Antonín Dvořák developed rather slowly as a composer and, although he gained a solid musical education, his first professional steps were far from extraordinary — as a violist in a dance orchestra in Prague. The group prospered, and in 1862 its members organized as the founding core of the Provisional Theatre orchestra. Dvořák would play principal viola in the ensemble for nine years, sitting directly beneath the batons of such conductors as Bedřich Smetana and Richard Wagner.

During those early years Dvořák also honed his skills as a composer, and by 1871 he felt compelled to leave the orchestra and devote himself to composing. Three times during the 1870s he was awarded the Austrian State Stipendium, a grant to assist young, poor, gifted musicians, which exactly defined his status at the time. If he had not received critical support when he did, he might well have given up trying to be a composer. Fortunately, the influential music critic Eduard Hanslick encouraged him to send some scores to Johannes Brahms. That eminent composer was so delighted with what he received that he recommended Dvořák to his own publisher, who immediately published two collections of the younger composer’s pieces and contracted a first option on all his new works. Nonetheless, even his mature masterpieces were slow to make their way into the international repertoire, embraced in England and America sooner than in the rest of Europe. Except for his Symphony No. 9, From the New World, the Carnival Overture, and the Slavonic Dances, Dvořák remained little played outside his native land until practically the middle of the 20th century.

In 1891 Dvořák received a communication from Jeannette Thurber, a Paris-trained American musician who had become a New York philanthropist bent on raising US musical pedagogy to European standards. To this end she had founded the National Conservatory of Music in New York, incorporated by special act of Congress in 1891, and she set about persuading him to serve as its director. She succeeded, and the following year Dvořák and his family moved to New York. He remained until 1895, building the school’s curriculum and faculty, appearing as a guest conductor, and composing such

**IN SHORT**

**Born:** September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, Bohemia (now the Czech Republic)

**Died:** May 1, 1904, in Prague

**Work composed:** November 8, 1894, to February 9, 1895, in New York City; revision of the finale completed in Bohemia on June 11, 1895; dedicated to Hanuš Wihan

**World premiere:** March 19, 1896, at the Queen’s Hall, London, with the composer conducting the Philharmonic Society, Leo Stern, soloist

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 6, 1896, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); this performance marked the US Premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** December 9, 2014, Krzysztof Urbanski, conductor, Alisa Weilerstein, soloist

**Estimated duration:** ca. 40 minutes
masterworks as his String Quartet in F major (Op. 96, *American*), the String Quintet in E-flat major, Symphony *From the New World*, and (in his final year here) the Cello Concerto.

This grand and noble work was first heard when Dvořák played through it privately in August 1895 with his close friend Hanuš Wihan, an eminent cellist and the work’s dedicatee. Wihan suggested a few technical alterations, which the composer incorporated, but Dvořák rejected as superfluous Wihan’s idea of inserting a large-scale solo cadenza in the finale — to the cellist’s distress, since he had spent considerable care crafting one that incorporated material from the earlier movements. Dvořák took the precaution of spelling out his position in a letter to his publisher early that October:

I shall only give you my work if you promise not to allow anybody to make any changes — my friend Wihan not excepted — without my knowledge and consent, and this includes the cadenza which Wihan has added to the last movement. ... I told Wihan straight away when he showed it to me that it was impossible to stick bits on like that. The finale closes gradually *diminuendo*, like a sigh — with reminiscences of the first and second movements — the solo dies down to *pianissimo* — then swells again and the

### Listen for . . . the Tribute to a Long-Lost Love

Dvořák enjoyed a long and happy marriage to Anna Čermáková, whom he wed in 1873. But she had not been his first love; several years before, he had experienced a serious infatuation for one of her older sisters, Josefina, his piano student at the time. Absolutely nothing romantic came of that early attraction (which, in fact, seems to have been strictly one-way), and Josefina and Antonín spent 30 years living as affectionate and entirely platonic in-laws.

While the Dvořáks were living in New York, Josefina’s health began to decline precipitously, and she died on May 27, 1895, only a month after they returned to Prague from their American sojourn. It appears that Dvořák worked a tribute to the dying Josefina into his Cello Concerto by incorporating into the slow movement a quotation from his song “Lasst mich allein” (“Leave Me Alone,” Op. 82, No. 1), which Dvořák’s biographer Otakar Šourek maintained was a particular favorite of Josefina’s. It was on learning of Josefina’s death that Dvořák crafted the coda at the concerto’s end — which he described as closing with a sigh — before concluding in a stormy mood.
The New York Philharmonic Connection: Early Interpreters

The New York Philharmonic’s connection to Dvořák’s Cello Concerto began at the moment of inception, since the Orchestra’s Principal Cello, Victor Herbert, served as an inspiration for the work. Herbert had played first cello when the New York Philharmonic gave the World Premiere of the Symphony No. 9, *From the New World*, and in 1894 Dvořák heard Herbert — who was also a composer — perform his own Cello Concerto No. 2 with Anton Seidl and the Philharmonic. Dvořák had not really considered the cello to be deserving of a concerto, even though he had been asked to write one. But then, according to former Philharmonic Program Annotator Michael Steinberg, Dvořák was impressed when Herbert, who managed high-flying passages elegantly and wrote plenty of them for himself, showed Dvořák that he had been needlessly concerned.

The first American performance of Dvořák’s Cello Concerto occurred at a Sunday “Popular Concert” of the New York Symphony (a Philharmonic forbear), led by Walter Damrosch, that featured excerpts or movements of several works, many performed by young, emerging soloists. Only the second and third movements of the Cello Concerto were played that day by 22-year-old, American-born Franz Listemann. Leo Stern, who had performed the World Premiere in London with the composer conducting, played the complete work with the Philharmonic in March 1897. It was this performance that would generally be thought of as the first in the United States, overshadowing young Listemann’s.

Almost ten years passed before the concerto was performed again in New York, this time by Beatrice Harrison, a 23-year-old English cellist who had made her Philharmonic debut only two years earlier. Harrison became somewhat famous for BBC broadcasts in which her cello performances from her garden were accompanied by the singing of nightingales.

— The Archives

To view the score of Dvořák’s Cello Concerto, visit the New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives at archives.nyphil.org.