

ASO Program Notes

Symphony No. 9 “New World”

Antonin Dvorak (1841 – 1904)

Following a very successful career in his native Bavaria, Antonin Dvorak took his wife, his fourteen-year-old daughter, nine-year-old son, and a personal secretary on a great adventure. They sailed for America in 1892, arriving in September. After twenty four hours of quarantine at Staten Island, they docked at Hoboken, were met by a cheering entourage of dignitaries and Czech immigrants, and spent their first night in “the new world” at a hotel on Park Avenue in Manhattan. The next few months were spent teaching and composing, as Dvorak familiarized himself with his new surroundings. He found himself enraptured by the spiritual songs of black Americans, and spent many hours listening to singers interpret them. He also studied “the local color of Indian character,” which he found very similar to that of the Negro culture. He brought his teaching skills to this new genre of music, saying “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 express it.” By the end of the year he had fulfilled his obligations to his sponsors and was free to embark upon a labor of love – his new symphony, full of “impressions and greetings from the New World. I should never have written the symphony as I have if I hadn’t seen America,” he declared. The New York premiere in December of 1893 was wildly successful, but tempered somewhat by an on-going debate over the authenticity of its “American credentials”. Dvorak had been in the U.S. less than a year by the time the symphony was completed, but was nevertheless declaring that he had a thorough understanding of American musical language.

In the case of the New World, as with his nationally Czech music, Dvorak creates original themes by incorporating the distinctive elements that give a body of tunes their family resemblance. He uses the altered scale characteristic of black songs, the drive toward resolution typical of Western melodies, the emphatic rhythms employed by Stephen Foster, the lilt of the black spiritual, and the soulful spirit of Longfellow’s “Song of Hiawatha,” which he loved. The tunes themselves, however, are wholly Dvorak’s. In his own words, Dvorak wrote to a critic, “But leave out that nonsense about my having made use of original American melodies. I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies.” Still, many listeners have claimed to hear fragments of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in the first movement, and a bit of “Yankee Doodle” in the finale. Judged strictly, many critics do not consider the ninth symphony Dvorak’s strongest. It is, however, the most played and most enjoyed by American orchestras and audiences. The Largo movement with the beautiful “Goin’ Home” melody for English horn is one of the most beautiful Dvorak ever wrote.

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