



Gustav Meier
Music Director
62nd Season
4th Subscription Concert
Klein Memorial Auditorium
Saturday, March 1, 2008
8:00 p.m.

Gustav Meier, Conductor
Allison Eldredge, Cello

DVORAK Slavonic Dance in C, op. 46. no. 1

DVORAK Cello Concerto in B minor, op. 104

Allegro

Adagio, ma non troppo

Allegro moderato

Allison Eldredge, Cello

INTERMISSION

DVORAK Symphony no. 9, op. 95 (from the New World)

Adagio. Allegro molto

Largo

Scherzo, molto vivace

Allegro con fuoco

*Tonight's concert is made possible in part by the support of the
Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism and WSHU Public Radio Group.*

PROGRAM NOTES

The Old world/New world billing of this all-Dvorak program is an apt historical reference. The 'Old' (Europe) had restored a repressive political order, following the upheavals of Napoleon, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Germany had become by then, under the aegis of its compositional colossus, Beethoven - inheritor of the mantle of Haydn and Mozart, the arbiter of musical style in the West. But this hegemony was gradually to be challenged, (politically, in the 20th century Germany ended by losing two World Wars). Uprisings in 1830 and especially in 1848, when Dvorak was 7, were like after-shocks of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment with the professional/ business classes and the working man all knocking at the door for a greater say in government and society. This population needed concert halls, opera houses and performing organizations as well - and there were far more members of it than there ever were of the old aristocrats. (One result of this 'institutionalizing' of venues and audience was the 'museumizing' of its repertoire, making it hard to break into for living composers). The 'New' (United States) was in part an expansion of the 'Old' from the point of view of the freedoms and opportunities its Declaration of Independence offered its citizens, most of whom had come initially from the 'Old', it should be said. By 1892, Jeanette Thurber, determined wife of a wealthy New York wholesale grocer, had started a National Conservatory of Music in the city with a charter from Congress because she was offering sliding tuition fees or free instruction for anyone unable to pay. She is owed a debt of gratitude for this and brought Dvorak here as its head at a salary of \$15,000 a year, five times what he was earning in Europe. He stayed three years. She also wanted and got compositions. The stellar *New World Symphony* and the *Cello Concerto*, arguably the greatest ever written for this instrument, were among them.

Country by country, development of national musical styles became a phenomenon of the second half of the 19th century as the periphery pressed against its Germanic (Viennese) center. Bohemia, where Dvorak was born, is a land of changeable boundaries lying northeast of Vienna. Divided at different times among the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prussia, Germany and Poland, it has faced such trials as Bismarck's attempt to stamp out the Czech language in the process of unifying Germany in the 1870's. In the 20th century it became independent as Czechoslovakia, only to be dominated again by

the Nazis and later Communist Russia. Now it is split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Many of its composers helped shape the early symphony and sonata in the mid-1700's as well as the genre pieces of Romanticism a generation later. The city of Prague, its cultural center, commissioned Mozart to write the opera, *Don Giovanni*, one of the world's masterpieces.

Son of a village innkeeper and butcher who could also play the zither and compose simple dances, Dvorak left home at 12 for study in towns where he could learn German and music, becoming at 16 a student at the Prague Organ School. A competent violist and church musician, by 1862 he was in the orchestra of the newly founded Provisional Theater in Prague where works in Czech were performed and by 1866, Smetana, a significant composer and father of Czech music, was conductor. Dvorak was Smetana's eventual musical heir. His next upward-bound step was winning an Austrian stipend in 1874 for his compositions in a contest for which Brahms and the critic/musicologist Hanslick were judges. Brahms championed Dvorak, introducing him to his own publisher, Simrock, who then brought out the *Slavonic Dances*, op. 46, the first of which is played this evening.

The Schumann/Brahms/Dvorak line of descent from Bach/Haydn/Mozart/Beethoven took a more conservative approach, preserving traditional forms and complicated motivic development, while the Liszt/Wagner/Bruckner/Strauss/Mahler line from the same source became expansive and extramusical. Dvorak was influenced by both, but stayed close to his Czech roots as well, and always resisted any attempts to over-Germanize him. His is a rags-to-riches story, tagged in the beginning as coming from a kind of "tourist-nationalism ghetto" (Taruskin), but now shining significantly (and internationally) from distant late-Romantic horizons.

SLAVONIC DANCE IN C, OP. 46, NO. 1

Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904)

Written in August 1878, the first set of *Slavonic Dances* "was like an injection of monkey gland in the drawing rooms and concert halls of Europe" (Robertson). They were an instant success, especially in their duet form for piano. Unlike the *Hungarian Dances* of Brahms which are settings of actual folk melodies, Dvorak's dances are original tunes. Some have national origins in Poland, the Ukraine, Serbia and elsewhere, however; hence the name Slavonic rather than Bohemian. He is trying for an idealized form of each dance.

The first dance of op. 46 is a *Furiant*, defined as an “exuberant Bohemian dance of fiery and impulsive character” - not translatable as ‘fury’. Typically, the rhythm contrasts three groups of two beats with two groups of three beats covering the same time span called a hemiola. The dashing opening gives way to a light-hearted middle section before returning with imaginative changes of texture and color.

CELLO CONCERTO IN B MINOR, OP. 104 DVORAK

Written between November 1894 and February 1895 during Dvorak’s second year as Director of the National Conservatory in New York, the *Cello Concerto*, had two practical catalysts; (1) hearing a performance by Victor Herbert of his own Cello Concerto which impressed Dvorak with the possibilities of the instrument and (2) a request for such a work from his friend, the Czech cellist Hanus Wilan to whom it is dedicated. The third catalyst, however, was inspirational - the composer’s homesickness, making the concerto what Steinberg calls “a look homeward,” one “of dark and troubled eloquence.” Woven into it also was his knowledge that Josefina, his wife’s older sister, was dying. When 16 Josefina had been his piano student and he had loved her, but she did not return his interest.

The cello has always been considered a difficult instrument to pit against a full orchestra, but here soloist and accompaniment are perfectly matched. The composer was in New York and the deep-toned instrument and Bohemian color of the melodies heighten and universalize the general tone of nostalgia, longing and remembered pleasures.

There are two themes in the first movement; the first elegaic, its dotted rhythms bearing “some of the characteristics of funeral music” and the second “as beautiful a French horn solo as exists in the literature.” The cello makes a commanding entrance. In the development the first theme becomes a “song of ecstatic and deeply sad lyricism.” The movement ends with “jubilant fanfares.” The second movement begins quietly, but an orchestral outburst plays a quotation from one of Dvorak’s songs that had been a favorite of his sister-in-law, “Leave me alone,” and the cello responds in its high register with “tearing intensity.” The last movement opens with march-like tread leading to a lively theme in the cello. The ending was changed after the Dvorak’s return to Europe, a month after which Josefina died. He described it thus: “The Finale closes, gradually diminuendo, like a sigh, with reminiscences of the first and second movements... and the last

bars are taken up by the orchestra and the whole concludes in a stormy mood. That is my idea and I cannot depart from it.”

SYMPHONY NO. 9, OP. 95 (from the New World)

DVORAK

The *New World Symphony* was a great popular success from its first performance (“I had to show my gratitude like a king from my box,” Dvorak wrote his German publisher Simrock). Steinberg has noted that Kurt Mazur, retired conductor of the New York Philharmonic, contends that, imbued with the pain of homesickness, the work is one of the great tragic 19th century symphonies. Dvorak himself once said it sent “Impressions and Greetings” to those back home. His employer at the Conservatory, Mrs. Thurber, wanted an opera from him and had suggested Longfellow’s epic, *The Song of Hiawatha*, as a subject, a poem Dvorak had read as a youth in a Czech translation. He reread it and claimed that the second and third movements of the *New World* were influenced by the poem. Tarasquin in *The Oxford History* notes Beckerman’s persuasive view that the famous Largo represents Hiawatha and Minnehaha’s journey home after their wedding and the middle section possibly her death and burial in the woods. Dvorak himself acknowledged that the third movement *Scherzo* was suggested by the scene at the feast in *Hiawatha* where the Indians dance. No suitable libretto was ever forthcoming for an opera, but Dvorak was clearly interested in the subject, and the *New World Symphony* seems to have his initial thoughts on it.

When first in this country Dvorak had been impressed with Negro spirituals and the Indian dances he heard in the summer at the Bohemian colony in Spillville, Iowa. In a letter to the *New York Herald*, he said he felt they could be the basis for “beautiful treatment in the higher forms of art” and urged their use by American composers. He didn’t realize that as the music of minorities this was not then likely. (Gershwin’s great opera, *Porgy and Bess*, written in 1935 to a Negro plot, was then unacceptable at the Met and not performed there until 1985).

At any rate, the *New World Symphony* is constructed masterfully, especially in the cyclic combinations of many of its motives, along the Bohemian lines pointed toward Viennese classicism that were Dvorak’s roots, having gained some perspective from its American provenance as well. It is a high point in the work of one of the 19th century’s great composers.

-Burton Hatheway