

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, “From the New World”

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

B. September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeves, Czech Republic

D. May 1, 1904 in Prague, Czech Republic

First performed on 16 December 1893 in Carnegie Hall by Anton Seidl and the New York Philharmonic.

Scored for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, and strings. (approx. 40 minutes)

“The Americans expect great things of me and the main thing is, so they say, to show them to the promised land and kingdom of a new and independent art, in short, to create a national music.” - Antonín Dvořák

Dvořák arrived in New York in 1892 to assume his new post as director of the National Conservatory. He had agreed to leave his home in Vysoká (near Prague) only after considerable coaxing from Jeannette Thurber, a Paris Conservatory alumna who had distinguished herself as a patroness and fierce advocate for classical music in America. Banking on Dvořák’s achievements in the formation of Czech musical identity, Thurber hoped that composer’s presence and example in New York would spark similar nationalistic fervor in American composers. Although financial problems for Thurber and Dvořák’s intense homesickness resulted in a relatively short tenure, the composer produced several important compositions that reflect his experiences and emotional investment in the music and life of the New World. The most famous of these, of course, is his ninth and final symphony.

Taken as a whole, the symphony represents Dvořák’s ingenious effort to internalize what he perceived as “America’s music” and render it in broad, symphonic gestures. In particular, Dvořák was fascinated by the culture and music of Native Americans and African Americans. From Harry Burleigh, an African American student at the National Conservatory, Dvořák learned spirituals and plantation songs. (Burleigh, a vocalist and composer, would later pen some 265 vocal compositions based mostly on spirituals.) The majority of Dvořák’s interactions with Native Americans followed the composition of the symphony, but he studied notated realizations of indigenous music provided by Henry Krehbiel, an Ann Arbor native and who had become a prominent music critic in New York.

The results of this exposure are evident in the music. The clearest cases arise in the second movement’s melancholy English horn solo, which emulates the melodic phrasing and direction of an African American spiritual, and in the finale’s primary theme, in which modal inflections and terse rhythmic energy suggest Native American song. Neither of these passages offer authentic representations of ethnic music, but rather reflect Dvořák’s attempt to incorporate different American musical styles within a symphonic idiom. Importantly, he does not exoticize these borrowed elements by setting

them apart as novel and odd, but rather embraces them fully within his own musical language.

The first movement begins with a slow introduction in which violas and cellos, then flutes and oboes, paint a desolate landscape of drearily descending melodic lines, interrupted by ominous horn calls. With the start of the allegro section, the orchestral forces accumulate with alarming swiftness, gathering tempest-like energy that sends forth an aggressively climbing theme, bellowed by horns and trombones. Two successive themes introduced by the flute provide lyrical contrast. The third theme shares a close kinship with the primary theme, mimicking its rhythmic character while inverting its melodic line (the primary theme leaps upward, then downward, while the third theme leaps downward, then upward). The tension generated by placing these two themes in opposition provides much of the movement's musical interest and vigor, culminating in a boldly emphatic statement of the primary theme that the trombones and lower strings carry to the final measures.

Like the slow movement from his *Symphony No. 8*, the second movement is panoramic in the breadth of its phrasing and expressive content. The clarity and openness of the initial brass chorale always strikes the ear as new and fresh while the English horn solo that follows remains one of the most simple, moving passages in the entire repertoire. Dvořák created this melody himself in the style of a spiritual. (It was later set to a new text by William Arms Fischer becoming the spiritual "Goin' Home, which is often used for funerals to this day.) Later, a grandiose statement of the primary theme from the first movement interrupts the pastoral ambience, but peace is quickly restored and the movement concludes with a gratifying reiteration of the brass chorale.

The third movement scherzo runs, stumbles, and leaps. Its intoxicating rhythmic verve is infectious, spreading throughout the orchestra at different intervals, giving the impression that all might fall to pieces - until, that is, an amicable theme for winds provides temporary respite. (Dvořák explained that this movement depicts Hiawatha's Wedding Feast from Longfellow's poem and one can imagine Native American drums in the strings.) Here again, the primary theme from the opening movement appears, cameo-like, in a fleeting passage for horns.

The finale opens with a repeated, half-step motion in the lower registers of the string section, an effective tension-building gesture that reminds movie fans of John Williams's theme for *Jaws*. This leads directly into a majestically defiant theme for trumpets and horns, backed by formidable orchestral accents. As the most memorable theme from the symphony, its reiteration with tutti orchestra is inevitably stirring. The secondary theme is a gentle solo for clarinet that offers musical contrast, but the real thematic opposition is left for the development section. It is here that the primary theme from the first movement returns to settle accounts with the primary theme of the finale. The conflict even continues in the coda, allowing Dvořák to indulge in increasingly greater heights of epic grandeur. The symphony's final chord, however, is both understated and unexpected, suggesting that Dvořák's impression of the New World was as ambivalent as it was enthusiastic.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9* in E minor on Sept. 18, 2005 with Itzhak Perlman conducting.

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*Program note by Nathan Platte, doctoral candidate in musicology with a focus on film
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