notwithstanding their very different characters, the three are connected through a shared theme, which the Dvořák scholar Otomar Šourek has credibly labeled the “Theme of Nature.” It serves as the principal theme of the first piece in the triptych, *In Nature's Realm*, and then makes return visits in the other two works. In the relaxed middle section of *Carnival* one hears it briefly recalled by the clarinet, and then echoed a few bars later by the English horn:

