Dvořák For the Birds

Michael Beckerman
New York University

One of the most breathtaking passages from Dvořák's *"New World" Symphony* occurs at the end of the c-sharp minor section of the Largo. Ushered in by a Picardy third, it features an oboe playing a rustic theme in triplets over a drone, followed by a flute offering a trilling cadential fanfare. These figures are repeated over the next measures in changing colors and increased dynamics before yielding to the return to the first theme of the movement.

The question of Dvořák's relationship to the United States, and in particular the claim made by some contemporaries and scholars that the composer was trying to write something like "American music" continues to be contested, with various adherents and detractors still arguing over claims and counterclaims. Part of the problem, of course, involves the question about just what an expression like "American music" actually means and to whom…and this is no less true now that those two words can also refer to a burgeoning field of study. Yet it is my sense that a brief contextualization of this particular passage can at least give us some idea of what Dvořák actually did, and that might provide some firmer grounds on which to speculate about his intentions in terms concerning more global, or at least national, issues.

On December 20, 1893 the critic James Huneker included something in his review of the *"New World" Symphony* that ought to have been startling:

> The writer was the first to suggest to the composer the employment of characteristic negro melodies for symphony or suite, citing John Brockhoven's charmingly conceived 'Suite Creole.' This was a year ago. Dr. Dvorák listened attentively and evidently was predisposed to favor the idea. Who knows but that the Bohemian came to America to boldly rifle us of our native ore! At all events he accepted some specimen themes and also a book on the characteristic songs of the American birds.[1]

A bold, and sometimes grandiose figure, it turns out that Huneker was not merely blowing smoke with this claim. Dvořák's secretary, Josef Kovařík, has this to say about Huneker's role:

> Normally he [Dvořák] would start working on another work as soon as the first one was completed. But in this case he prepared a bit longer—and the reason for this is as follows. Perhaps you know this, but to make certain I'll write about it. Mr. JAMES GIBBONS HUNNEKER, piano teacher at the National Conservatory and also the music critic of the musical weekly *The Musical Courier* gave him an article from a certain [monthly] journal on the subject of Negro songs, in which several "typical" Negro melodies were presented.
>
> The next time they met Huneker asked Dvořák whether he thought it would be possible to establish a "typical American" music founded on Negro melodies, and he answered that he "believed it to be possible.[2]

There is such an article with notated examples of African American music in the Dvořák Museum in Prague, which corresponds to

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1 James Huneker, *Musical Courier*, December 20, 1893, "The Second Philharmonic Concert. Dvořák's New Symphony."

2 Letter from Josef Kovarik to Dvořák's biographer Otakar Šourek, July 21, 1927. In writing his four-volume biography of Dvořák, Šourek drew on Kovarik's unique placement, which he elicited in a series of letters over two decades.

Kovařík's recollections. Titled *Negro Music*, and signed by one Johann Tonsor, it offers "specimen themes," and may well have been a central inspiration for the symphony, although there are still a few things to think about in this regard.[3] David Beveridge has noted that Kovařík's testimony is contradictory, and that he elsewhere claims that Huneker's visit came earlier, that he took the cutting back with him, and that it contained both Native and African American examples.[4] There is less conjecture about Huneker's other claim: while his arch tone might make it seem like a jest, there is indeed a book of birdsong in the archive, catalogued as coming from Dvořák's own library (call mark S226/1376), and it is certainly the book that Huneker mentions.[5]

So far, then, we have significant evidence that Dvořák possessed both African American "specimen themes" and some examples of American birdsong in the run up to the composition of the "New World." Before we explore the latter in more detail, we might quickly offer a reminder of an additional way Dvořák sought to Americanize his symphony. It is now widely accepted that he based several parts of the symphony on passages from Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*. Dvořák himself, in several interviews, drew connections between the

3 See my *New Worlds of Dvořák* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2003), especially the chapter, "Two Who Made the New World."

4 When I completed my monograph, *New Worlds of Dvořák*, I was certain that the article "Negro Music" must have been the piece Kovarik was speaking about here. And it is still by far the leading candidate. But Kovarik later said that the article Huneker brought had both African and Native American themes (seven of them, rather than the six found in "Negro Music") and that Huneker brought it three or four weeks after Dvořák's arrival, so towards the end of October or the beginning of November 1892. Since the issue of *Music* with "Negro Music" is dated "December 1892," this muddies the waters slightly. Of course, Kovarik says that two days after Huneker asked Dvořák about whether these melodies could ignite a school of "American music" an article proclaiming the composer's opinion appeared in *The New York Herald*. That article did not appear for another *seven* months, so we have to think carefully about Kovarik's recall.

5 When I first went to the Dvořák Museum in Prague to ask about a book of birdsong, the archivist laughed and said, "Professor, this in not an ornithology museum!" But it was there nonetheless.

poem and the inner movement, while more recent critics have made even bolder claims for the association.[6]

But back to our birds! It is no wonder that the composer would be fascinated by birdsong at this point. He was an avid pigeon fancier in Bohemia and according to Harry Burleigh Dvořák "had birdcages all over the house with thrushes in them. He kept the cage doors open so the thrushes flew about freely and joined in the singing."[7] Birds would figure into several of the American works including, most famously, the "damned bird" that appears in the scherzo of the "American" Quartet, Op.96, almost certainly a scarlet tanager.

The particular book Huneker brought is titled *Wood Notes Wild*, by Samuel Pease Cheney. Published in 1892, the year Dvořák arrived, it is a collection of birdsong notations with commentary.

The volume opens with a paean in praise of birds and their song:

> Conjecture as we may concerning the growth and development of birds and bird-songs, we know that the birds now sing in a wonderful manner, using all the intervals of the major and minor scales in perfections of intonation, with a purity of voice and finish of execution, with an exquisiteness of melody, a magnetic and spiritual charm appurtenant to no other music on earth. The horse neighs, the bull bellows, the lion roars, the tiger growls, —the world is full of vocal sounds; only the birds sing. They are Nature's finest artists, whose lives and works are above the earth. They have not learned of us; it is our delight to learn of them. To no other living things are man's mind and heart so greatly indebted.[8]

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6 For an outline of the evidence for this see my "Dvořák's 'New World' Largo and 'The Song of Hiawatha,'" *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 16, No. 1. (Summer, 1992), pp. 35-48. For greater claims about the Hiawatha influence see James Hepokoski, "Culture Clash: James Hepokoski Revisits Dvořák's New World Symphony," *Musical Times*, 134, no. 1810 (December 1993), pp. 685–88 and Robert Winter's DVD-Rom produced by ArtsInteractive, *From the New World: A Celebrated Composer's American Odyssey*. Both, in different ways argue for a kind of "Hiawatha Symphony" where most details are associated with passages from the symphony.

7 *New York World Telegram*, September 12, 1941.

8 Wood Notes Wild, Samuel Pease Cheney, Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1892, p 8-9. A copy of the book may be found online at <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.ml14in;view=1up;seq=7>.

This is an echo of Dvořák's well-known line about birds, "They are the real masters," though it looks as if the composer said this before he encountered Cheney.[9]

Cheney's initial chapter begins with the words, "Our first two spring visitors are the bluebird and the robin…" and it is my strong sense that like Cheney, Dvořák's music brings these two birds together.[10] I will briefly outline the musical evidence for this and then offer an additional reason why these two birds ended up singing in the *"New World" Symphony*.

Some of the important information we have about the programmatic contents of the symphony comes from the critic Henry Krehbiel, who was in close contact with Dvořák at the time the symphony was composed and premiered. It was Krehbiel who interviewed Dvořák before the first performance and wrote a 2500 word article about the symphony with music examples, published in the *New York Daily-Tribune* on December 15, 1893. He made a point of asserting, based on conversations with Dvořák, that the Largo had been inspired by the chapter in Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* titled "The Wooing" and about the passage under discussion he wrote:

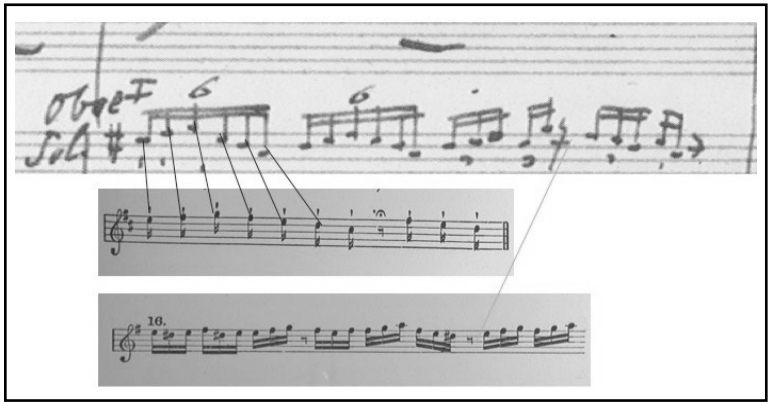
> There is a striking passage in the middle of the movement, constructed out of a little staccato melody, announced by the oboe and taken up by one instrument after another until it masters the orchestra, as if it were intended to suggest the gradual awakening of animal life on the prairie scene, and striking use is made of trills, which are exchanged between the instrumental choirs as if they were the voices of night and dawn in converse.

9 *Bohumil Fidler*: 'Vzpomínky na mistra dra. Antonína Dvořáka', (Reminiscences of Dr. Antonin Dvořák) *Dalibor* XXVI/25-26 (7 May 1904), p. 170. I am indebted to David Beveridge for pointing out to me in private correspondence that Fidler wrote twice about the same encounter with Dvořák, first just after the composer's death in the publication above and then more than thirty years later in his memoirs, originally published in 1935: *My Life and Memories*. The Dvořák Society for Czech and Slovak Music, 2008, p.95. It is clear that Fidler's discussion with the composer took place just before his trip to the United States.

10 Cheney, p.11.

Since, so far as I know, prairie dogs don't sing or trill, the reference to the "gradual awakening of animal life" must be avian.

Let us look at the passage in question again. Its most conspicuous feature is the figure in the oboe, which after five repetitions of a triplet rhythm creates a characteristic "staggering" effect by dropping out the last note of the triplet. Both of these elements are characteristic of the song of the robin as notated by Cheney. Further, we can see places where Dvořák might even have grabbed specific pitches.[11] (Example 1). The second motive, introduced by the trilling flute bears a strong resemblance to the example of the bluebird in Cheney's book (Example 2).[12]

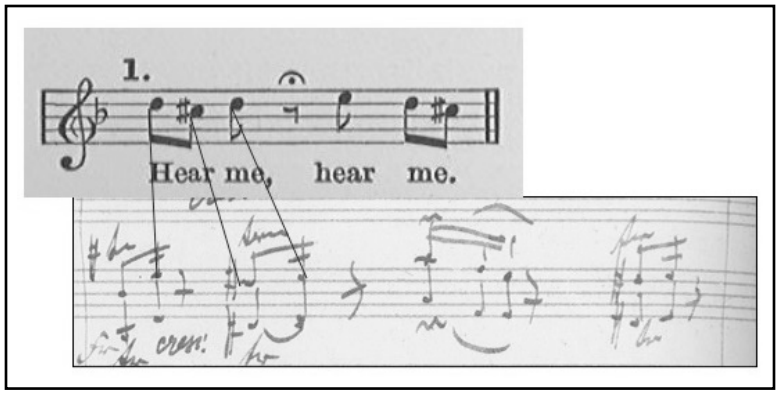


Example 1 (Panel X). Song of the Robin. *Wood Notes Wild*.

These two birds also resonate with the programmatic underpinnings of the movement. As we noted, Krehbiel, after discussing the symphony with Dvořák, correlated the Largo with the chapter, "The Wooing" from Longfellow's Hiawatha. Based on this, I have argued elsewhere that the opening of the Largo, with its drone and consonant intervals, represents the journey of Hiawatha and his bride Minnehaha through the archaic pastoral landscape of primeval

11 Cheney's discussion of the robin is found on pages 14-22 and contains more than 25 examples.

12 The bluebird section runs from pages 11-13.



Example 2 (Panel X). Song of the Bluebird. *Wood Notes Wild*.

America.[13] It seems likely then that our passage references the following lines from "The Wooing," and that Dvořák used Wood Notes Wild as a handy source:

> Pleasant was the journey homeward!
> All the birds sang loud and sweetly
> Songs of happiness and heart's-ease;
> Sang the bluebird, the Owaissa,
> "Happy are you Hiawatha,
> Having such a wife to love you!"
> Sang the Robin, the Opeechee,
> "Happy are you, Laughing Water,
> Having such a noble husband!"

I would like to close with a few short observations. Critics and commentators often refer to this passage as a "transition," but in this kind of musical storytelling there are no simple transitions. In addition to any role it might play in the larger plot of the movement and the

13 Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák*, chapter 2, "Dvořák and the Largo."

symphony, the passage also stands on its own as a brilliant set piece. That it was almost certainly inspired as well by a similar moment from Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony (starting at measure 29 in the first movement) does not in any way dim its originality. Nor does it overshadow the presence of specifically American birds which, surrounded by musical ideas inspired by African American melos, Native American drumbeats, and scenes from Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, signal Dvořák's strong intention to as much as he could to make his symphony an American work. Today we are rightly skeptical of any reductive notion of what it means for music, or anything else, to be "American," but Dvořák was intent on painting a musical landscape that was as American as any painting by Albert Bierstadt, Fredrick Church, Thomas Cole or Georgia O'Keefe. Some might argue that his technique is Czech, or German, or even "Hapsburgian," but as much as any musical work can have a subject, the main subject of this symphony is America.

There are other questions the birds can help us with. In his review in The Musical Courier James Huneker wrote: "Who knows but that the Bohemian came to America to boldly rifle us of our native ore."[14] Huneker may have been joking, but there is nothing funny about the metaphor: the colonial theft of natural resources is an old and tragic tale. But does the metaphor hold for other kinds of resources? Was Dvořák's use of African and Native American sources a case of rank appropriation?

The current musicological moment, with its emphasis on ethics, politics, and the mantra that "music is socially and culturally constructed," prides itself that it has gotten beyond some of the troubling tendencies of the past. But there were surprising and inspiring moments in the past as well, and in my view that Dvořák's time in the United States was one of them, particularly if we are truly interested in political action. It is widely known that in May of 1893 an interview with Dvořák titled "Real Value of Negro Melodies" was published in *The New York Herald*. Less noticed was a startling editorial in the *Herald* on the same day that began in this way:

14 Huneker, *Musical Courier*.

> **Dr. Dvořák and American Music.**
> Dr. Antonin Dvořák's declaration that the future music of America must be based upon the negro melodies comes with the force of a mature and expert judgment. The article which we print to-day is a delightful surprise, especially as it announces that the National Conservatory of Music is to be thrown open to the negro race and that talent is the only necessary qualification.

It is certainly possible to read this as yet another example of white privilege, whereby upper class Europeanized composers appropriate the sounds of African Americans in a grotesque display of power imbalance; and further one could find the phrase "talent is the only necessary qualification" an instance of barely covert condescension and racism. Can we go even further and ask if the appropriation of nature, whether the pastoral landscape writ large or the songs of birds is also a political act, inviting skeptical and dialectical interpretation?

Cheney's Introduction quotes a "modern English writer" who says that "There is no music in Nature, neither melody nor harmony." Cheney marvels, "'No music in Nature!' The very mice sing; the toads do; and the frogs make 'music on the waters.' The summer grass about our feet is alive with little musicians."[15] The Introduction concludes with a quote from *Matthew 11:15* (and other places in the New Testament) "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."[16] It is probably not a coincidence that this line was also referenced by Mildred Hill who, as "Johann Tonsor," played a role in the creation of Dvořák's American style with the article *Negro Music*. She concludes her signed article on African American street cries, *Unconscious Composers*, published in the *Louisville Courier Journal* on March 27, 1895 with the words, "He that hath ears to hear music can find it everywhere around him and truly it is the voice of the people." And these words could easily be the motto of Dvořák's American years, for whether his work, and Hill's are viewed darkly as a colonialist project, or understood as the most progressive effort of the time, both, like Cheney, invite us to listen to the world anew, taking things that

15 Cheney, p.2.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

have been ignored and neglected, and treating them with enormous love and respect.

When Fidler writes about the composer's love of birds, he recalls Dvořák talking about Beethoven's *"Pastoral" Symphony* and then going on to say, "If God will preserve my health, I am going to write a Bird Symphony."[17] It is my view that the *"New World"* is, at least in part, that very thing. But it is also a call to political action—words backed up by a symphony, and a symphony backed up by words… and birds.

New Rochelle, New York

17 Bohumil Fidler, *My Life and Memories*, The Dvořák Society for Czech and Slovak Music, 2008, p. 95. This source if it is reliable—since it recalls events that took place thirty years earlier—makes it clear that this conversation took place just before Dvořák's journey to the United States.