Dvorak in America

First some contextual information that may prove useful.

(Note-I apologize for the lack of accents in many of the names like Dvorak, I could not figure out how to do this on my computer. Also, if you would like to skip some of the contextual information and get right into the music, please go to the bottom of page 10)

**Jeanette Thurber**

Perhaps it would be best to begin by not talking about Dvorak, but rather an incredible woman named Mrs. Jeanette Meyer Thurber. She was born in the town of Delhi, New York in 1850. As a teen, her parents sent her to France to study music at the eminent Paris Conservatory. However like so many women of the time, any hopes of a career in music performance ended upon returning to the states as she married a wealthy food merchant, Francis Thurber in 1869. However, Mrs. Thurber was a driven woman who did not rest on her laurels and she became a powerful patroness of the arts. She sponsored Theodore Thomas’s (NY Phil conductor from 1877-1891) young people’s concerts, she sponsored a NYC Wagner festival in 1884, and in 1885 she founded the American Opera Company. She even brought the Boston Symphony to New York for the first time during the 1888-89 season.

**The Genesis of the National Conservatory**

While a student at the Paris conservatory, Jeanette Thurber was struck by the school’s broad curriculum and the country’s strong federal backing. So with her husband’s help, in 1885 she persuaded friends like Andrew Carnegie and William Vanderbilt among others to join her in her mission to open a conservatory of music
modeled after the French system. Just weeks after receiving the necessary financial backing, including a personal donation of 100,000 dollars, the Conservatory’s doors opened for the fall term in 1885 in two converted homes on 126 and 128 East Seventeenth Street. A total of 84 students were initially enrolled.

**The Progressiveness of the Conservatory**

One of the most remarkable things about the school was the fact that women, minorities and the disabled were encouraged to apply for admission. As options for women, minorities and the disabled were then scant at best, to be welcomed into the National Conservatory with open arms and given an equal opportunity was truly progressive. Indeed, women, the disabled and minorities, particularly blacks, made up a significant percentage of the student body. While the school was not free, (in 1892 the National conservatory advertised its fee as 100 dollars per semester) no students were turned away for financial reasons.

**The Growth of the Conservatory and the Curriculum**

To attract the best faculty, Mrs. Thurber sought someone with a certain cache to lead the school as director. The school’s first director was the esteemed Belgian baritone Jacques Bouhy who had created such roles as Don Cesar in Massenet’s “Don Cesar de Bazan” and Escamillo in Bizet’s Carmen. Indeed, the school flourished and by 1890, there were over 40 faculty members and several hundred students enrolled. The school’s pedagogy was pioneering by including a full curriculum of music history, theory, piano proficiency and for the first time in an American music school, solfège and humanities. (‘Sounds an awful lot like the curriculum in all American conservatories today!)
In 1889, Bouhy decided to return to Paris. For a full three years, the school functioned without a full-time director. At this time, Mrs. Thurber was approaching congress with the idea of making the conservatory into a National Charter. Thus the school would move to the District of Columbia and be subsidized by the federal Government. In her petition to Congress of 1888, she states “America has, so far, done nothing in a National way either to promote the musical education of its people or to develop any musical genius they possess, that in this, she stands alone among the civilized nations of the world.”

A bill passed in 1891 to make the conservatory a National Charter and was signed into legislation by President Harrison on the 3rd of March. However, the signing turned out to be merely symbolic as Washington seemed to lose interest in housing the Conservatory immediately after the bill was passed. New York was also not too keen on giving up one of its most valuable cultural assets. Surprisingly, the bills sponsors in congress and Mrs. Thurber herself did not seem to mind just staying in New York. And so it did, but now with significant federal support. Perhaps that was the whole point; once the money was there, did Mrs. Thurber really care to pick up and move?

Meanwhile while this financial jockeying was going on, Mrs. Thurber sought out a new director for the conservatory; one that possessed substantial international clout. This would accomplish several things; one, it would let congress know that she was taking the National Charter title seriously by getting the best of the best. Two, obviously it would fill the void left by Msgr. Bouhy’s departure and there would now be a captain at
the helm. And lastly and perhaps most significantly, it would put into place a potential musical messiah to the American classical music scene.

Mrs. Thurber and her circle were growing increasingly anxious over the fact that no *American* musical identity had been established. No superman or woman had arrived to compose American classical music that could hold its own against the mighty Europeans; Brahms, Liszt, Saint-Saens, Grieg, Wagner, etc. She wanted someone to serve as a musical fire starter, a compositional catalyst that would unearth the tacit American school of composers.

The name of the young Finn Jean Sibelius was tossed around, but in the end he was deemed too young as he was all of 26 in 1891 when the director search became more pertinent because of the political jockeying for a National Charter. On top of that, Sibelius was still a student himself studying with the Hungarian Karl Goldmark. (Coincidentally, Karl’s nephew Rubin would later become a faculty member at the conservatory.) Ultimately they found their man in Antonin Dvorak. At this time, Dvorak was the dean of living Czech composers. His star was quickly rising, particularly in England with several commissions rolling in for works like the 7th and 8th symphonies with the Royal Philharmonic in 1885 and 1888 respectively, his cantata “The Specter’s Bride” premiered in 1885 at Birmingham, the Oratorio St. Ludmilla at Leeds of 1886 and his Requiem Mass of 1891 again premiered in Birmingham. Dvorak’s works, particularly the smash hit Slavonic Dances op. 46 had been played in the States as early as 1879 in New York and Boston. His Symphony No. 4 was performed by the New York Philharmonic and their conductor Theodore Thomas on October 6th of that year. Dvorak’s works proved to resonate with the American public and Thomas became a
veritable champion of his works, presenting the American debuts of the Third Slavonic Rhapsody in Cincinnati on March 4th, 1880, the first complete performance of the Stabat Mater in New York on April 3rd, 1884. The seventh symphony also received its American premier in the hands of the NYPO and maestro Thomas. Mrs. Thurber was likely at these concerts and no doubt aware of the stir this bristly bearded Czech incited and knew she must bring him to the Conservatory.

(As a side note, the American premiere of the “The Specter’s Bride” did not take place in New York or Boston, but in Providence on November 18th, 1885 under the baton of Jules Jordan. Just showing some Rhode Island pride.)

The Courting of Dvorak, or “Show me the money!”

Mrs. Thurber’s first attempts at enticing Dvorak in June of 1891 proved futile. Dvorak was quite comfortable in Prague having just been hired as a professor at the conservatory and was enjoying the growing renown across the globe. On top of this he was raising a family with six children. However, Mrs. Thurber did not give up easily and upped the ante. She sent correspondence after correspondence and sent members of her circle to Prague in order to seduce the stubborn Dvorak. What might have finally convinced him was when she offered him an annual salary of $15,000, at that time an enormous sum. To put things into perspective, his salary in Prague at the time was approximately $600 annually. To quote so many contemporary athletes, “it’s not about the money.” Well, he accepted. Perhaps it was about the money and he signed the dotted line on December 23, 1891 to begin in the fall the following year. With his wife and two of his children, (he placed the remaining four in the care of his mother-in-law back in Prague) they set sail on September 15, 1892 and touched American soil on September
26th. The fall semester began on the first of October and his contracted duties required him to teach 3 composition classes during the week and to lead the conservatory orchestra. This was on top of his administrative duties as director of the school.

**Dvorak as Teacher**

What kind of teacher was Dvorak? According to direct accounts from two of his students, Harry Rowe Shelley and Camille W. Zeckwer, Dvorak was incredibly demanding but at the same time caring and well-meaning. Dvorak insisted on a regular diet of study of the old masters like Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert etc. while at the same time pushing each student hard to uncover their own artistic voice. If anything presented to Dvorak resembled imitation rather than inspiration, this would anger him greatly and he would often scream out, “this is not yours!” and snatch the manuscript away from the student and grind it into the floor with his heel.

Despite his temper and the demands Dvorak placed on his students, his heart was very loving and giving. Mr. Harry Shelley was to recall, “No other teacher was ever such an inspiration to me, he always seemed to me like a second father…Simple as a child he was but ever with confidence in his own opinions, that proved his unaffected consciousness of his own deep and rich authority.”

**H.T. Burleigh**

One student that Dvorak met early in his three year tenure was a young African American student from Eire Pennsylvania named H.T. Burleigh. Born in 1866, Burleigh was the grandchild of a slave named Hamilton Waters who purchased his own and his mother’s freedom from a slave owner in 1832 before settling in Eire. H.T. was close to his grandfather and would accompany him on his rounds as a lamplighter and would
often hear about plantation life. Young Harry would also be exposed on these walks to the music of the plantation; the spirituals that his grandfather sang to him were delivered according to H.T. in an “exceptionally melodious voice.” This would prove to be pivotal to H.T. and later he would be the first to publish and arrange editions of spirituals as concert pieces. Burleigh came to NYC just months before Dvorak in 1892 to follow his dream to become a musician. He auditioned at the Conservatory on voice, and while deemed just below conservatory level, Burleigh appealed to the registrar on the strength of his recommendations and was accepted for both voice and composition. Through his studies at the conservatory Burleigh was introduced to Dvorak and the two became fast friends. Dvorak invited H.T. to his home often to hear him sing spirituals and to ask questions about growing up black in America. Dvorak was enthralled with the depth and beauty of these spirituals and on one occasion after a performance of “Go Down Moses,” Dvorak remarked excitedly, “Burleigh, this is as great as any Beethoven theme!” Burleigh would become a prominent American composer and arranger and was a baritone soloist in the choir at St. George’s church in Stuyvesant Square in New York. He joined the choir in 1894 and would remain for 52 years before illness forced him to retire in 1946. He died in a nursing home in Stamford, Connecticut in 1949.

**Dvorak Takes a Stand**

Dvorak himself would state in a New York Herald interview from the spring of 1893, “In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay or what you will. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source.” This affirmation of
slave music as a vibrant art form that could serve as the basis for this unborn American school of music proved to be controversial as many Americans still viewed blacks as primitive outsiders who did not belong in a cultured society. As prophetic as Dvorak’s statement would prove to be, many Americans were not ready to hear those words.

The Influence of Burleigh and Black Music on Dvorak

Burleigh was an important influence on Dvorak and served as his personal ambassador into the idiom of the tradition of the spiritual. Much has been made of the influence of black folk music on Dvorak’s writing and Burleigh was often asked to comment on this after Dvorak’s death. While Dvorak often found inspiration in folk music, he did not like to use direct quotations in his works, but rather be fueled by their idiomatic characteristics. Burleigh would state that Dvorak “saturated himself with the spirit of these old tunes and then invented his own tunes.” The spirit of these old tunes can certainly be felt in Dvorak’s most well-known composition from his stay in America, his 9th symphony, the so called “New World Symphony,” which he composed between January 10 and May 24th, 1893. Burleigh was intimately involved with the genesis of the piece and provided inspiration for the second theme of the first movement of the symphony. If one hears the first few bars of “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” followed by the said melody from the symphony, one can hear a rather close resemblance. Burleigh would comment on this similarity often, no doubt with a sense of pride.

Also, many have confused the famous melody from the second movement of the symphony as being derived from a pre-existing spiritual. This melody was in fact an original melody composed by Dvorak. Later one of Dvorak’s students, William Arms Fisher set a poem entitled “Goin’ Home” to the melody to create an art-song that is often
labeled as a spiritual. The Dvorak scholar Jean E. Snyder writes, (This) “popular misconception suggests that Dvorak successfully captured the characteristic idiom of the songs Burleigh sang to him.”

There is even evidence to suggest that Dvorak’s choice of the English horn for the melody was because it most closely resembled Burleigh’s voice. Additional inspiration for the second movement of the “New World” symphony was Longfellow’s epic legend, “Hiawatha” and particularly the funeral of Minnehaha. (Mrs. Thurber desperately wanted Dvorak to write an opera on “Hiawatha” though this never materialized)

The Trip to Spillville

Towards the end of his stressful first year in New York, the homesick Dvorak was planning on returning to Bohemia for the summer of 1893 to get back in touch with his roots and to see his friends and family. However, something else materialized. His secretary J.J. Kovarik had grown up in the town of Spillville Iowa. Spillville was a town whose 300 inhabitants spoke Czech and tried to uphold their Bohemian way of life. Kovarik suggested that Dvorak go there instead. This interested Dvorak as it would afford him a long journey in his beloved trains, he would be in a village with other Czechs, and it would allow him to visit many destinations during the summer like Niagara Falls, the World’s Expo in Chicago, St. Paul, Minnesota and Omaha Nebraska.

At this time there were approximately 300,000 Czechs living in the mid-west United States primarily in larger industrial centers like Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, Cleveland, Cedar Rapids and Omaha. Then there were pockets of Czechs in smaller villages across the plains in places like Spillville. Why were they there? In 1840, serfdom was ended in Austrian-ruled Bohemia and restrictions on travel and land
ownership were lifted for the first time in two centuries. However a proper infrastructure was not put in place by the Haupsburg Empire for these somewhat liberated Bohemians and poverty and unemployment was rampant among them. According to the historian Cyril Klimesh, author of the book “They Came to this Place: A History of Spillville Iowa and Czech Settlers,” “With such unsettled conditions, it did not take too much deliberation for some of the peasants to see the opportunity which lay across the seas and forsake the country the loved but whose government they hated.” The western frontier was being expanded rapidly and Czechs started coming in droves. However in escaping the oppression of the Austrians, the Czechs were unknowingly complicit of a great tragedy and injustice being done to Native-Americans. The reason more and more of the American plains were being opened to settlers was because of unfair treaties being forced upon tribes and the annexing of their land.

On June 3rd of 1893, Dvorak along with his wife Anna, his six children (he had sent for his children in Prague to be with the family for the summer), Mr. Kovarik, a maid and the newly completed score of the ninth symphony in his back pocket, they set off for Iowa. They arrived in Spillville on June 5th.

And finally, The Music!

The “American” Quartet, op. 96

Movement I-

Just days after arriving in Spillville, away from his academic duties in NY which often kept him from composing, the muse spoke and Dvorak feverishly began composing a new string quartet, a medium he had not visited for 12 years. Perhaps inspiration came
to him as they whisked across the open plains of the mid-west; quite a change from the hustle and bustle of the big city. In the opening theme of the first movement, a sense of the excitement these wide open spaces inspired within him is palpable. A shimmer of anticipation in the violins and a low drone of the cello invites the viola to launch into the sweeping first theme. In the opening movement’s sonata-form structure, the first theme’s excitement of the open plains gives way to a more plaintive, introspective second theme introduced by the first violin atop pedal chords in the remaining strings. Upon reaching the development, Dvorak plays mostly with material from the first theme before we hear a short fugato passage derived from the second theme begun by the second violin that leads the musical structure to the recapitulation. However, like all the great masters, Dvorak does not merely restate the themes in the recapitulation but brings them back with subtle changes that we did not hear in the exposition. For example there is an added variation of the second theme delivered in a sonorous range on the cello. After a brief but riveting coda, this concise movement brimming with joy and a spirit of the open plains comes to a close.

**Movement II-**

The very first thing one hears in the second movement is not a melody but rather an ostinato, or repeating figure that serves as the lifeblood of the entire movement. This heartbeat is a slow rising and falling pulse kept by the 2nd violin and viola while the cello uses pizzicato below. Throughout the entire movement this pulse keeps the narrative flowing. Atop the pulse comes a heartfelt tale of sorrow that many have suggested is directly derived from spirituals with its emotional profile, use of the pentatonic scale (the black keys on the piano are the best example of a pentatonic scale) and lowered seventh
degree of the scale. This melody is first heard in the first violin before being passed to the cello. The first violin and cello share most of the important melodic material in the movement.

The whole second movement is conceived in a large arch shape with a passionate emotional climax in the middle before acquiescing back to where it began, with a simple pulse. However at the close of the movement, the heartbeat begins to fail during one final cry from the cello with alternating bowed and pizzicato throbs below before ultimately becoming still on a tragic d-minor chord that brings the movement to a close.

**Movement III-**

While in Spillville, Dvorak would often start his day with an early morning walk through the Iowa countryside. On these strolls, he heard a new and delightful sound. The scarlet tanager was bird unfamiliar to Dvorak its song enchanted him. (Dvorak was always an admirer of birds and in fact was a passionate breeder of pigeons) The third movement is monothematic meaning it is based upon a single melody. In this case, the tune has a misleading accent on the second of three beats ala a Haydn minuet or a Beethoven scherzo. One can hear the repeating song of the tanager high above the treetops in the first violin as a variant of this theme. Indeed, every note of the third movement can be derived from the initial tune. For example, beneath the scampering, ghostly f-minor repose in the first violin, you can hear the tune in a rhythmically expanded version underneath in the second violin. Or when you hear snappy, punchy outbursts in the upper strings you hear the melody rumbling underneath in the cello. It is remarkable how much Dvorak squeezes out of that tiny little opening tune. The structure of the third movement is essentially a minuet with two trios.
Movement IV-

There is a certain amount of controversy that surrounds the Native American influence on Dvorak’s music while in America. The noted Dvorak scholar Otakar Sourek, among others, often refers to certain rhythmic motives in his American period works as being inspired by Native American drumming patterns. Other important Dvorak scholars such as John Clapham have skeptically claimed that this influence has been exaggerated and these rhythmic patterns could easily be Czech in origin. In an article from the Musical Times in 1966, Dr. Clapham writes, “there have been misunderstandings concerning the presence of Indian elements in Dvorak’s music….It is true that Dvorak was influenced by Indian music, but only very slightly. Greater use was made of Indian material by MacDowell and Busoni.”

The opening of the fourth movement is one of these passages with an ambiguous rhythmic pattern that some have attributed to Native American drumming patterns. Whatever the source of the motive, the snappy bouncy ostinato introduced by the viola and second violin infuses the movement with a joyful ebullience from the very outset. The first violin responds to this percussive call and answers with snappy arpeggiations of excitement. (I remember the first time I heard this movement played in high school, I immediately thought of cowboys riding across the plains.)

We then hear a secondary theme of playful arpeggios by the first violin atop shifty accent patterns below. There is then a third theme by the first violin which sings coquettishly before blooming to the top of its trajectory with a snappy dotted rhythm, while underneath the Indian ostinato rhythm pulsates. One element of the third theme that the ear is drawn to is the wonderfully playful walking bass underneath. There is then
a return to the scampering rondo theme before transitioning to a more somber chorale. It has been suggested that this could have been inspired by hymns from the morning services at the St. Wenceslas church in Spillville for which Dvorak played the organ. We then have a restatement of the primary and secondary theme groups in their original forms before a final thrust to the finish line.

Dvorak composed the American quartet, op. 96 with white-heat intensity. He finished the piece in sketch form in just 3 days on June 11 and had an initial reading with friends, himself playing first violin, on June 23rd. The first public performance took place on New Years day, 1894 in Boston by the Kneisel quartet.

The “American” Viola Quintet, op. 97

While the ink was still drying on his quartet Dvorak felt inspired to write a viola quintet which he started sketching out on June 26th.

Mvt. I-

The introduction to this piece begins with a solitary viola singing a stretched-out preview of the first theme of the movement’s sonata-form structure. It’s as if in the introduction, the movement’s first theme is limbering up for the big game. Like the first theme of the quartet, the introduction to the quintet conveys the openness of the plains, however with a different emotional underpinning. Dvorak could also find the plains quite mysterious and isolating and one can sense this in the quintet’s introduction. After the beautifully paced introduction, the first violin begins the journey with an optimistic, sunny first theme.

The opening movement of the quintet is cast in traditional sonata form and the second theme is perhaps the most convincing example of Native-American influence on Dvorak’s writing. While Dvorak was in Spillville, a group of Central Algonquin Indians
from the Kickapoo tribe came to town to sell medicinal herbs. Intrigued, Dvorak asked them to perform tribal dances and tunes for him at the local inn. Dvorak’s assistant J.J. Kovarik transcribed one of these tunes on paper. Both the Indian theme and the second theme of the quintet’s first movement share an identical rhythmic and melodic profile leaving little doubt of the Indian theme’s influence.

For the development section, Dvorak mostly uses the second theme group as his clay for experimentation, though one can hear melodious snippets of the first theme as well. Following the development is the recapitulation, which remember in sonata form is a restatement of the principal themes from the exposition, but always with subtle twists and turns. The coda, which is essentially the bow that ties a movement up to its conclusion, is in this case not a triumphant romp to the finish but rather a return to the pleading, mysterious aesthetic of the introduction.

Mvt. II-

This movement, marked Allegro vivo, is a scherzo (which means joke in Italian) in disguise. It follows the same structural format as a minuet and trio with two repeating sections in the minuet, two repeating sections in the trio and then a da capo, or repeat to the first section. At the opening, there is a brief introduction with a solitary viola again, this time cranking out a repeating percussive rhythm that possibly could be of Native-American origin before we hear the light-hearted punchy melody overtop. As a secondary theme, Dvorak returns to his beloved Bohemia for a polka-like romp of a melody. The trio is an emotional aria spun by the first viola before passing the melody to the first violin. There is then a return to the scherzo and a repeat of all the material.

Movement III-
From his office at the conservatory, he was able to witness the mass spectacle that was the Quadricentennial celebrations of the fall of 1892. He was overwhelmed at the pandemonium and felt inspired to write a great American anthem using the same text as “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” A few weeks later he sketched out a tune which was possibly to be the melody for this anthem. This anthem never materialized but he did end up using the quickly jotted-down melody as the secondary major-key-theme in a set of variations which makes up the third movement of the quintet. If we hear the opening a-flat minor theme, it sings with a distinct solemn contemplation before modulating to the said “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” a-flat major theme. The patriotism conveyed in Dvorak’s theme is not the over-the-top, F-14 fly-by variety but rather a more inward personal statement. All the variations follow the same harmonic scheme exactly with 16 bars for the minor section and 10 bars for the major. He has a lot of fun with this movement and employs the full expressive resources of the ensemble culminating in the fiery fifth variation. To bring the movement to a close Dvorak returns to the opening melody in its original form, only this time fortissimo for the minor section and with the first violin in a tonally demonstrative range up on the e-string. The major section acquiesces into a peaceful cadence.

Movement IV-

The final movement of the quintet is a joyful rondo using a snappy, dancing motive as its central theme. Dvorak uses two contrasting episodes in the final movement between statements of the rondo refrain. The first contrasting episode is somewhat spooky with repeating triplets atop a pizzicato groove beneath. Many musicologists have pointed to this passage as another clear example of Native-American influence. The other
contrasting episode is a more pastoral theme with a somewhat pleading quality to it. Both of these episodes are repeated twice before a coda that uses material from both the first episode and the main rondo theme. It is one of those codas that create a tremendous dramatic thrust to the end. It reminds one of the famous Dudley Moore parody of a Beethoven piano sonata with the extremely drawn out final cadence.

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I invite any emails with thoughts, comments, complaints etc.