

FROM THE NEW WORLD PROGRAM

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) **Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95,** ***“From the New World”***

As a young composer in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic), Dvořák was undoubtedly influenced by the spirit of Nationalism that swept across Europe in the second half of the 19th century. He often uses modal fluctuations and Slavic dance rhythms, which lend an ethnic flavor to his works, making them especially appealing to audiences at home and abroad.

In 1892 Dvořák was named Director of the newly-established National Conservatory of Music. Although reluctant to leave his homeland, the composer found his new salary irresistible—\$15,000 a year—exactly 25 times his income at Prague Conservatory! The timing of Dvořák’s arrival in New York could not have been more propitious, since celebrations commemorating the fourth centenary of the discovery of America were underway. The United States was known for its business enterprises and inventions, not artistic contributions, and American composers, who had always imitated Western European music, were searching for a cultural identity.

After encountering various sounds in “the melting pot” of America, Dvořák urged young composers to explore potential elements in ethnic music and produce a national American musical style. In an interview in 1893, he states, “The future music of this country must be built on the foundations of the songs which are called Negro melodies. They must become the basis of a serious and original school of composition which should be established in the USA.” Dvořák’s comments immediately sparked controversial exchanges among musicians and the general public. Interest in this subject was further heightened when it was announced that the composer had spontaneously written the words “From the New World” on the last page of his recent work, Symphony No. 9. On

December 16, 1893, this composition was premiered by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in Carnegie Hall, and concertgoers were ecstatic. The composer reports proudly to his publisher Simrock, “The success of the symphony... say that no composer has ever had such a triumph. I was in a box, the hall was filled with the best New York audience and the people applauded so much that I had to thank them from the box like a king.”

Many listeners immediately detected an “American” quality in Symphony No. 9. Like a number of American folk songs and spirituals, some of Dvořák’s melodies are pentatonic (only five notes) and modal (lowered leading tone), with open fifths, creating a pastoral effect; however, numerous folk songs of Central Europe share similar characteristics. In fact, Dvořák denied ever quoting a folk song literally, stating, “It is the spirit of Negro and Indian melodies which I was striving to reproduce in my new symphony. I have not used a single one of them.” He also adds that his new symphony “is and always will be Czech music.”

Whether American or not, Symphony No. 9 is undoubtedly a masterpiece that blends conventional elements with fresh sounds. Its overall structure is typical; there are four lengthy movements in contrasting tempos and formal plans. The outer movements are fast and in sonata-allegro form, while movements two and three are slower and, respectively, in ABA and expanded scherzo formats. The Symphony also resembles many other works of the 19th century by using the same themes in more than one movement.

Dvořák’s colorful orchestrations are remarkable. Relatively new instruments like the piccolo, bass trombone, and tuba, help produce a modern sound, while in the third movement the triangle and timpani create special effects. In the beginning of the second movement the brasses play “ppp” (very, very softly) in a

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low register. Although consisting of only seven chords, this chromatic passage is one of the loveliest in symphonic literature, and its unusual harmonies lead smoothly into a hauntingly beautiful melody played by the English horn.

Perhaps Symphony No. 9's most immediate appeal is its lyricism. Three themes dominate much of the opening movement—an ascending minor chord with a touch of syncopation at the end, a rhythmic modal figure, and a pentatonic melody that resembles the spiritual *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. The English horn presents a lovely cantabile theme in the second movement. (In 1922 one of Dvořák's pupils added lyrics to this tune, turning it into the spiritual *Goin' Home*.) New materials appear in the third movement—a playful staccato theme over open fifths, a more sustained pentatonic melody, and a new folk-like tune. All of these themes lend themselves to repetition and sequence rather than extensive manipulation.

Symphony No. 9 may not be a genuine American work, since no U.S. folksongs were used, and according to the scholar R. Larry Todd, "a truly American musical idiom emerged only with the work of native composers in the twentieth century." Still, Dvořák deserves credit for raising the consciousness of American musicians, for he was the first composer of international rank to pose the pertinent question: "Every nation has its music. There is Italian, German, French, Bohemian, Russian; why not American music?"

Peter Boyer (1970-) ***Ellis Island: The Dream of America***

Boyer holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from Rhode Island College and the University of Hartford, and he is a music professor at Claremont Graduate University in California. A conductor, orchestrator, and composer, Boyer's works have received over 500 public performances by more than 150 orchestras, and thousands of broadcasts by classical radio stations around the United

States and abroad. *Ellis Island*, which was commissioned by the Hartford Symphony, is his best-known work. To prepare for this project, the composer listened to more than 2,000 stories of immigrants who came to America between 1910 and 1940, and he selected comments from seven individuals.

Ellis Island comprises an orchestral prologue and epilogue, with interludes interspersed between the immigrants' narratives. Boyer sets the mood immediately with a heroic trumpet theme in open intervals, somewhat reminiscent of John Williams and Aaron Copland. However, Boyer deftly creates appropriate moods for each narration without overpowering the monologues. For example, there are loud percussive sounds during the description of a violent storm scene, syncopated ragtime for an Irishman's commentary, and soft, sparse tones for intimate moments. When the new arrivals see the Statue of Liberty for the first time and realize that they have finally found refuge in the United States, a lush Romantic melody soars in the strings. The blend of the immigrants' own words, along with visual images, and emotional orchestral music, creates a powerful work that is heart-wrenching and stunning, yet awesome and magnificent. The real story of *Ellis Island* is deeply inspiring and should never be forgotten. In the words of Lazarus Salaman, one of the immigrants, "We're all strangers. It's only a matter of time, who got here first."

In 2003, Boyer conducted London's Philharmonia Orchestra in a recording of *Ellis Island*, which was released on the Naxos record label, and in 2006 the recording received a Grammy Award nomination for Best Classical Contemporary Composition. The work has been performed more than 200 times by almost 100 orchestras, and it recently aired on PBS as part of the *Great Performances* series.

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