

then be unable to silence them any longer, because they will have for the first time heard and been moved by the sound of their own singular voice.

Antonín Dvořák's Manhattan Project

by Dennis Speed

Dec 28—During his 1892-1895 sojourn in America, composer Antonín Dvořák brought to our nation, and to New York City in particular, the compositional methods of Classical music, represented at the highest level then in Europe by Dvořák's friend, sponsor, collaborator, and fellow artist Johannes Brahms. Dvořák composed his Ninth Symphony "From The New World" and his famous Cello Concerto at his home on East 17th Street, located a few blocks from the Conservatory.

His friendship and musical collaboration with the African-American composer, arranger, and instrumentalist Harry Burleigh, violinist Will Marion Cook, and others resulted in the initial highlighting of the African-American Spiritual as the basis for the creation of a new American school of composition. Burleigh's singing of the Spirituals for Dvořák, along with their discussions about the fight against slavery and its eradication in the United States, was the artistic basis for Dvořák's composition of the famous Second Movement of his Ninth Symphony, centered around an original theme often wrongly presumed to be an African-American Spiritual.

Dvořák's insistence that a "great and noble" American culture must be based on the work of the poor, and the opportunities that they might be provided through such institutions as the National Conservatory of Music, would not have been welcome among the increasingly pro-British "aristocrats" of New York City, nor the racists of the E.H. Harriman family's Eugenics Records Office, established in Cold Spring Harbor in 1904, less than 10 years after Dvořák returned to Europe.

Though the National Conservatory would remain open until 1945, it was suppressed almost immediately. Stravinsky's 1913 *The Rite of Spring* would replace Dvořák's symphony as the "Classical music" that

would most affect—or infect—Twentieth Century America.

A letter to the Editor of the *New York Herald* written by Dvořák, and published May 29, 1893:

I was deeply interested in last Sunday's *Herald*, for the writer struck a note that should be sounded throughout America. It is my opinion that I found a sure foundation in the Negro melodies for a new national school of music, and my observations have already convinced me that the young musicians of this country need only intelligent directions, serious application, and a reasonable amount of public support and applause to create a new musical school in America. This is not a sudden discovery on my part. The light has gradually dawned on me.

The new American school of music must strike its roots deeply into its own soil. There is no longer any reason why young Americans who have talent should go to Europe for their education. It is a waste of money and puts off the coming day when the Western world will be in music, as in many others, independent of other lands. In the National Conservatory of Music, founded and presided over by Mrs. Jeannette Thurber, is provided as good a school as can be found elsewhere. The masters are competent in the highest sense and the spirit of the institution is absolutely catholic. A fresh proof of the breadth of purpose involved in the conservatory is the fact that it has been opened without limit or reservation to the Negro race.

I find good talent here, and I am convinced that when the youth of the country realize that it is better to now stay at home than to go abroad we shall discover genius, for many who have talent but cannot undertake a foreign residence will be encouraged to pursue their studies here. It is to the poor that I turn for musical greatness. The poor work hard; they study seriously. Rich people are apt to apply themselves lightly to music, and to abandon the painful toil to which every strong musician must submit without complaint and without rest. Poverty is no barrier to one endowed by nature with musical talent. It is a spur. It keeps the mind loyal to the end. It stimulates the student to great efforts.

If in my own career I have achieved a measure of success and reward it is to some extent due to the fact I was the son of poor parents and was reared in an atmosphere of struggle and endeavor. Broadly speaking the Bohemians are a nation of peasants. My first musical

education I got from my schoolmaster, a man of good ability and much earnestness. He taught me to play the violin. Afterward I traveled with him and we made our living together. Then I spent two years at the organ school in Prague. From that time on I had to study for myself. It is impossible for me to speak without emotion of the strains and sorrow that came upon me in the long and bitter years that followed. Looking back at that time, I can hardly understand how I endured the privations and labor of my youth.

Could I have had in my earlier days the advantages, freely offered in such a school as the National Conservatory of Music, I might have been spared many of my hardest trials and have accomplished much more. Not that I was unable to produce music, but that I had not technique enough to express all that was in me. I had ideas but I could not utter them perfectly.

There is a great opportunity for musicians in America and it will increase when grand opera sung in English is more firmly established, with public or private assistance. At the present time this country also needs the materials for orchestral work. The dearth of good native performers on reeds and brass instruments is marked. Everyone wants to sing or play the piano, violin or violoncello. Nobody seems to realize the importance of good cornetists, trombonists, clarinetists, flutists, trumpeters and the like. In Bohemia applicants for admission to the Conservatory are assigned to instruments according to the necessities of the time. Of course nearly every young musician wants to play the violin, but to encourage that tendency would be to undermine the orchestral system and leave composers without the means of properly presenting their works.

I do not agree with those that say that the air here is not good for vocalists. The American voice has a character of its own. It is quite different from the European voice, just as the English voice is different from the German and Italian. Singers like Lloyd and M'Guckin have an entirely different vocal quality from that of German singers and members of the Latin race. The American voice is unlike anything else, quite unlike the English voice. I do not speak of method or style, but of the natural quality, the timbre of the voice. I have noticed this difference ever since I have been in New



Czech composer Antonín Dvořák (far right), with his family and friends in New York City in 1893.

York. The American voice is good; it pleases me very much.

Those who think that music is not latent in the American will discover their error before long. I only complain that the American musician is not serious enough in applying himself to the work he must do before he is qualified to enter upon a public career. I have always to remind my most promising pupils of the necessity of work. Work! work! work! to the very end.

The country is full of melody, original, sympathetic and varying in mood, color and character to suit every phase of composition. It is a rich field. America can have great and noble music of her own, growing out of the very soil and partaking of its nature—the natural voice of a free and vigorous race.

This proves to me that there is such a thing as nationality in music, in the sense that it may take on the character of its locality. It now rests with the young musicians of this country and with the patrons of music to say how soon the American school of music is to be developed. A good beginning has been made in New York. Honor to those who will help to increase and broaden the work.

—Antonín Dvořák