

[1] **Antonín Dvořák**

in Words and Music

Written by Davinia Caddy

Read by Nicholas Boulton

[2] **Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)**

Slavonic Dances, Series 2, Op. 72, B. 147 – No. 1 in B major

from Marco Polo 8.223131

- [3] Bits and pieces are all we may know about the music of Antonín Dvořák. Pieces like the one we just heard: a lively and vigorous ‘Slavonic Dance’ for full orchestra; almost carousel-like in its swirling phrases, tinkly percussion and catchy repetitive motifs. As for titbits of information, it is well known that Dvořák lived during the nineteenth century, that he composed a standout symphony subtitled ‘From the New World’, and that he was born and raised, far from that ‘World’, in Bohemia, nowadays part of the Czech Republic. Indeed, this last point – about the composer’s national identity – has tended to colour most accounts of Dvořák, his life and career, within biographies and history books, not to mention CD sleeves, programme notes and critics’ reviews. Time and time again we are told of the composer’s lowly status and unsophisticated social background, of his deeply-felt love for his homeland and his voracious appetite for native traditions. This is not to mention his rich and resonant music, a vehicle, it seems, for the expression of a pure and timeless folk culture. Like other so-called ‘nationalist’ composers of the nineteenth century (Bedřich Smetana, Franz Liszt, Pyotr Tchaikovsky), Dvořák sought to celebrate and showcase the distinctive features of his native music, its characteristic rhythms, melodies and even its musical scales (sequences of pitches). His compositional process, we are told, was perfectly natural, utterly instinctive and spontaneous. According to the Czech writer Josef Zubatý:

“Dvořák identified his whole personality, without reserve, with his art, so that you will find nowhere a greater sincerity of artistic expression.”

Reflecting on Dvořák and his achievements, fellow Czech composer Leoš Janáček made a similar acknowledgement:

“In him, his person and his work were interchangeable.”

There is more we could say here about Dvořák and his inherently ‘personal’ music: its ‘lofty simplicity’ and ‘spiritual nobility’; but also its ‘perennial, unfading freshness’, its ‘easy fluency’ and ‘ultimate good cheer’. As for the reception of this music, critics both past and present have shared an intense enthusiasm, even an entrancement. Janáček admitted that, for him, Dvořák’s melodies ‘were as if he had taken them from my heart’. Czech musicologist Josef Bohumil Foerster also confessed to a kind of psychological or emotional kinship. Foerster, it seems, was not only captivated but carried away by the composer’s creative flight:

“I yield myself up completely and willingly to the intoxicating sound. When listening to his works, I lose all power of criticism and become a mere listener with nerves tingling to their very tips in sympathy – singing, weeping, rejoicing and dreaming along with him.”

This short life history aims to wrest back some of that ‘power of criticism’, to pause for a moment and ponder anew both Dvořák the man and his music – the conditions of its creation and performance, and its reception by critics on both sides of the Atlantic. We will want to keep firmly in mind the standard wisdom just recounted: about Dvořák’s national heritage, his compositional aims and methods, and the quirks of his creative personality. This is to say nothing of the commonly-held views on Dvořák’s works, supposedly imbued with the spirit of Bohemia, its picturesque folk culture and enduring traditions. A fresh perspective might reveal new insights, new ‘bits and pieces’ about the composer; but it might also challenge what we know (or what we think we know) about a

life, a career and a repertoire – a repertoire in which, according to one recent reviewer, ‘there isn’t a single dull note or dead spot’.

[4] **Ten Biblical Songs, Op. 99, B. 185 – No. 4. Hospodin jest můj pastýř**
(‘The Lord is my shepherd’)

from Capriccio C5207

- [5] The fourth of Dvořák’s *Ten Biblical Songs*, titled ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’ and set to a well-known Psalm text from the traditional Czech translation of the Kralice Bible. A devout Catholic, Dvořák composed the cycle – the culmination of his song output – at a time when, living in the United States, his father was struggling with his health back home in Bohemia; according to one critic, the set of songs ‘must be recognized as a sincere reaffirmation of the composer’s unshakable faith in divine wisdom and love of the almighty’.

But why do we begin our life history here: that is, with a work from the final quarter of the composer’s life, a period in which he is thought to have concentrated his attention on grand operas and symphonic poems? One explanation relates to the business of genre. For while Dvořák was and still is widely celebrated for his instrumental music (his symphonies, symphonic dances, rhapsodies, concertos and chamber music), his songs are barely known, rarely performed and recorded. They represent a side or facet of the composer’s output – of his creative imagination – that is scarcely discussed or even acknowledged in textbook histories of so-called ‘classical’ music: more specifically, in the now-customary tacked-on chapter about ‘Great Nationalist Composers of the Nineteenth Century’.

A second explanation follows: the songs represent not only a different genre from the instrumental music we usually associate with Dvořák; they also adopt a different musical style. Think back to ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’. That solitary sustained note on the piano at the outset; the unaccompanied chanting around a single pitch; the natural, speech-like rhythms; and the ongoing sparse accompaniment: these features combine to create an effect of stillness that contrasts sharply with the composer’s customary

buoyancy and rhythmic drive: incidentally, the most animated passage in the song, a repeated ornamental figure in the piano, features as mere transitional material. The overall musical impression is not of excess and abundance: quite the opposite, Dvořák's music is characterized by an economy of means; there is almost minimal surface activity.

'The Lord is my Shepherd' sets up a contrast, of genre and of style, with the portrait of Dvořák painted musically by our very first musical example. This alternative style, though lesser known today, will prove important as our biography unfolds – as multiple aspects of the composer's musical personality are uncovered and explored. But it is also important as a foil for Dvořák's humble beginnings, for the family into which he was born and its fundamental piety of spirit, and for the society in which he grew up.

- [6] **Ten Biblical Songs, Op. 99, B. 185 – No. 6. Slyš, ó Bože, volání mé**
('Hear my prayer, O Lord')
from Capriccio C5207

- [7] Antonín Leopold Dvořák was born on 8th September 1841 in the village of Nelahozeves, near Kralupy, in Bohemia, approximately 28km north of Prague. The very next day he was baptized in the Church of St Andrew, across the road from the family home. This home, in fact, served several purposes. As well as a domestic residence for the Dvořák family, it was also a workplace, where Dvořák's father František carried out his trade – that should be trades – as both butcher and innkeeper. Finding a member of the widely-branched Dvořák family working behind the bar was apparently not unusual, for tavern keeping was the family tradition and a common occupation of the period.

Dvořák was expected to continue that tradition, but his early enthusiasm for music suggested an alternative career path. Having first encountered music in the home (his father performed on the zither) and the tavern (where dancing and singing were popular activities), Dvořák started formal music tuition when he commenced school around the age of 6. Here, local teacher and church Cantor Josef Spitz offered training in singing and violin playing. Such was Dvořák's talent that, improving quickly, he started playing in the local church and the village band, an ensemble that performed a typical repertory of

popular dances and ceremonial music. After six years at school in Nelahozeves, Dvořák was sent to the nearby town of Zlonice: living now with an uncle, Dvořák was able to learn German and continue his musical education with both church choirmaster Josef Toman and Cantor Antonín Liehmann, who offered training in violin, piano, organ and music theory. In the autumn of 1856, Dvořák moved again: on this occasion, to the north Bohemian town of Česká Kamenice, where he continued his German training at the local German municipal school and took music lessons (organ and theory) from Franz Hanke. Dvořák stayed for only one year, before entering the Prague Organ School, studying simultaneously at the Maria Schnee secondary school. At the specialist music academy, Dvořák took lessons not only in organ, but in harmony, continuo, improvisation, counterpoint and fugue, and from a roster of teachers including František Blažek, Josef Leopold Zvonař and Josef Foerster. At the same time, he started playing viola in the musical ensemble of the Prague St Cecilia Society. Conducted by Anton Apt, the ensemble introduced Dvořák to orchestral works in the Romantic style of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Louis Spohr:

- [8] **Louis Spohr (1784–1859)**
8 Symphony No. 6 in G major, Op. 116 ‘Historische Symphonie im Styl und Geschmack vier verschiedener Zeitabschnitte’
(‘Historical Symphony in the Style and Taste of Four Different Periods’)
– IV. Allerneueste Periode (‘The Very Latest Period’) (1840): Allegro vivace
from Naxos 8.555533

- [9] Reflecting on this period of the composer’s life, Zubatý (the Czech writer mentioned previously) wrote:

“Seemingly for Dvořák the Organ School was more a means of qualifying for the formal title of musician than the path leading towards becoming a professional composer. He never actually undervalued the solid theoretical training which he received at the Organ School, but he aimed for greater musical recognition outside it.”

After graduating from the Organ School in July 1859 (coming second in his final examinations), Dvořák began his professional career as a musician: not as an organist, and certainly not as a composer. His first job was that of violist in a private musical ensemble directed by the Bohemian composer-conductor Karel Komzák. The ensemble, used to playing popular tunes as background music in restaurants, proved successful; in 1862, it became the nucleus of the orchestra of the new Provisional Theatre in Prague, the forerunner of the Czech National Theatre of 1881. During his 9-year tenure in the pit orchestra, Dvořák was exposed to a range of German, French and Italian operas; in addition, he played in the orchestra for special occasions in the musical calendar, such as the visit, in 1863, of Richard Wagner.

On the outside, then, Dvořák was barely making a living as a professional violist; on the inside, and in secret, he had started to compose. Now, while Dvořák was musically gifted and well trained in music theory and performance, he was not a child prodigy. Or, even, a youth prodigy. As Dvořák expert Kurt Honolka reminds us:

‘Twelve years were to pass between finishing his studies at the Organ School and becoming publicly known as a composer’. But these twelve years were not unproductive. Quite the contrary: Dvořák sketched hundreds of pages of music, in his scrupulously tidy handwriting, many of which he later burned – or said he had burned. Of this early repertoire (or, rather, what remains of it), a wide range of genres is represented: the string quintet; string quartet; song cycle; historical opera; concerto; and symphony. (In later life, the composer’s versatility would stretch to the oratorio, cantata, mass, concert overture, serenade, suite, sonata and sextet, to name but some.)

[10] **Antonín Dvořák**

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, B. 9 ‘The Bells of Zlonice’ – II. Adagio molto

from 8.550266

- [11] Dvořák’s first symphony, composed between February and March 1865, began life as a submission to a German composition competition: the genre of the symphony, it

seems, had become a compositional test piece, one that represented the height of musical training and technical rigor. In fact, this was one of the early works that Dvořák said he had destroyed. But, fortunately, he hadn't: the score was purchased in a Leipzig second-hand bookshop in 1882 and came to public attention in October 1936 when premiered by the State Theatre Orchestra in Brno, Czech Republic.

Notable within the symphony, and possibly a response to a Beethovenian trend, is a pastoral and pictorial component: given the title 'The Bells of Zlonice', the work recalls the familiar sound of church bells resonating through the town in which Dvořák spent part of his childhood. Scholars have also identified the key of the symphony (C minor) and its emotional current or trajectory (from darkness to light) as possible debts to Beethoven. We might also note the presence of distinctive motifs – short, easily identifiable, often chained together as connecting tissue, and with a tendency to propel the music forward with what one commentator describes as 'an athletic vigour'. Listen for these little motifs as they pop up at the start of the work; and listen also for the loud tolling horns, evocative of the bells of Zlonice:

[12] **Symphony No. 1 in C minor, B. 9 'The Bells of Zlonice' – I. [Maestoso] – [Allegro]**
from Naxos 8.550266

[13] In early 1865, Dvořák started teaching piano to the daughters of a Prague goldsmith: one of the two, Anna Čermáková would later become his wife (though Josefína had been his initial preference). He remained a member of the orchestra of the Provisional Theatre until 1871 and, in addition to his paid employment, he carried on composing. During his final couple of years in the orchestra, Dvořák entered what has been described as the 'New German' phase of his career: a reference to the group of self-consciously progressive musicians who promoted the highly expressive or 'poetic' musical style of Franz Liszt (who was actually Hungarian), Hector Berlioz (who was French) and Wagner (yes, a German). This style was associated with the principle of innovation: newly chromatic harmonies (departures from the basic major and minor chords); modulations to wide-ranging and non-traditional keys; the long-range development and transformation of motivic units; irregular phrase lengths; advanced

instrumental techniques; and a heightened sense of expressivity – of the composer's musical voice. Some of these features can be heard in the first movement of Dvořák's String Quartet No. 4 in E Minor, completed in 1870. The music is lyrical but anguished, almost torturous at times:

- [14] **String Quartet No. 4 in E minor, B. 19 – I. Assai con moto ed energico**
from Naxos 8.574205

- [15] Before he left the Provisional Theatre orchestra in the summer of 1871, Dvořák was the subject of an announcement in a leading local music journal. Editor Ludevít Procházka, an important figure within Prague's music scene, informed readers that Dvořák, 'a man possessed of considerable talent and skill', had just completed the vocal score of a Czech opera called *King and Charcoal Burner*, to a libretto by poet and lawyer Bernard J. Lobeský. Dvořák, as it happens, had shown parts of the opera to Procházka, whose overall positive impression had led to his promotion of the violist-turned-composer. As well as the journal announcement, Procházka invited Dvořák to the song recitals he organized in Prague. Here, Dvořák's songs 'Remembrance', 'The Reason' and 'The Orphan' were performed; then followed, in 1872, concert performances of Dvořák's chamber music, including the Adagio movement of one of his early piano trios (now lost) and the Piano Quintet in A.

1873 marked a turning point: what commentators have described as the official launch of Dvořák's compositional career. Not only did the year witness the publication of one of Dvořák's songs, 'The Lark', the first of his compositions to appear in print. There was also a momentous concert premiere: on 9th March at the New Town Theatre, the Prague Hlahol choir, conducted by Karel Bendl, performed Dvořák's patriotic cantata *The Heirs of the White Mountain*. For chorus and orchestra, the cantata was based on an epic poem by Vítězslav Hálek, considered one of the founders of Czech poetry. The poem lamented the fate of the Czech people after their defeat by the Habsburgs in the battle of the White Mountain; but it went on to celebrate the Czech spirit and its faithfulness to the 'Motherland'.

With its magnificent ending, joyful and euphoric, *The Heirs of the White Mountain* was a huge success. In the columns of his magazine, Procházka wrote:

“With great pleasure I confess that it has been a long time since I was so moved by a piece of music as I was on this occasion; I was also glad to share the collective enthusiasm of the audience.”

Buoyed by the cantata's reception, Dvořák turned his attention back to his opera *King and Charcoal Burner*, asking the Provisional Theatre (his former employer) whether they would agree to stage it. Despite initially replying in the affirmative, the Theatre would later abandon the production. Some say the reason was a host of complaints, from the singers and instrumentalists, that their parts were too difficult. Others surmise that the score was too Wagnerian, as well as too long (about 3 and ½ hours), too densely textured, too melodramatic and simply too much for the relatively lightweight storyline: based on an old puppet play, the plot revolved around the developing friendship between the title characters, complete with romantic subplot, mistaken identity and final happy reunion.

Around a year later, Dvořák submitted a second version of the opera to the Provisional Theatre. This was a wholesale rewrite: while Dvořák kept the same libretto by Lobeský, he changed every note of the score. The result, premiered on 24th November 1874 and conducted by Adolf Čech, was closer to a quasi-classical style than to Wagner. Here is a short extract from Act One scene 9, a dance episode with stylized bagpipe accompaniment. Certainly, there is nothing ‘New German’ about this: Dvořák writes a stock-in-trade triple-time dance, with regular phrase lengths, a melody-dominated texture and rustic accompaniment, combining regular repeated notes in the bass with a pastoral clarinet counter-melody.

- [16] **Král a uhlíř ('King and Charcoal Burner'), B. 21 – Act I, Scene 9: Jaký zvuk to jest? ('What sound is that?')**
from Orfeo C678062H

[17] It seems that Dvořák's revision of the opera between 1873 and 1874 was but part of a larger stylistic renovation being undertaken by the composer at the time. Indeed, Dvořák destroyed many of his works from the previous seven years and set about renumbering those that remained. Moreover, in keeping with the stylistic transformation of *King and Charcoal Burner*, his compositions turned away from a modern German influence towards a more transparent classical style, combined with the deliberate introjection of Slavic-sounding elements. It was also at this time that Dvořák, now married, commenced a professional interaction that would prove influential for his future career.

In July 1874, Dvořák applied for the much-coveted Austrian State Stipendium to support his work as a composer. Some 15 of his compositions – including symphonies, overtures and songs – were sent to the adjudicatory panel comprising the influential music critic Edouard Hanslick, the Vienna Director of the Court Opera Johann Herbeck, and Otto Dessoff, the German conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic. Dvořák's work was looked on favourably and he was awarded the prestigious grant. Indeed, he would receive this honour for the next four years.

The 1877 application process is particularly worthy of note. For this year's competition (with Johannes Brahms now replacing Dessoff on the panel), Dvořák submitted a set of string quartets, a Serenade for strings, a Theme with Variations for piano and a group of so-called *Moravian Duets* for female voices with piano accompaniment. The duets had been written at the request of one Jan Neff, a wholesale merchant who had engaged Dvořák as a piano teacher for his family. Neff gave the composer some Moravian verses and melodies, asking for vocal arrangements to be sung in the home. While Dvořák accepted the texts (from a collection of Moravian national songs by František Sušil), he substituted his own newly invented tunes.

[18] **Moravské dvojzpěvy ('Moravian Duets'), Op. 32, B. 62 – No. 2. Veleť, vtáčku ('Fly, Sweet Songster')**
from ArcoDiva UP0210

[19] In response to Dvořák's multi-composition submission for the 1877 stipendium, Brahms singled out the *Moravian Duets* for special praise. Indeed, he went as far as to recommend the set to his Berlin publisher Fritz Simrock. In a letter to Simrock, Brahms wrote:

"As for the state stipendium, for several years I have enjoyed works sent in by Antonín Dvořák of Prague. This year he has sent works including a volume of 10 duets for two sopranos and piano, which seem to me very pretty, and a practical proposition for publishing. Play them through and you will like them as much as I do. As a publisher, you will be particularly pleased with their piquancy. Dvořák has written all manner of things: operas (Czech), symphonies, quartets, piano pieces. In any case, he is a very talented man. Moreover, he is poor! I ask you to think about it! The duets will show you what I mean, and could be a 'good article'."

Brahms' endorsement helped catapult Dvořák to Slavonic success. For Simrock not only accepted the *Moravian Duets* proposed by Brahms; he commissioned what would be Dvořák's first set of eight *Slavonic Dances*. (We heard an example from the second set at the very outset of this life history.) While we are likely familiar with these dances as flashy orchestral favourites, they began life as piano duets, intended for a new generation of amateur musicians, to be performed in the home. Their musical style, we might argue, was ideally suited to that increasingly prominent sector of the market: each dance was melody-dominated, repetitious, regular in phrase structure and tonal scheme, catchy in rhythm and 'revolving' in its dependence on a small number of quirky motifs. And each showcased a picturesque folk dance from across the region, including the polka, the 'Sousedská', 'dumka', 'Skočná' and 'furiant'. What follows is an example of the last, a fast and fiery Bohemian dance characterized by alternating metres (duple and triple time). The shifting accents create a unstable but energizing impression.

[20] **Slavonic Dances, Series 1, Op. 46, B. 83 – No. 1 in C major**
from Naxos 8.550143

[21] While this style of music might be regarded, somewhat cynically, as a kind of opportunistic ‘tourist nationalism’ (to quote a recent historian), listeners in Dvořák’s time thought the very opposite, describing the dances as ‘natural’ and ‘perfect’, with ‘no trace of artificiality or restraint’: ‘Divine providence flows through this music’, wrote influential critic Louis Ehlert in the Berlin newspaper *National-Zeitung*. Indeed, so successful were the *Slavonic Dances* that not only did their sheet music sales sky rocket; the dances were soon being performed at concerts in Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin, Nice, London and even New York.

A hint of negativity, though, crept into the reception of Dvořák’s music: not that of his *Slavonic Dances* but rather his next large-scale offering, the more-extended *Slavonic Rhapsodies*. The composer began to notice that some in the specifically Viennese audience seemed to harbour an anti-Czech cultural bias. In a letter to conductor Hans Richter, Dvořák admitted:

“In the Viennese papers yesterday I read the programme of the Philharmonic concerts in Vienna ... I am glad you have remembered my humble self again, but I have some misgivings about the choice of the Slavonic Rhapsody, because Viennese audiences seem to be prejudiced against a composition with a Slav flavour, so it may not be as successful as it might in other circumstances. It went very well in London and Berlin, and will do well elsewhere too, but in the national and political conditions prevailing here I am afraid it will not be well received.”

Dvořák’s concern about this mounting cultural bias against the Czech people and their cultural artefacts was such that he wrote to Simrock requesting that the titles of his compositions be published in German and in Czech, that his vocal works were accompanied by texts in both languages, and that his forename was printed as simply ‘Ant.’ – an abbreviation of both the Czech Antonín and the German Anton. Some historians have also argued that this Viennese bias, a result of political tensions within the Austrian Empire, nudged Dvořák to develop a different musical language. The Slavonic aspect of his style was, in general, toned down, the overall impression much less jovial and festive: instead, we hear music full of tension and drama, with stark

contrasts in dynamic and melodies leaping frantically between high and low notes. Dvořák's F Minor Piano Trio, composed in early 1883 following the death of the composer's mother in December 1882, provides a good example.

- [22] **Piano Trio No. 3 in F minor, Op. 65, B. 130 – I. Allegro ma non troppo**
from Naxos 8.550444

- [23] In August 1883, Dvořák received a prestigious invitation: the London Philharmonic Society requested his presence as conductor (of his own orchestral works) in their forthcoming concert season. This invitation was swiftly followed by another: the London music publisher Novello asked Dvořák to conduct a performance of his *Stabat Mater* while in London. By this point in his career, Dvořák had received applause from audiences across Europe. (Indeed, he would be one of few composers whose works would enter the international mainstream during his lifetime.) In London, Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* and *Slavonic Rhapsodies* had become popular successes; and the composer's *Stabat Mater*, performed for the first time in the English capital in March 1883 (under Joseph Barnby), had received a particularly favourable reaction. The 10-movement work, which some historians consider a response to the death of three of Dvořák's children, explores the grief, sorrow and pain experienced by the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross. Here is an extract from the monumental symphonic introduction, a stretch of music built on a single theme: an anguished chromatic descent, passed around the orchestral instruments, like an ongoing cry of despair:

- [24] **Stabat Mater, Op. 58, B. 71 (original 1876 version) (version with orchestral accompaniment) – Stabat mater dolorosa**
from Naxos 8.555301-02

- [25] Dvořák left Prague for London on 5th March 1884: eight days later he was conducting the *Stabat Mater* in the Royal Albert Hall. The day after the concert, the composer described the reception of his music in a letter to his friend Velebin *Urbánek*:

“As soon as I stepped up onto the podium, I was greeted by a stormy applause from an audience of about 12,000. After each movement their fervour increased, and, at the end, the clapping was so loud I had to take several bows, again and again. I couldn’t have wished for a better outcome. All this has given me the conviction that a new and, God willing, more auspicious time has come for me here in England which, I hope, will bear good fruit for Czech music and culture in general.”

Overwhelmed by the positive response he received from the English audience, Dvořák seems to have seen himself as a some kind of ambassador for the Czech people and their cultural heritage. Certainly, he had not forgotten his humble origins, and neither had the English, as the composer writes a few days later in a letter to his father:

“Some of the newspapers mentioned you as well, stating that I came from a poor family, that my father was a butcher and an innkeeper in Nelahozeves, and that you invested everything you could in order to raise your son in the proper manner! I salute you for this!”

The importance of England to Dvořák’s compositional career cannot be overstated. During the eight additional visits he would make to the country between 1884 and 1896 (not only to London but to Worcester, Birmingham, Leeds and Cambridge), the composer received much support, and not only from the crowds in the audience: he also made important contacts within the English musical world, including Henry and Alfred Littleton, the owners of Novello publishing. Success in England also allowed Dvořák to achieve his dream back home: he bought a countryside property in Vysoká, a village near the south Bohemian town of Příbram, where he would spend his summers, away from the city spotlights. And that success came with an additional and not insubstantial perk: for English audiences, Dvořák did not have to worry about cultural politics or any kind of artistic bias. He was now able to further explore, without nervousness or trepidation, the Slavonic style he had adopted earlier in his career, and to base his works on Czech themes or texts. Historians have described this as Dvořák’s ‘second Slavonic period’, one that resulted in music of a generally pictorial or poetic nature. The *Dumky Trio*, for example, referenced a Ukrainian dance: in fact, the trio comprised a set of 6 ‘dumky’, in

different keys. Characteristic of the dance was an alternation between a slow, sorrowful style and one of high spirits, lively rhythms and a brisk tempo. The first 'dumky' of the Trio offers precisely this, contrasting a pained, intensely woven mode of musical expression with a bold and bright style, bursting with off-beat accents and rustic articulation:

- [26] **Piano Trio No. 4 in E minor, Op. 90, B. 166 'Dumky'**
– I. **Lento maestoso – Allegro vivace, quasi doppio movimento – Tempo I**
from Naxos 8.573279

- [27] In 1891, the same year Dvořák completed the *Dumky Trio*, he took up the position of Professor of Composition and Instrumentation at the Prague Conservatory. (Incidentally, the composer had rejected the same offer in 1889.) This was not the only honour received around this time. In 1889 Dvořák was awarded the Austrian Order of the Iron Crown; the next year he was given an honorary doctorate from the Czech University of Prague, then elected to the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts; this was before he was awarded a second honorary doctorate, this one from the University of Cambridge. But Dvořák did not stay very long in his new role at the Prague Conservatory. For in June 1891 he received an invitation to take up the position of Professor of Composition and Artistic Director at the National Conservatory of Music in America, based in New York City – an invitation that came with a handsome salary, some 25 times greater than what he was receiving in Prague.

As for why the National Conservatory of Music wanted Dvořák as the figurehead of the institution, the composer's popularity with audiences in America no doubt played a part: Dvořák's works had featured on concert programmes on both sides of the Atlantic since 1879. What is more, Dvořák had garnered a reputation as a composer of a distinctively national musical idiom. This reputation was of considerable importance, for the President of the Conservatory, a visionary patron of the arts called Jeannette Thurber, had an ambition for her institution to lead the way in forging a specifically American style of classical music.

Dvořák left Prague on 15th September 1892, ready to embark on a 9-day voyage on the S. S. Saale, along with his wife and two of his children, Otilie and Antonin. But this was not before substantial musical activity was undertaken on home turf. In advance of his departure for New York, Dvořák enjoyed a forty-concert tour of Bohemia, in which he appeared on the piano. Moreover, he also composed a large-scale Latin liturgical hymn in praise of God, the *Te Deum*. This, we are led to believe, was not a spontaneous or personally motivated undertaking. Dvořák had been commissioned by Thurber to compose (and conduct) a festive cantata for chorus, orchestra and soloists, suitable for performance at a celebratory concert in New York for the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America – suitable, also, to mark Dvořák's introduction to an American audience. Thurber was supposed to supply Dvořák with a suitably patriotic American text, but by the time the composer received her choice, he had already completed the *Te Deum*. A four-movement choral symphony, the *Te Deum* begins with a striking (and unusual) timpani solo, a fast-paced and repetitive oscillation between two pitches; then, the orchestral players busy themselves with their own repeated motifs, all the while sustaining a single underlying chord or harmony. The overall effect is of a 'polymelodic' structure: that is, music composed of layers of independent melodies unfolding simultaneously.

[28] **Te Deum, Op. 103, B. 176 – Te Deum laudamus: Allegro moderato, maestoso**
from Naxos 8.573558

[29] The premiere of the *Te Deum* within the celebratory concert, which took place on 21st October 1892 at New York's Carnegie Hall, was preceded by a concert address by the American musical patron Thomas Wentworth Higginson. The rationale behind Dvořák's presence here in America was laid out plainly, as Higginson described a collective hope that the composer 'may help add the new world of music to the continent which Columbus found'. Over the next three years, Dvořák endeavoured to fulfil this hope, searching for the keys to a specifically American style grounded in native folk traditions. He asked the black Conservatory student Henry Thacker Burleigh to sing spirituals and plantation songs. And he approached music critic and amateur ethnomusicologist Henry Krehbiel for transcriptions of native American melodies. All the

while Dvořák wrote newspaper articles and engaged in interviews in which he expressed a belief that a national style could be founded on what he came to regard as American musical features: an unconventional five-note scale (called 'pentatonic'); drones or sustained notes in the bass; repeated rhythmic motifs; and syncopation or off-beat accentuation.

Dvořák's so-called 'American' compositions are thought to illustrate precisely these features: music historians cite his String Quintet in E^b, his Sonatina in G for violin and piano, his Suite in A for piano, and his *Biblical Songs* – one of which we heard towards the start of this life history. This is not to mention Dvořák's Ninth Symphony, the infamous work with the explanatory subtitle 'From the New World', begun in late 1892 and finished the following May. Premiered in New York on 16th December 1893, this, the last symphony the composer would write, was an immediate success and major triumph – not only for Dvořák but for the nation. A good deal of journalistic ink was spilled in the press: just how American was the symphony? (Indeed, music historians are still debating the question today.) Dvořák, for his part, insisted that, while his music was entirely original and borrowed no actual melodies, he had taken inspiration – certain rhythmic and melodic features – from native folk traditions. The slow movement, with its famous cor anglais solo, is thought to have been inspired by *The Song of Hiawatha*, a popular 1855 poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow that Dvořák had read in a Czech translation. The third movement also had its origins in the *Hiawatha* story, specifically Longfellow's description of the dance at Hiawatha's wedding feast, the bridegroom 'Whirling, spinning round in circles, Leaping o'er the guests assembled'. Recent commentators, however, have debated any native American aspect to this movement, considering it representative of characteristically Czech music: the snappy rhythmic motif in the woodwind at the outset, for example, is thought reminiscent of Czech folksong.

- [30] **Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, B. 178 'From the New World' – III. Scherzo: Molto vivace**
from Naxos 8.553229

[31] Following the premiere of his Ninth Symphony, Dvořák may well have looked forward to a prosperous and productive period in New York. Indeed, he had had his contract with the American Conservatory extended by Thurber. But impediments arose. Owing to an economic crisis in April 1893, Thurber became unable to finance Dvořák's position, resulting in delays to his payment and deductions at the beginning of his second year. In addition, Dvořák seems to have sensed that the atmosphere at the Conservatory had changed. He was now starting to struggle with his compositional activities; and was beset by homesickness. Acknowledging the slow pace of his work on his Cello Concerto in B Minor, Dvořák longed to be back in Bohemia at his countryside retreat:

"If I could work with as few anxieties as I do in Vysoká, I would have been finished long ago. However, I cannot do it here – I have to teach on Monday – I have Tuesday free – but I am more or less busy on the other days of the week – in short, I cannot give so much time to my work – and if I could I would not feel like it – and so on. In short, it would be best to be back in Vysoká – I am refreshed there, I rest, I am happy. Oh, if only I were home again!"

Dvořák – unsettled, unhappy and under-paid – seems to have reached a point where his desire to leave his Conservatory position outweighed all other factors, including the particulars of his contract. For in August 1895, having spent the summer at Vysoká (and having taken legal advice), the composer informed Thurber – who still owed him his full salary – that he would not be returning for the start of the forthcoming academic year.

Back in Bohemia, Dvořák enjoyed some months of rest and relaxation with his family, but soon his busy working life would recommence. In November, for example, he returned to his teaching post at the Prague Conservatory. He went to Karlsbad to meet with both Simrock and Hanslick, important figures in his pre-American life who he had not seen for some years. And he attended the funeral of his sister-in-law, whom he commemorated in the second and third movements of his now finished Cello Concerto with reference to a song of his that she had particularly enjoyed. The Concerto was to occupy Dvořák's attention in early 1896: on 19th March, the composer conducted the premiere during a Philharmonic Society concert in London; the soloist on this occasion

was the English Leo Stern. Incidentally, the concerto was written for another cellist, Hanuš Wihan, a member of the Bohemian String Quartet. During the compositional process, Wihan suggested to the composer a number of changes, including the insertion of a cadenza in the final movement. While Dvorak was against the cadenza, disliking virtuosity for its own sake, he accepted some modifications. Wihan, however, was prevented from premiering the work not because of any tiff with the composer (as is often reported); rather, he was unavailable on the pre-arranged Philharmonic Society date. What follows is an extract from the end of the concerto: the cadenza-free end. As the composer himself described:

“The finale closes gradually, diminuendo, like a sigh... the solo dies down to pianissimo and then swells again, and the last bars are taken up by the orchestra and it finishes in a stormy mood.”

[32] **Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104, B. 191 – III. Finale: Andante – Allegro vivo**
from Naxos 8.550503

[33] The next – and, indeed, the penultimate – phase in Dvořák's compositional journey seems to have emerged from his previous interest in music's extra-musical associations: the poetic or pictorial aspect explored in previous works, including the *Dumky Trio*. For after the Cello Concerto in B Minor, Dvořák set to work on a series of so-called 'symphonic poems': extended orchestral pieces based on a text, the outline of a story or sometimes even a general idea. The series of four works composed by Dvořák in 1896 – 'The Water Goblin', 'The Noon Witch', 'The Golden Spinning Wheel' and 'The Wild Dove' – were set to themes from a collection of poetry by the Czech writer Karel Jaromír Erben. (It seems that Dvořák had a longstanding interest in Erben's work, having set to music his poem 'The Orphan's Bed' – as 'The Orphan' – back in 1871.) The 1896 symphonic poems were constructed in accordance with Dvořák's developing interest in what is often called 'programmatic' music. In particular, the composer wanted to go beyond simple mood setting: that is, capturing the general atmosphere of a poem. Instead, he sought to offer a more precise alignment of music and poetry, constructing

his melodic material on the rhythmical base of Erben's verse: in other words, setting the text as if for voice.

This tight synchronization between music and source text, while new and innovative, was not looked upon favourably by all music critics. Hanslick, for example, who had been full of praise for Dvořák earlier in his career, implied that relying on a text was beneath the composer, not to mention dangerous:

"I enjoy listening to Dvořák's music, and I feel its charms almost too sensitively, but I still could not fail to point out the danger of this most recent direction. Dvořák has no need to go begging to literature (and to such literature!) for his music. His wealth of musical invention needs no borrowings, crutches, or guides... It is a peculiar passion with which Dvořák is now devoting himself to ugly, unnatural, macabre subjects that correspond so little to his real feeling for music and his amiable character."

This quotation may tell us more about Hanslick than Dvořák. Clearly, the critic is no lover of pictorial, poetic or programmatic music; instead, he values traditional forms, the absence of extra-musical connotations – what we might call 'absolute music' or else 'music for music's sake'. As for Dvořák, an extract from the opening of his 'The Water Goblin' illustrates his poetic credentials. Here, during a moonlit night, the malevolent title character envisages his forthcoming marriage to a young girl lured deep into his underwater lair.

[34] **Vodník ('The Water Goblin'), Symphonic Poem, Op. 107, B. 195**
from Naxos 8.550896

[35] During his final years, Dvořák became the recipient of various honours: in 1897 he was appointed as a member of the jury for the Viennese Artists' Stipendium; in 1898 he was elected a member of a committee of experts on copyright in music; in 1901 he became a member of the House of Lords of the Austrian government; and in November 1901 he was appointed Director of the Prague Conservatory Opera.

As for his compositional activities, Dvořák stated:

“Over the last few years I have written nothing but operas. Not out of vanity or desire for fame, but because I consider opera the most advantageous of genres for the nation too. Large sections of society hear such music, and hear it very often.”

Not a genre we tend to associate with Dvořák, a composer much better known for his orchestral and chamber music. Nonetheless, as historians have argued, there was practically no period of his life when Dvořák was *not* engaged in one operatic project or another. This, his final period, simply saw a burst of creative energy in operatic composition.

As Dvořák’s words make clear, a substantial part of opera’s appeal to the composer was in fact opera’s own appeal as a genre: the ability of opera to draw an audience – a large, mixed audience, one that represented a cross section of society. The composer’s mention of ‘the nation’, too, is surely important: whether it be an opera that depicts the nation (a period in its history, its folk heritage or mythology) or an opera that attracts the nation (luring paying customers into the theatre), Dvořák’s homeland figures prominently in his creative vision. Here, towards the end of his life, we find Dvořák writing two new Czech national operas: *The Devil and Kate*, based on a Czech fairy-tale; and *Rusalka*, also a fairy-tale and also on a Czech libretto. Moreover, if we look back over the composer’s career, we also find important Czech-based operas, including *King and Charcoal Burner*, mentioned earlier; and the lesser known *The Jacobin*, set in a Bohemian village in the eighteenth century.

But focusing on these Czech operas – and these operas alone – gives a false impression. For prominent within Dvořák’s compositional career, even here during the twilight years of his life, is a marked interest in historical opera of a distinctly *international* appeal.

Indeed, Dvořák's very first attempt at opera, the grand and heroic *Alfred*, was set to a story about the English King Alfred the Great; later came *Dmitriji*, a slice of Russian history following the death of tsar Boris Godunov; and, then, his last completed work, *Armida*, based on an epic poem by the sixteenth-century Italian writer Torquato Tasso, *The Liberation of Jerusalem*. The opera depicts events unfolding during the First Crusade, with a focus on a passionate relationship between the title character, the daughter of King Hydraot of Damascus, and the crusading knight Rinald – two characters from two opposing camps. Important to the plot is the exotic locale, the backdrop against which the romance unfolds. Dvořák captures this Oriental setting from the very start of Act One scene 1 where, in the Royal Gardens of Damascus, the traditional call to prayer is heard. The muezzin's proclamation of the greatness of Allah is interspersed between contrasting choral passages: ethereal-sounding female voices sing of peaceful days of contentment; while a male choral recitative, with rhythmically defined repeated notes, captures the menacing goings-on in the desert.

- [36] **Armida, Op. 115, B. 206 – Act I, Scene 1: Jak z dervišových prstů řinou**
(‘As delightful rosary beads glide in the hands of the dervishes’)
from Orfeo C404962H

- [37] Dvořák is said to have departed the theatre early on the evening of 25th March 1904, during the premiere of *Armida* at the National Theatre in Prague, where the opera was being directed by Robert Polak and conducted by Frantisek Picka. According to sources, the composer felt unwell. His departure, sadly, was portentous. For less than two months later, on 1st May, a 62-year-old Dvořák passed away from an undiagnosed cause. His funeral was held on 5th May and he was buried in Prague's Vyšehrad cemetery.

Of course, as with any great composer, the story does not end here. Musical masterworks live on long after the death of their creator: in fact, Dvořák's music remains as popular today as it ever was during his lifetime; works such as the Ninth Symphony, for example, regularly top lists of symphonic favourites. Yet the reception of Dvořák's music over the last century-and-a-half – in the concert hall, the opera house, as well as

the musicological literature – has tended to emphasize his Czech or Slavonic repertoire, not to mention his status as a ‘national’ composer. Indeed, such is the intensity of focus on his folk-infused music that many of Dvořák’s other works, let alone his other modes of musical expression, remain relatively little known. As we have learned, though, Dvořák was remarkably adept at crafting his own musical identity. His national heritage did not seep through his pen and paper in an entirely natural and inevitable manner. He was not overcome by a patriotic fervour that effortlessly infused his scores. Dvořák, like many composers of the period, was most probably motivated by money: he worked to commission; and he intended his works to reach the widest possible audience. (Remember his abbreviation of his forename on the title page of his scores, and his insistence on German as well as Czech texts.) His output, clearly, was market oriented, but also markets oriented. Time and time again, the composer resorted to the stylization of different musical dialects: Bohemian, Moravian, Slovak, Ukrainian, African-American and American-Indian, as well as Russian, English and Oriental. That these dialects are most often convincing to audiences speaks of Dvořák’s craftsmanship and astuteness, his creative and captivating imagination.

[38] **Hymnus k Nejsvětější Trojici ('Hymn to the Most Holy Trinity'), B. 82: Deo Patri sit gloria**

from Capriccio C5207