

## Antonin Dvorak: creating a truly 'American' music

by Kathy Wolfe and Marcia Merry

Centennial celebrations are now in progress for the journey to America during 1892-95 of the Czech composer Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904) who, in collaboration with his friend Johannes Brahms (1833-97), sought to bring to Americans the best tradition of European Classical music. In fact, it is poetic justice that, as the result of this trip, one of the last truly Classical symphonies to date, was composed in the United States. The centennial of Dvorak's Symphony "From the New World," Op. 95, in E minor, which the composer began in New York and finished in 1893, will be marked by concerts in New York this December.

On Aug. 6-8, the Czech-American town of Spillville, Iowa hosted a "Dvorak Festival" to celebrate Dvorak's 1893 summer in the town, where he composed among other works his "American" string quartet Op. 96 in F. Dvorak's grandson, great-grandson, and great-great-grandson, Antonin Dvorak III, Antonin Dvorak IV, and Antonin Dvorak V, traveled from Prague for the festival, which included concerts in St. Wenceslaus Church (where Dvorak played the organ for the mass), and performances of his symphonies, piano, string, vocal, and other works.

Of most lasting significance, however, is Dvorak's work with the next generation of young American composers. Arriving in time for the Columbus Quadricentenary in 1892, Dvorak was truly a "musical Columbus." He came to take up the post of director of New York's new National Conservatory of Music, a school founded by Manhattan philanthropist Jeanette Thurber, a retired music teacher determined to create an American school of composers.

Mrs. Thurber won the special designation "National" for the school from Congress, by granting free tuition to poor students, and by especially encouraging African-American,

native American, and poor Irish, German, and other immigrants to take up the high art of Classical contrapuntal composition to enrich American culture.

Dvorak's article from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, which we reprint below, tells how warmly he embraced this idea. Here he attempts to develop a notion of how a national culture can also be universal.

### The black musician as hero

Dvorak found in particular that among those most ready to receive the legacy of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms from his hands, were a number of black American musicians who had been steeped in the European, especially in the German Classical tradition. In certain schools and churches across the land, the tradition of bel canto, the singing of polyphonic choruses, and the reading of Scripture and the classics in Greek, Latin, German and other languages had survived, sometimes almost underground, among both free and enslaved blacks, since the time of the American Revolution.

This image of what *EIR* founding editor Lyndon LaRouche has called "the black Classical musician as a collective American hero" shocked the bluebloods on Wall Street, but delighted Dvorak.

Dvorak not only helped to train African-American composers such as Harry Burleigh, Maurice Arnold, and Will Cook, but also strongly urged them to study "Negro melodies, the songs of the Creoles, the red man's chant, and the ditties of the homesick German or Norwegian," as he wrote. "I did not come to America to interpret Beethoven or Wagner for the public. I came to discover what young Americans had in them, and to help them to express it."

He recognized in certain Negro spirituals the basis for

establishing a tradition of the classical art song, a German *lied*, for America. He encouraged the bel canto singing of these songs according to Classical principles, and had his close friend Harry Burleigh and others sing many of the spirituals to him, in order to study them as thematic material for the construction of larger choral and instrumental works, just as Brahms studied and recomposed hundreds of German and Slavic folk songs.

It was in fond tribute to this that words were later put to the theme of the second movement of Dvorak's "New World Symphony," to create the "spiritual" known today as "Goin' Home."

Brahms, Dvorak, and their circle in Europe strongly supported Emancipation and Lincoln's vision for the Union in the U.S. Civil War, from their profound belief that, as Schiller and Beethoven said that *all* men are brothers. In Dvorak's words, America "earned its name, the 'Land of Freedom,' by unshackling her slaves at the price of her own blood."

Dvorak also relates his idea that a nation should invest in creating a musical culture, to the basic concept Lincoln had of economic policy: "protectionism." A nation, he argues, should invest in its own artists, just as it raises tariffs and other barriers to protect its national industries. In the 1890s, the ideas of Lincolnian "American System" economists such as Henry Carey and Friedrich List were still well known, and the public was aware that British free trade theory originated as a promotion of the slave trade.

Today, when legislative debate over funding for the arts has degenerated into a showdown between the Jesse Helms approach (no public funding at all) and the ultra-liberal view of promoting pornography and terrorism at taxpayer expense, it is refreshing to be reminded of Dvorak's positive conception and its roots in the European musical system that produced the greatest composers.

## Music in America

by Antonin Dvorak

*What follows is the full text of the article as it appeared in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Vol. XC, February 1895, pp. 429-434.*

It is a difficult task at best for a foreigner to give a correct verdict of the affairs of another country. With the United States of America this is more than usually difficult, because they cover such a vast area of land that it would take many years to become properly acquainted with the various localities, separated by great distances, that would have to be considered when rendering a judgment concerning them all. It

would ill become me, therefore, to express my view on so general and all embracing a subject as music in America, were I not pressed to do so, for I have neither travelled extensively, nor have I been here long enough to gain an intimate knowledge of American affairs. I can only judge of it from what I have observed during my limited experience as a musician and teacher in America, and from what those whom I know here tell me about their own country. Many of my impressions therefore are those of a foreigner who has not been here long enough to overcome the feeling of strangeness and bewildered astonishment which must fill all European visitors upon their first arrival.

The two American traits which most impress the foreign observer, I find, are the unbounded patriotism and capacity for enthusiasm of most Americans. Unlike the more diffident inhabitants of other countries, who do not "wear their hearts upon their sleeves," the citizens of America are always patriotic, and no occasion seems to be too serious or too slight for them to give expression to this feeling. Thus nothing better pleases the average American, especially the American youth, than to be able to say that this or that building, this or that new patent appliance, is the finest or grandest in the world. This, of course, is due to that other trait — enthusiasm. The enthusiasm of most Americans for all things new is apparently without limit. It is the essence of what is called "push" — American push. Every day I meet with this quality in my pupils. They are unwilling to stop at anything. In the matters relating to their art they are inquisitive to a degree that they want to go to the bottom of all things at once. It is as if a boy wished to dive before he could swim.

At first, when my American pupils were new to me, this trait annoyed me, and I wished them to give more attention to the one matter in hand rather than to everything at once. But now I like it, for I have come to the conclusion that this youthful enthusiasm and eagerness to take up everything is the best promise for music in America. The same opinion, I remember, was expressed by the director of the new conservatory in Berlin, who, from his experience with American students of music, predicted that America within twenty or thirty years would become the first musical country.

Only when the people in general, however, begin to take as lively an interest in music and art as they now take in more material matters will the arts come into their own. Let the enthusiasms of the people once be excited, and patriotic gifts and bequests must surely follow.

It is a matter of surprise to me that all this has not come long ago. When I see how much is done in every other field by public spirited men in America — how schools, universities, libraries, museums, hospitals, and parks spring up out of the ground and are maintained by generous gifts — I can only marvel that so little has been done for music. After two hundred years of almost unbroken prosperity and expansion, the net results for music are a number of public concert halls of most recent growth; several musical societies with