

ANTONIN DVORAK

Dr David C F Wright (1974)

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Dvorak, like Mendelssohn, in my opinion, is liked rather than admired or appreciated. But it is my contention that they were both very fine but flawed composers. Perhaps the problem is the perennial problem of musical fashion and how music opinion changes, since music lovers can be fickle and often want to go with current opinion rather than detach themselves from general opinion, which is often wrong or prejudiced, and some people do not use musical facts to consider either the music or the man.

The first outstanding fact about Dvorak was that he was a very pleasant man and morally good as were composers like Bruckner, Haydn and the aforementioned Mendelssohn. Dvorak was not a martinet as was Mahler; he was not pompously arrogant like Elgar or a megalomaniac like Britten. He was not lascivious like Schubert or Wolf, but a faithful husband. He was not a racist like Chopin or Wagner. He was a devout Catholic who eschewed the militancy of some branches of the Roman church.

It has always been my belief that the man is revealed in his music and therefore these two aspects must be considered side by side with every composer or artist. Dvorak was man who loved both God and humanity and would never offend anyone deliberately. In his music there is heart, and it is a big heart as well, yet it is not slushy or sentimental as one might find in Tschaikevsky, for example. He was a down-to-earth person and further to be commended for that.

But he has been maligned. Some of his early works have been dismissed as Wagnerian as if that were a hanging offence. Some shallow musicians, musicologists and music lovers have insulted him by comparing his music to that of Schubert, a matter that understandably and grossly offended Dvorak in his own lifetime and also offends those of us who are musicians today. Because someone writes good melodies does not mean they are a disciple of anyone else. Mozart wrote some glorious melodies and before Schubert was born. Utter rubbish is written about composers and Dvorak has been unfairly castigated. I have read that Dvorak was the counterpart of Johann Strauss in Vienna thus debasing Dvorak's music which is, of course, vastly superior to anything by the Viennese waltz composers..

The butchers trade had always been in the Dvorak family and music played an important part in their lives. Jan Nepomuk Dvorak (1764-1842) was a butcher as was the tenth of his twelve children, Frantisek, who added an inn to the family butcher business. Frantisek was Dvorak's father who was accomplished on the zither. Dvorak's mother was Anna Zdenkova (1820-1882) who had no musical talent, but her father had been steward to Prince Lobkowitz.

The Dvoraks married on 17 November 1840 and had fourteen children of which only eight survived. Antonin was the first-born arriving on 8 September 1841 in the family house/business at Nelahozeves and he was



christened the next day at the little church across the road. He was always known as Tonik. When he was ten months old, the inn caught fire and was reduced to rubble but the butcher's shop was repaired.

Dvorak's father taught his son the violin and the boy was fascinated with Bohemian music, music of his own country. By the age of five, he was able to entertain the restored inn's patrons by playing the violin for them. He attended the village school and was helped by the schoolmaster/organist Josef Spitz. His learning of German was somewhat neglected although this was a necessary discipline particularly after the failed nationalistic uprising of 1848. And Dvorak did not like the German language and, of course, the Germans were hostile in their attitude towards the Czechs.

In 1854, Antonin was sent to his uncle Antonin Zdenek in Zlonice who was a steward at the Court of Count Kinsky. The boy joined the local butchers guild as an apprentice and, in his new school, had, among his teachers, Josef Toman and the German Antonin Liehmann, both gifted musicians. In 1855, the Dvorak family moved to Zlonice where Frantisek took up another inn, but this enterprise was not successful as an inn opposite already had an established clientele and, by 1860, Frantisek was bankrupt and had to surrender the lease. He demanded his son give up his musical aspirations and concentrate on the more secure livelihood of being a butcher.

On 1 November, the young man received his Journeyman's Certificate from the Butcher's Guild. But it was music that he wanted to pursue and in this quest he was aided and abetted by Liehmann. Father Dvorak was not moved, but sent his son to school at Bohmisch-Kamnitz, a town in Sudetenland to learn German properly. In July 1857, he returned to Zlonice with a leaving certificate from the school and Liehmann urged his father to let the young man take up music and Uncle Zdenek added weight to the argument. Frantisek gave in and, in September 1857, Dvorak set off for Prague. He was just 16.

His first lodgings were unsuitable and so he moved in with Aunt Josefa. Dvorak enrolled in the organ school being taught by Josef Foerster for organ, Josef Zvonar for singing and Frantisek Blazek for theory. Financially, it was a hard time for Dvorak and his hatred of the German language did not help. He worked in orchestras and cheap bands as a viola player. He was befriended by Karl Bendl, a fellow student who had a piano and several scores that Dvorak could use and therefore he was better off.

He completed his studies when he was almost eighteen. He applied for various musical posts but was rejected. He did not want to continue nightly in the Komzak band with daily morning rehearsals.

The Czech National Theatre came into being in November 1862 and employed the Komzaks together with their own National orchestra. Dvorak played the viola in productions and enjoyed the conducting of such notables as Liszt and Richard Strauss. Antonin played in the first performances of Smetena operas, Dalibor and The Bartered Bride. In fact Smetena was appointed director of the National Theatre in September 1866..

Early in 1865 something happened in Dvorak's life which was to change him completely.

Jan Cermak was a wealthy goldsmith who employed Dvorak to teach music to his daughter Josefina. He fell in love with her immediately, but it was not returned. Unrequited love is very debilitating. Antonin suffered dreadfully. He tried to win her by composing the song cycle *Cypresses*.



Sisters Josefina Cermak (standing) and Anna (sitting)

Much of Dvorak's music reveals his love for Josefina even music

written later in life. The slow section at the end of the finale of the superlative Cello Concerto in B minor is obviously an example.

It took him over six years to come to terms with this rejection but he gradually accepted the matter and turned his attention to the younger sister, Anna and married her in 1873. Josefina married Vaclav Count Kaunic in 1877.

All through his life Dvorak contemplated his love for Josefina and what it would have been like to be married to her. This seems to be unfair on Anna to whom he was faithful but his love for Josefina was a torment.

But he carried on teaching and, by July 1871, could leave the orchestra being no longer dependent on that salary. He extended his interest in composition.

His first piece was a piano piece, the Forget-me-not polka of 1856. There were some small organ pieces which could only be classed as exercises. Opus 1 is a String Quintet in A minor and Opus 2 a String Quartet in A major which both date from 1862. Then there is a gap of three years before the Symphony no. 1 in C minor entitled The Bells of Zlonice.

The symphony has been savagely attacked as being too long and of little merit. I can think of two symphonies by a British composer to which this criticism could be justly made, but not Dvorak's Symphony no. 1. As with much of Dvorak's music, it recalls and records an event, or events in his life. The dissonances in the first movement are said to represent one of the bells at the church which was cracked and caused a type of dissonance. Dvorak entered the symphony for a competition in Germany. But it was never returned. It came to light in 1923, eighteen year after the composer's death. There is no doubt that Josefina is here, as she is in his first Cello Concerto, the one in A major, which is seldom played. This concerto was not discovered until 1918 in a cello and piano version. The orchestration was undertaken by one Gunther Raphael in 1929 but improved upon by Jarmil Burghauser. It is a good piece and recommended, but it will always be in the shadow of Dvorak's masterpiece and the greatest cello concerto ever written, his Cello Concerto in B minor, Opus 104.

The Symphony no. 1 brought vitriol from critics, so-called musicologists and reviewers when it was first performed in various parts of the world, but these writers only displayed their ignorance and stupidity as music reviewers regularly do. Many complained that there was absolutely nothing bell-like in the music yet the whole of the first movement revolves around a bell like motif. Elgar rubbished the work, but years later tried to atone for his inexperience by praising the Symphony no. 6 in D major but, being the pompous man he was, did not withdraw his unjust criticism of The Bells of Zlonice.

After all these years, this symphony is still not established yet many inferior works of other composers are. Bells of Zlonice, among all its many other attributes, has a gloriously memorable theme and, to quote current parlance, it is a tune to die for. It is a monumental work, richly orchestrated with a super slow movement which incorporates a sort of march or, to be precise a marziale section, a sort of country pageant, but it is not overblown or pompous. It is a masterly work of which I have never tired, a really super piece. Vaclav Neumann's recording is excellent as is that of Istvan Kertesz and I was present at the rehearsals of all the Dvorak symphonies which Bryden Thomson gave for the BBC some years ago.

A symphony in 1865 is good going, but the year also saw that Symphony no. 2 in B flat, another work also savaged by the critics. It was condemned as being too much like Liszt and Wagner and that the excellent opening was not maintained in quality throughout the rest of the piece. He also wrote the opera Alfred but did not try to get it staged, being unsure of it. In fact, he took the overture and entitled it Tragic Overture but it was published by Simrock as the Dramatic Overture. The opera was staged in 1938.

In his early career, Dvorak wrote three more string quartets in B flat, D and E minor respectively. They were

lost for years. Of special note is the E minor quartet which is in one movement and does hint at Wagner's indisputable masterpiece *Tristan und Isolde*. To me, it is Dvorak's outpouring of his feelings for Josefina.

He composed eleven operas but not one of them has been really successful. He so wanted to be an opera composer but, like Schubert, had no sense of stage or theatre, although it has to be said the Dvorak's operas are not feeble, as Schubert's are. Dvorak also destroyed a lot of his early compositions and revised many so that, for example, his *String Sextet in A Opus 48* was composed, or completed, after his *String Quintet in G Opus 77*.

Johannes Brahms admired Dvorak immensely and befriended and helped him financially as he had with the Schumanns, which is further evidence of the fundamental goodness of Brahms. He is quoted as having said of Dvorak, "He has more ideas than the rest of us. We could glean main subjects from his left-overs".

Dvorak had a wonderful capacity for friendship. He formed a friendship with a lawyer Dr Ludevít Procházka and his wife Marta who was a singer and they would have musical soirees at their house where some of Dvorak's work was premiered. The merchant, Jan Neff, became a friend and Dvorak taught his two children.

In the Spring of 1872, Dvorak began work on his first real success, *Hymnus* subtitled *The Heirs of the White Mountains* for chorus and orchestra to a text by Vitezslav Halek. It was a nationalistic work and displayed Dvorak's feelings. Its premiere in March 1873, conducted by his friend Karel Bendl, was a triumph and Prague music society knew that this was a composer to be reckoned with. Dvorak was 31, the same age as when Schubert died.

Brahms rightly said that Schubert never wrote a masterpiece but that Dvorak could not help writing some. This encouraged Dvorak who, feeling that he had been jilted by Josefina, married Anna, her father having died and therefore the slur of a daughter of a rich goldsmith marrying a penniless musician was lifted. The marriage was also sanctioned because Anna was about five months pregnant with their son, Otakar. Their daughter Otilie went on to marry Josef Suk in 1898 the date of her parents silver wedding anniversary.

Antonin and Anna had nine children in all.

It was probably Anna who recommended to her husband that he apply for the organist post at St Adalbert's Church where Foerster was the choirmaster. Dvorak took the post for three years but the money was not good. He had to take other jobs to implement his meagre income with as much teaching as possible and playing the viola.

The conductor Hans-Hubert Schonzele told me that you can only understand a composer's music if you understand the man, his character and his attitude both to his environment and the world and its morals. I have advocated that truth for years and come in for unfair criticism as a result. If you understand the laziness of Schubert you will understand the poor quality of his music. If you understand the seriousness of Rubbra you will understand his music. If you understand the Catholic spirituality of Bruckner you will understand his music. Dvorak was a devout Catholic although he was still prone to indiscretions, as we all are, but he was a true believer and generally followed the rules of Catholicism but he never made an open display of it. At the end of some of his scores he wrote such things as *Thanks be to God* or *Praise be to the Lord* just as Haydn, another very decent man, would end some of his scores with *Laus Deo*. Dvorak saw God in all creation and often walked in the country being an early riser.

Hans Gal told us that Dvorak worked in his shirt sleeves. He was a man after my own heart since he hated pomp and ceremony and simply abhorred official occasions. He would have hated Elgar and Britten and what they stood for. Dvorak was easily embarrassed by any praise of his music. "I am a simple Bohemian composer," he would protest.

He had two hobbies namely trains and his pigeons. He would meet with his friends and smoke a cigarette

and drink the local beer and, latterly, was fascinated by the game of skittles.

The other great quality about this man to add to his enviable modesty was his love for his family. He was always happy playing with his children. Their noisiness did not trouble him and he was always helpful in the kitchen.

He composed a Piano Quintet and after its first performance reworked it into his Piano Quintet in A, Opus 81, a sublime chamber work of the highest quality which should be cherished by all music lovers. He began work on his Symphony no 3 in E flat, his only symphony in three movements. The influence of Wagner is less but, from a personal point of view, the lack of rhythmic contrast in the finale is a little tedious.

The award of an Austrian State Grant around 1874 inspired him to write his finest symphony the Symphony no. 4 in D minor. It is grievous that some mischief-makers have said it is a Schubertian symphony proving again that comparisons are unhelpful and a positive hindrance. This is pure Dvorak with his infectious love both of God and of nature with its mountain streams and refreshing clear water and it is decidedly original with glimpses of Bohemian nationalism. The scherzo is an absolute joy and totally irresistible. Smetana conducted it as a separate piece in 1874 and the complete work was not heard until 1892 under the composer's direction. The recording by Istvan Kertesz is a must. In this minor masterpiece we are spared every excess and all those base things such as ceremony, pomp, pageantry and ostentation. It is a real gem.

The composer next worked on the second version of his opera The King and the Charcoal Burner which was staged. He also completed his Quartet no 7 in A minor, Opus 16.

Over Christmas 1874 he completed his opera The Stubborn Lovers and then turned to three major chamber works, the String Quintet in G, Opus 77, and the Piano Trio in B flat, Opus 21, and the Piano Quartet in D, Opus 23, although these were on the drawing board for some time before. They are happy works reflecting his own contented life but they are certainly not superficial. This sunniness is also shown in his Serenade in E for string orchestra, Opus 22. Would that all serenades for string orchestra were of this quality! He composed his Moravian Duets, Opus 20, for Jan and Marie Neff.

In the middle of 1875, he began work on his Symphony no 5 in F which some have opined is his pastoral symphony. It continues in the stream of self-assured, confident and happy music which, perhaps, is sometimes bucolic. It was the first of his symphonies to reach the concert hall and originally hailed as the Symphony no. 1. Sadly some have likened it to Schubert because of its melodic inventiveness but that comparison is odious. Dvorak's melodies are extensive not fragmentary and not always repetitive. Dvorak had a gift for modulation and could handle key relationships which Schubert certainly could not. The Finale is not brilliantly constructed whereas Schubert had no sense of construction at all.

Dvorak asked Von Bulow if he could dedicate this symphony to him. Von Bulow replied, " A dedication from you? Next to Brahms you are the most gifted composer. Such a dedication would be a higher decoration than any sort of award from the hands of a prince."

For the rest of 1875, Dvorak worked on his opera Vanda. The following year saw many chamber works completed, the Piano Trio in G minor, Opus 26, the String Quartet in E, initially given the opus number of 27 but published by Simrock as opus 80. And he was considering a big choral work, the Stabat Mater, as well as the Piano Concerto in G minor, Opus 33, which seldom gets played. It is not in the same class as either the Violin Concerto or the Cello Concerto because Dvorak was not a pianist but a string player. The Piano Concerto is relatively simple and is not virtuosic and yet it is the simplicity that gives it an appeal. Do concertos always have to be showpieces? Surely it is the quality of the music that counts.

However, I do not admit that the piano parts in some of his chamber music does let the pieces down. The Piano Trio in E minor known as the Dumky may be a case in point.

When everything is going well there is often something that happens to spoil it. The year 1877 was not his best year. He had his state grant renewed which enabled him to resign as organist at St Adalberts. In July he went on a walking tour with his friend Leos Janacek who was then 23 years old and who had recently conducted Dvorak's Serenade for string orchestra. He renewed his friendship with Alois Gobl who was a gifted singer and fellow viola player and probably encouraged Dvorak to write opera.

In August Dvorak's daughter Ruzena died being less than a year old, followed about four weeks later by Otakar, a victim of smallpox and this tragedy happened on Dvorak's 36th birthday. On 6 June 1878, his daughter Otilie was born, one of six children to survive their father and became well-known because she married Josef Suk.

In November 1877, Dvorak moved house where he received visitors such as Brahms, Grieg and Tchaikovsky as well as his publisher Simrock. Later he visited Vienna but missed Brahms but met Hanslick. Dvorak worked on his Symphonic Variations based on the folk song I am a fiddler. He was still attracted to opera and began work on The Cunning Peasant. He wrote a setting of Ave Maria and the last set of Moravian Duets. Because of the tragedy in his life, Dvorak had temporarily become very stern but humour shot through with such comments as that which he made about his Symphonic Variations. "This is 'I am a fiddler' muddled up," he said. However, the Variations were received with great enthusiasm. Hans Richter adored them but that is not necessarily a good omen since Richter enthused about the turgid works of an English composer. It was his way of getting himself into the limelight to conduct new works.

Dvorak's emotional state was reserved for his massive Stabat Mater of 1876/7. It is music of the heart deeply felt and sometimes beautifully constructed. On a personal note, I think it is a little too long at ninety minutes to sustain the material but the religiosity is so natural and there is a wonderful sense of melody throughout. Some movements do seem a trifle banal and the five minute orchestral introduction does not seem to fit but these are minor quibbles. Quite amazingly, Dvorak conveys the message rather than the text. It is the glorious sound he makes that carries the greatness conviction.

His next major work was the String Quartet in D, Opus 34, which is quite subdued despite the second movement being a polka. His other 'severe' quartet was no. 11 in C opus 61. It was written in a hurry and received a rebuke from Brahms but not in a malicious way. Nonetheless both quartets are fine in many respects.

His sunny music returned. In the early part of 1878, the Serenade for wind instruments, cello and double bass, Opus 44, appeared. This is somewhat Haydenesque but it is a refreshing and jovial work. A curious work followed namely the Bagatelles, Opus 47, for two violins, cello and harmonium. Can you think of another chamber work of Dvorak's time with a harmonium? Nevertheless, they are homely pieces conveying the idea of family and friends in congenial domestic settings.

It was the orchestration of the Slavonic Dances that next occupied him. They were an instant success and have deservedly remained so, although the Slavonic Rhapsodies are finer pieces. It is the sheer exuberance and joy of these pieces with simply marvellous orchestration that endear them. We often speak of the fine orchestration of Richard Strauss and a few others but Dvorak's orchestrations are usually remarkable and stunning. Some have opined that Dvorak's love of locomotives and their splendour influenced his orchestration.

On Christmas Day 1878, he began work on his String Quartet no. 10 in E flat. For some reason this work took over fifteen months to complete which was very slow for Dvorak. It has a Dumka which has some furious type interjections and the movement does not work. The slow movement is a Romance.

Despite his aversion for all things German, Dvorak went to Berlin in the summer of 1879 where he met the distinguished violinist Joseph Joachim. In Joachim's house, the E flat Quartet and the Sextet in A were premiered. Dvorak, being the shy and modest decent man that he was, melted somewhat into the background but he was inspired to write his Violin Concerto for Joachim.

This is a gem, a real delight and vastly superior to other concertos of its time. Much as I admire Mendelssohn, I have never been taken by his Violin Concerto in E minor but the Dvorak stands head and shoulders above the Mendelssohn. Dvorak, being a string player, makes this concerto and the sublime B minor Cello Concerto more virtuosic than the Piano Concerto. What I applaud about Dvorak is that he is not a show-off. He is concerned with writing music not technical fireworks yet his music remains enthralling. The glorious Cello Concerto has no cadenza, a brave move for that time, since it is music and not a competition.

Dvorak has two great friends in Brahms and Richter. Richter had made his name in London by conducting Wagner in 1877 and went on to be the conductor of the Halle Orchestra. Hans von Bulow was a more discerning conductor than Richter and refused to conduct some English music which he thought was 'utter tripe' leaving it to Richter 'to show himself up', yet Bulow always conducted Dvorak and truly admired his greatness.

The next major work was the Symphony no. 6 in D, Opus 60, sometimes said to be the first of the great symphonies. It was dedicated to Richter but the premiere was conducted by Adolf Cech. At that time and, indeed, for some time, Germany had a hostile anti-Czech policy. When Richter did take it up, the publishers Simrock published it in 1882 as Symphony no. 1!

If there is a weakness in Dvorak's symphonies it is always in his finales but perhaps the finale of this symphony is his most successful finale. It continues the classic structure of Beethoven but structure was never Dvorak's strong point and his music is sometimes a little too repetitive and therefore wearisome.

It has four movements namely allegro non tanto, adagio, scherzo in the style of a furiant and allegro con spirito. The opening movement is rather leisurely and, perhaps, hints at times at banality, but it is open air music with the hunting horns, the pastoral woodwind, the strings hinting at the rising of the wind and the broad sweep of Bohemian landscapes.

I do not rate this movement. It is not an allegro since allegro means quick, merry and lively. This is not. It is no more than an andante moderato. The second movement is quite beautiful and the furiant is often very exciting and indeed exhilarating, a real allegro. The finale begins somewhat sedately but it gets going with a noble (but non-pompous) theme of great purport but again it is really lively? What it is is a movement teeming with invention and colour. We are not always on the mountain top but often down in the valley but, structurally, it does not work.

As with the Symphony no 7, this symphony's best parts are the final pages and the coda.

I was present at extensive rehearsals of this symphony with the BBC Welsh SO under Bryden Thomson (as I was with all the symphonies) and revelled at all the detail 'Jack' brought out which I had not heard before or since. The music glowed under his direction and, as usual, Dvorak's orchestration proved to be superb. But I regret to say that one cannot say that any of his symphonies are great works... attractive and popular maybe, but not great, although the Symphony no. 4 in D minor is the finest in my opinion.

Dvorak alternated big works with smaller works such as the Ten Legends Opus 59 originally written for piano duet but later orchestrated. He was trying to repeat the success of the Slavonic Dances but his efforts did not work. By the beginning of 1881 he was contemplating a new opera Dimitrij. His work on this was hindered by emotional matters such as the destruction by fire of the National Theatre on 12 August 1881 and the birth of his daughter, Magdalena, five days later. He was seriously behind in the composition of a string quartet he had promised to Hellmesberger and his quartet. He had written an Allegro in F destined for this new quartet but was unsatisfied with it and put it to one side and began work on his Quartet no 11 in C and then it was announced that the Hellmesberger was to premiere a new quartet by Dvorak in a few weeks time. This was news to Dvorak who worked like a Trojan to complete the piece for performance on 15 December. He need not have bothered since another fire occurred which destroyed the venue and so the work was not performed until eleven months later by the Joachim Quartet in Berlin. It is a curious work, somewhat serious

but still retaining that distinctive melodious gift. He continued work on *Dimitrij* premiered in October 1882.

The death of his mother in December 1882 threw him into gloom and the composition of the Piano Trio in F minor, a work that has little appeal for me and disliked by many pianists.

By April 1883 he was composing his *Scherzo Capriccioso*, a joyful piece for orchestra but is often played as slush as if it were by one of the Strauss family. He finally came to terms with form with his fine overture *Husitska*, Opus 67, a nationalistic work combining the Hussite hymn and the St Wencelas Chorale. He visited Berlin to hear Brahms' Symphony no. 3.

Dvorak came to England nine times between March 1884 and March 1896. His first trip was with his pianist friend Jindrich Kaan and it was the first time Dvorak has seen the sea. He was relieved to find the sea calm at Ostend. Brahms also hated the sea and turned down a degree from Cambridge as he could not face the sea!

I suppose it was Hans Richter with the Halle Orchestra that paved the way for Dvorak's first visit. What is clear is that the British warmed to Dvorak and loved his music. Dvorak was a humble and sincere man with poor English but with a very strong handshake. He conducted his *Stabat Mater* in the Royal Albert Hall on 13 March 1884 and, on 20 March, there was the *Husitska Overture*, the *Sixth Symphony* and the *Slavonic Rhapsody no. 2*. This concert was a great success. In a concert at Crystal Palace on 22 March he conducted his *Nocturne in B*, a fine but curious work, and the London premiere of his *Scherzo Capriccioso*. The publishers Novello offered him £200 to publish *Hymnus* with the proviso that he wrote a new cantata for England. On his return to Prague, he conducted *Dimitrij* and the *Stabat Mater* but, by now, he was exhausted.

The new work for London was *The Bridal Shirt* (literal translation of the Czech) which title was deemed unsuitable and which the Rev John Troutbeck rendered as *The Spectre's*

Bride which became Dvorak's Opus 69. The composer worked on this for months before sailing to England again in August 1884. This was an invitation to the Three Choirs Festival held that year in Worcester where on 11 September he conducted his *Stabat Mater* in the morning and his *Symphony no 6* in the evening. Back in Prague he worked on the *Spectre's Bride*. He made his debut as a conductor in Berlin on 21 November with the *Husitska Overture*, the *Piano Concerto* (with Anna Grosser-Rilke as soloist) and his *Symphony no. 6*.

Germany now interested him as he had been impressed with Brahms's *Symphony no. 3*. He regarded Brahms highly and vowed to write another symphony and had half-promised a new symphony to London. And so his *Symphony no. 7 in D minor* came into being. It is sometimes a sombre work. Some claim that the death of his mother was the reason, and others that it reflected his misery at his failure to be a successful opera composer. It seems a pity to admit that only the final bars of the last movement of this symphony, which is now in the major key, makes any real impact... so say the critics!

He arrived in London again on 19 April 1885, this time with Professor Josef Zubaty. At St James's Hall on 22 April Dvorak gave the world premiere of the *Symphony no. 7* which was not as well received as the *Symphony no. 6* and the press gave mixed reviews. At other concerts the *Piano Concerto* was given and there was the British premiere of *Hymnus*.

The composer enjoyed London and walks in the parks. He met many fine musicians including my relative Sir Ivor Atkins. I now possess a letter that Dvorak wrote to Sir Ivor.

Dvorak spent most of the summer at Vyoska relaxing and making corrections to the *Seventh Symphony* and *Dimitrij*. But in August 1885 there was another trip to London. He conducted the premiere of *The Spectre's Bride* in Birmingham on 27 August. It was a huge success so much so that Leeds invited him to produce an oratorio for the following year. And we should be glad that they did, for it resulted in his choral masterpiece

St Ludmilla. It was begun on 17 September 1885 and completed by 30 May 1886. Then he turned to a set of miniatures, the second set of Slavonic Dances, Opus 72.

Dvorak left Prague on 1 October 1880 to make another visit to London and then went on to Leeds, this time taking his wife, Anna with him. St Ludmilla was premiered at the Leeds Festival on 15 October which was acclaimed enthusiastically. But there are always foolish people who will indulge in comparison of musical works. Dvorak's new work was compared with his Stabat Mater, but why?

He had struggled with the orchestration of the Slavonic Dances and this led him to compose more chamber music such as the Terzetto for two violins and viola Opus 74, a work that gave him much pleasure. The Four Romantic Pieces for violin and piano Opus 75 also dates from this time and, to cheer the composer, Richter gave a good account of the Symphony no. 7 in Vienna.

The composer was now asked to compose a mass and he responded with the Mass in D, Opus 86, which was intended for a private occasion and so the work is scored for choir and organ alone. His wife was the alto soloist at the premiere. It is not his best work by any means but it combines his nationalistic and religious convictions. He also undertook the orchestration of twelve of his early songs called Cypresses... Josefina was still in his mind. He also arranged them for string quartet. He reworked his setting of Psalm 149, originally for male voices alone, and set it for a mixed choir.

It is curious that few settings of the psalms ever find a permanent place for themselves.

In December 1888, he took more of his Cypresses and turned eight of them into his Love Songs, Opus 83. One can only conjecture how deep was his continuing love for Josefina and how happy he would have been if he had married her. But he was devoted to his wife Anna, a good husband and father.

It is true that his workload affected his health and, although he was not yet fifty years of age, he may have felt that the decline in his health was a portent of what was to come.

His opera The Jacobin had a successful premiere in 1888. Dvorak was still obsessed with opera and was trying to prove to himself that he could write a great opera which he considered would be the pinnacle of any composer's success.

The countryside of his retreat at Vyoska led to the composition of his most original symphony, the Symphony no. 8 in G, Opus 88. Some nicknamed it the Idyllic Symphony but, thankfully, that stupid suggestion has not stuck. As it was his symphony published by Novello it was also called the English symphony. Other people, who obviously do not know what they are talking about, said it was Schubertian!

The greatness of this symphony lies in the fact of the excellent orchestration, a characteristic of this composer that is seldom mentioned. The finale is a set of variations with that racing horn tune and the trill at the top which is very exciting. The work has been praised and condemned but retains its popularity although second to the New World Symphony.

The year of 1888 also brought a request from R H Milward to write an oratorio for the Birmingham Festival and Newman's Dream of Gerontius was suggested. Dvorak read the text and positively hated it and refused point blank to do it. Years later, a lesser composer was to set it.

Dvorak embarked on his setting of the Requiem which took him ten months to compose in 1890.

There was an invitation for the Dvoraks to visit Russia. They set off on 27 February 1888. They had hoped to be welcomed by Tchaikovsky but he was in Italy. To add to the disappointments, the soloist who was to give Dvorak's Violin Concerto was taken ill and the Russians did not like to give concerts without a soloist. In Moscow, Dvorak gave his Symphony no. 5, the Scherzo Capriccioso, the Slavonic Rhapsody no 1 and the

Symphonic Variations but he did not receive the acclaim he usually received in England.

In St Petersburg he conducted his Symphony no. 6 and the Scherzo Capriccioso to a warmer audience.

Back home he conducted the Stabat Mater and then there was yet another trip to London to give the premiere of the Symphony no. 8. This was a short stay this time but he used it to good advantage selling this score to Novello's and discussing terms for the publication of the Requiem and the Mass in D now orchestrated.

He accepted the post of a professor in the Prague Conservatorium. In November he had a letter from Cambridge University wishing to confer on him an honorary doctorate. He worked on His Piano Trio in E minor, Opus 90, known as the Dumky Trio in six movements. It is a work which is not popular in many quarters and I know many international pianists who dislike it intensely.

In 1891 the Cambridge doctorate was confirmed.

Dvorak wrote three overtures namely In Nature's Realm Opus 91, Carnival Opus 92 and Othello Opus 93. Originally he designed them as three concert overtures which he was to call Nature, Life and Love and to be played as a triptych. Some has opined that these three pieces were a miniature Ma Vlast, others have said it was a symphony without a slow movement in the line of Schumann's Overture, Scherzo and Finale. Why do people say these things? However, Dvorak abandoned this idea and rightly so. The works are completely different and stand alone but would not stand as a trilogy although he did conduct all three in succession in Prague on 26 April 1892 just before leaving for America.

Most people would select Carnival as the finest of the three, which surprisingly, is like a miniature symphony in itself. It is an exhilarating work with a beautiful middle section. The orchestration is peerless. It is the best curtain-raiser for any concert. Performances conducted by Weldon, Reiner and Kertesz are truly amazing.

In June 1891 Dvorak was due in Cambridge to conduct his Symphony no. 8 and to collect his D. Mus.

Just before he was to go he received a telegram from Mrs Jeannette Thurber, an American millionaire, who had made her fortune in the grocery trade and formed an opera company to compare with the Metropolitan Opera. She had set up a music conservatory in New York and was a woman of strength and dignity. She wanted Dvorak to be the director of the New York Conservatory. He would work eight months of the year with a salary of \$15,000 and put on concerts including his own works. The contract was for two years.

In September 1891 he was back in England to premiere the Requiem at the Birmingham Festival on 9 October. He returned to Prague and sent off a signed contract to Mrs Thurber who pushed him to compose an American work, the American Flag. When he did eventually receive the text he made some sketches but he was working on his Te Deum.

Dvorak, his wife, Ollie and Antonin set sail on the SS Saale for New York in 17 September 1892. His other children were left with Anna's mother. Also sailing was Josef Jan Kovarik whose parents had emigrated to Spillville, Ohio. During the crossing there was a terrific storm and everyone was sick except Dvorak.

They were warmly welcomed in New York with large contingent of Czechs. But Dvorak did not like the Americans and their brashness. He had to attend receptions and parties which he never liked. Still today, people go to the ballet and the opera to see what so-and-so is wearing and who so-and-so is with. Such events are not vehicles for nosiness. On one occasion Dvorak felt he was the prize item at an auction.

His first American appearance as a conductor was at Carnegie Hall on 21 October. The concert opened with My country 'tis of thee, Liszt's Tasso conducted by Seidl and Dvorak conducted his three overtures and the premiere of the Te Deum. This work has been criticised for its American style and insincerity which is yet another example of nonsense since most of it was written in Prague. Whereas the Requiem, by its very

nature is subdued, the Te Deum is a glorious manifestation of Dvorak's belief in the God of the Bible and his denunciation of evolution.

Dvorak was sad and distressed at the bustling noise of New York which 'both shuts out the light and common sense' but he could enjoy his hobbies of trains and pigeons. He did approve of democracy and freedom.

He conducted his Symphony no. 6 in New York and the Requiem in Boston.. He set J R Drake's poem The American Flag but Dvorak was not in sympathy with pompous music and it shows. It was not natural for him to write flag-waving music.

His aversion to pompous music is reflected in his final symphony, the Symphony no. 9 in E minor Opus 95 subtitled From the New World. It is deservedly a popular work although it has its flaws. It is often repetitive, has no real development but it does abound in melody and superb orchestration. If not played well it can just be a pot-pourri of tunes. To add to this, people have said that he uses Negro tunes. There may be a hint of Negro spiritual tunes and some of the music has been used for television commercials which debases it. The final bars of this symphony are disappointing. Perhaps it suggests Haydn's Farewell Symphony or Dvorak being homesick for his native country and missing his four other children.

By 3 June 1893 the Dvoraks were off to see the large Czech community in Spillville, Ohio and en route spent a few hours in Chicago.. While with the Czechs in Spillville he felt more at home. He would rise early, go for a walk and then to Mass. He was invited to play the organ at church or conduct the choir which Anna joined. His new found joy is shown in his Quartet in F Opus 96 called the American, quickly followed by the String Quintet in E Flat which is an even better work and finished in August 1893.

He visited the Chicago World Fair and on Czech Day conducted his Symphony no. 8, Slavonic Dances and the Overture: My Home. He went to Omaha and St Paul and, at the impressive Minnehaha Falls, wrote on his cuff a theme which he developed into his Sonatina in G for violin and piano, Opus 100. He was also impressed by Niagara Falls and considered writing another symphony but that did not materialise. What did come about was his finest work, his masterpiece, the greatest cello concerto ever written.

The Cello Concerto in B minor Opus 104 is a glorious work and no words of mine or anyone else's can do it justice. Dvorak had written an earlier Cello Concerto and two other works the Rondo in G and Silent Woods.

After his return from Spillville, he could not settle in New York. Even today, big cities and large towns can be forbidding and disorientating and the serenity of country life is preferable. However, the New World Symphony was premiered at Carnegie Hall on 16 December and was an instant and tremendous success. On 1 January 1894 the Quartet in F was given its first performance in Boston and twelve days later at Carnegie Hall.

Relationships with Mrs Thurber were not always good. She was tardy at paying Dvorak's wages and adopted the attitude that Dvorak was under her control. But another contract was signed for six months from November 1894 to April 1895. But this time was not happy for Dvorak. Composition was now hard work. Von Bulow died, Tchaikovsky died and in strange circumstances. Dvorak's father had also died. These events lead him to resume his Biblical Songs Opus 99. Later he was to orchestrate them.

The Dvoraks left America on 19 May 1894 and arrived in Prague on 30 May. Reception after reception was laid on for him but all he wanted was to go to his retreat at Vyoska where he composed his Eight Humoresques Opus 101 for piano of the which the seventh in G flat is the most popular. He gave his local church an organ and played it at its consecration.

But on 26 October 1894 he, his wife and his son Otakar were back in New York. It was here that he set to work on his Cello Concerto in B minor Op 104. It was completed on 9 February 1895, his son Otakar's tenth

birthday

It is an amazing work and perhaps courageous in not having a cadenza. On 27 May 1895 his beloved Josefina died and after he had returned home he changed the second movement to include one of his own songs which Josefina loved, a song called Leave me alone. He also changed the coda of the finale once more recalling the song over a throbbing timpani heartbeat. It is one of the most stunningly beautiful moments in all music. The work is a durable masterpiece. No other cello concerto comes anywhere close to this. The only other cello masterpiece is Kodaly's Sonata for solo cello Opus 8. The best recording of the Dvorak is by the great Janos Starker with the LSO under Dorati. Avoid the versions by Jacqueline DuPre.

This is music of both the intellect and the heart but it is not maudlin. The cello is treated with respect There are many works for the cello and orchestra which do have these qualities.

Dvorak cut short his stay in America as Mrs Thurber was seriously in arrears with his salary. He returned home on the SS Saale arriving in Prague on 27 April 1895 and there was no welcoming party since Dvorak did not advise anyone of his return. It was a month later when his beloved Josefina died. He attended the funeral with the utmost sorrow. And that day something in him died. Nine years later he was dead. He was only sixty two years old.

This tragedy meant that Dvorak found it difficult to compose and when on 1 November he took up a post at the Prague Conservatory his heart was not in his work. However, he did compose two magnificent string quartets number 14 in A flat, which had begun in America, and the Quartet in G, Opus 106.

The New World Symphony had its first performance in Vienna in February 1896 where Brahms sat in the Director's box. Each movement was applauded with unbridled enthusiasm and the curtain calls Dvorak took were unprecedented.

He followed his penultimate journey. The London Philharmonic Society wanted him in England to premiere the Cello Concerto. So keen were they that they corresponded with the cellist Leo Stern in Prague to give the premiere.

The concert took place in the Queen's Hall on 19 March 1896. Emil Sauer played Beethoven's Piano Concerto no 5 with Alexander Mackenzie conducting and Dvorak took charge of his Biblical Songs, the Symphony no. 8 and the Cello Concerto. The reception for this concerto was overwhelming and no Cello Concerto has since received such praise.

His stay in London was not pleasant. The weather was awful, the food below standard. His concerto was alive but Josefina was not.

He turned down Brahms's gracious invitation of a professorship at the Vienna Conservatory and it must be said again that Brahms was a good friend to Dvorak. In fact, Brahms was a decent human being.

Dvorak seemed to believe that his life was almost over. He set about his opera Armida wanting to write a successful opera. He immersed himself in Bohemian myths and composed three symphonic poems, The Water Goblin, The Noonday Witch and the Golden Spinning Wheel all having reference to death and the music depicts the injustice of Josefina's death.

The Czech composer met Bruckner, a man of deep spirituality. The word spirituality refers to his Christian faith reflected in his music.

In his last years Dvorak had much sorrow. His friend Brahms died as did Karl Bendl a friend from his student days. Fritz Simrock, his publisher, died. Tchaikovsky died mysteriously. Adolph Cech the conductor who had championed Dvorak's early work died as did the composer Zdenek Fibich.

Yet on his wedding anniversary his daughter Otilie married Josef Suk. (1874-1935) the composer best known for his Asrael Symphony. Dvorak became a grandfather on 19 December 1901 and named the child Josef Suk who himself had a son, Josef, in 1929 who became a world famous violinist. His second daughter Anna was married on October 1903

Opera still fascinated him and in his final years his best operas were written, The Devil and Kate was given its first performance in Prague on 23 November 1899. He tried to revise The King and the Charcoal Burner but this was put aside to concentrate on Rusalka. This fairy tale by Kvapil captured his imagination. It was premiered on 31 March 1901 and was a great success. Dvorak had achieved his lifelong ambition. Mahler wanted to stage it later but this came to nought since Mahler was always a difficult

Dvorak received many honours and awards. Mrs Thurber wanted him to return to America but his globe-trotting days were over.

Prague decided to celebrate his 60th birthday but he hated pomp and ceremony. He went to Vienna to show the score of Rusalka to Mahler.

The premiere of Armida took place on 25 March 1904 but by now Dvorak was ill with kidney trouble and uraemia and an irregular heart beat. On 30 March he visited Prague railway to look at locomotives and caught a chill and was confined to bed. He rallied briefly but died on 1 May 1904.

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