

In the last decade of the 19th century Antonin Dvorak, the Czech composer with a well established career in Europe, accepted an invitation from Jeannette Thurber to head the National Conservatory of Music in New York. He arrived with his family in late September in 1892 and about two months later he was making steady progress on his 9th Symphony, which was finished in May, 1893; the work was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The official premiere of Dvorak's "New World Symphony" took place on December 16th of the same year, performed by the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall; it was directed by Anton Seidl. About a year before its premier, in November 1892, while Dvorak was in the midst of composing this famous symphony, he shared the following thoughts in a letter to his friend Josef Hlavka: "America is awaiting great things from me, and mainly that I show them the way to the promised land and the realm of a new independent art: in short, to create [an American] national music." (Beckerman, 2003, p.125) Although his intentions were to create American music, the style of Dvorak's "New World Symphony" sound much more like 19th century European orchestral music.

When Dvorak accepted Thurber's offer as head of the National Conservatory, he joined the ranks of influential, like-minded people in New York who had a vision for American music. (Horowitz, 1993, p.92). Thurber recruited Dvorak because she knew that the famous Czech composer supported the cultural nationalist perspective which she and her colleagues sought to establish. Thurber hoped that this nationalist tradition of composing in America would be taught in the National Conservatory, and would tap into the roots of "true America" to find sources of inspiration (Beckerman, 2003, p. 4). The head conductor at the National Conservatory, Anton Siedl, shared this perspective, and so did one of the most influential music critics of the day,

Henry Krehbiel, a close friend and supporter of Siedl and the National Conservatory. When Dvorak arrived in New York in September of 1892 his hosts made a concerted effort to expose him to a variety of American cultural references that included Columbus Day celebrations, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, books of American poetry, and book called *Negro Music*, which was given to him by a reporter named James Huneker (Beckerman, 2003, p.126). Thurber's hope was that Dvorak would be inspired to compose music with strong American influences thanks to his exposure to these aspects of American culture. (Rubin, 1993, p.68).

After about 6 months in America, Dvorak wrote to his friend Kozanek and said, "I have just finished a new symphony in E minor. It pleases me very much and will differ very substantially from my earlier compositions... the *influence* of America can be felt by anyone who has 'a nose'." (Clapham, 1966, p.86). African American music was an important influence on Dvorak's new symphony. As was mentioned above, one of Dvorak's first encounters with African-American music was through a book called *Negro Music* (Beckerman, 2003, p.126); Dvorak complimented the knowledge he gained from reading this book by listening to one of his African-American students sing. Harry T. Burleigh (a professional singer, and an accomplished composer and arranger) spent hours every week with Dvorak while he was composing his ninth symphony; Burleigh would sing plantation songs and music by Stephen Foster so that Dvorak could gain first-hand exposure to African-American music (Block, 1993, p.158). According to Burleigh's first hand account, Dvorak was especially fond of the song, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, so much that he used part of that melody in one of the main themes of the first movement of his ninth Symphony (Beckerman, 2003, p.128). In an interview for the New York

Herald in May of 1893, Dvorak described his deep respect for the African-American musical tradition which he had experienced.

“I am now satisfied that the future music of [America] must be founded upon what are called the African-American melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States. When I first came here last year I was impressed with this idea and it has developed into a settled conviction.”

(Beckerman, 2003, p.129)

There are several notable melodic themes in Dvorak’s work which indicate strong connections to American folk tunes and African American spirituals. About 4 minutes into the first movement of the 9th Symphony (Adagio-Allegro), at measure 149, Dvorak introduces a new section with a solo for flute. This melody resembles the tune of the African American spiritual, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, which Burleigh sang so often for Dvorak (see figure 1).



Figure 1. “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” Theme, Movement 1, mm. 149 - 156.

This theme plays an important role in the first movement; it is repeated in several different variations, and it contributes to a dramatic cadential structure that marks the end of a section within the first movement (mm. 171 - 180). The “Swing Low” theme is also a noteworthy melody because it participates in the continuing process of thematic recollection that takes place throughout the entire symphony.

Dvorak uses another important American melody about 3 minutes into the first movement; it resembles American fiddle tunes, with rhythmic structures that are often seen in Stephen Foster's music. This particular tune sounds similar to a common folk tune from the 1800's called *Turkey in the Straw*. (See figure 2).

The image shows a musical score for two staves: Flute I and II (Fl. I. II.) and Oboe I and II (Ob. I. II.). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The flute part begins with a triplet of eighth notes marked *p*, followed by eighth notes marked *fz*. The oboe part follows a similar pattern, starting with a triplet marked *p* and then eighth notes marked *fz*. The score spans four measures.

Figure 2. "Turkey in Straw" Theme, Movement 1, mm. 91 - 98

In addition to its African American and American folk music elements, the "New World Symphony" was also influenced by another important part of American culture. On December 17, 1893, the day of the premiere of the "New World Symphony", Dvorak explained in an interview with the New York Herald that his 9th symphony was also inspired by Native American music and culture, specifically stating that the two inner movements (the Largo and the Scherzo) were inspired by Native American music (while the outer movements were inspired by African-American and folk music) (Block, 1993, p.158). Since Dvorak's exposure to Native American music was limited, he added: "I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music... and I have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, harmonies, counterpoint and orchestral color." (Clapham, 1966, p.87). Even though Dvorak did not directly quote any Native American music, he tried to write music which,

according to his experience, sounded like it could be Native American. For example, the famous theme that opens the 2nd movement has a restricted range in the contour of the melody, along with notes that more or less follow a pentatonic scale. It can be interpreted that the dotted rhythms also contribute to the exotic “Indian” style that Dvorak sought to express. (See figure 3).

Figure 3. Opening Theme to Movement 2 - Largo

Besides finding inspiration from the general sound of “Indian music,” Dvorak said that his composing was also influenced by the famous poem about the Ojibwe people, “The Song of Hiawatha” by Longfellow. The illustrations below indicate the programmatic aspects of the “New World Symphony.” The drawings show Dvorak in the background and the opening bars of the largo in the foreground as part of an idyllic scene with a Native American in his canoe floating peacefully on a river (Block, 1993, p.159). (See figure 4.)

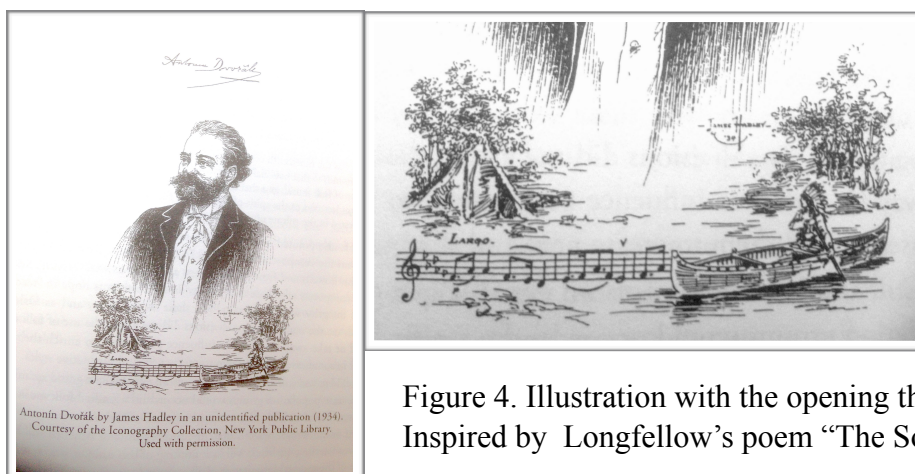


Figure 4. Illustration with the opening theme from the Largo - Inspired by Longfellow’s poem “The Song of Hiawatha.”

Dvorak spoke clearly about the programmatic aspects of his 9th symphony, and he stated that certain scenes from “The Song of Hiawatha” were represented musically in his symphony. The musicologist Michael Beckerman explores several of the programmatic features that Dvorak mentioned which appear in the Largo and Scherzo. (Beckerman, 1992, p.37). One possibility is that this beautiful melody represents the wooing scene in “The Song of Hiawatha,” while another hypothesis suggests that the tune could represent the funeral march from this poem. Beckerman looks closely at Longfellow’s poetry compared to the contours of Dvorak’s Largo, and offers his own theory that this music represents the landscape of the journey that Hiawatha takes, which is described in detail by Longfellow in his famous poem (Beckerman, 1992, pp.42). In the Scherzo Beckerman follows the text of the feast scene which Dvorak said was the inspiration for this movement. He finds several examples of word painting where the music seems to imitate parts of the poem that speak of dancing to flutes and drums, whirling, leaping, and soft panther-like treading (Beckerman, 2003, p. 42). At the same time, he recognizes that it is impossible to know for sure how Dvorak was inspired by Hiawatha (Beckerman, 2003 p. 65).

Even though Dvorak’s symphony was extremely well received, certain critics of his day questioned whether the New World Symphony was truly American, and musicologists continue to debate this point today. After all, the work is composed in four movements (each one with Italian titles): 1 - Adagio - Allegro, 2 - Largo, 3 - Scherzo, 4 - Allegro con fuoco. The general form and development of the piece clearly follow the European orchestral tradition. Some would argue that the programmatic aspects that relate the music to “The Song of Hiawatha” are contrived, and an exoticist’s afterthought. Other critics might recognize that Dvorak used

certain melodic references to American music, but that does not mean that the “New World Symphony” is an American work; in Clapham’s opinion, the work is “far more Czech, than American.” (Clapham, 1966, p.88).

At the same time it is important to recognize the important role that Dvorak played in encouraging the development of the American idiom in art music. His 9th symphony brought attention to the the cultural nationalist cause by emphasizing the importance of African American music and Native American references. His legacy as an educator of composers can be traced to Aaron Copland and George Gershwin through Rubin Goldmark, who was one of Dvorak’s students who ended up leading the composition department at Jularid from 1924 - 1936 (Rubin, 1993, p. 69).

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