

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, 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, 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, the *American*), String Quintet in E-flat major (Op. 97), and Symphony *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, and the critic for 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 one to recall how interested Dvořák was in African American and Native American music, and musicologists have found in its melodies echoes of such undeniably American tunes as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

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 who belonged to Cody's troupe. 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 performers Dvořák encountered a few months later at a performance given by the Kickapoo Medicine Company during his summer in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa.

The ethnic influences on the Symphony *From the New World* become interesting in light of the composer's own assertions about the subject. On the day of his new symphony's premiere, the *New York Herald* ran an article in which Dvořák emphasized the work's purported Native American connec-

In Short

Born: September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, near Kralupy, Bohemia

Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague

Work composed: December 1892–spring 1893

World premiere: December 15, 1893, with Anton Seidl conducting the New York Philharmonic in a "public rehearsal"; the official premiere took place the following evening at Carnegie Hall

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 26, 2017, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 42 minutes

inclinations, and although there is plenty here that is Brahms-like (particularly the Brahms of the Hungarian Dances), Dvořák's finale is also a reminder of its 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.

From the Archives

In mid-November of 1893, composer Antonín Dvořák, director of the new National Conservatory of Music on West 25th Street, took a meeting with New York Philharmonic Music Director Anton Seidl. Seidl had heard that the eminent composer had recently completed a new symphony, and he asked if the Philharmonic might perform the work. Dvořák did not immediately reply, but as the meeting was breaking up, he promised Seidl the first performance. The next day Seidl informed the composer that he planned to conduct the work in about four weeks, on December 15, and that he would need the score immediately in order to prepare. The composer's assistant, Josef Kovařík, was asked to deliver Dvořák's manuscript to the conductor and his own copy to the Philharmonic librarian for the creation of orchestra parts. Kovařík wrote in his diary: "The same evening, at the very moment that I was about to leave with the score, [Dvořák] inscribed the words 'From the New World' on the title page." What exactly the composer meant by this has been in dispute ever since.

The Philharmonic hired four copyists to create all the parts for the musicians. One of those was reportedly Harry Burleigh, a descendant of slaves and a student at the National Conservatory, who had introduced Dvořák to slave songs and spirituals that he had learned from his grandfather. Many of the parts created for the premiere of Symphony No. 9, *From the New World*, are preserved in the Philharmonic's Archives. A few have been lost or, more likely, simply were worn out, given the immediate popularity of the work and the fact that the Philharmonic used the same parts for years, before they were replaced with a published version.

To page through digitized scores of Dvořák's Symphony No. 9, *From the New World*, used by the Philharmonic and marked by conductors including Leonard Bernstein, visit archives.nyphil.org and search "New World Symphony."

Original horn part for Dvořák's Symphony No. 9