

## **Made in America**

### ***On reading Joseph Skvorecky's novel Dvorak in Love***

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*Dvorak in Love* has no central chronological narrative but consists instead of some twenty-six individual vignettes all related in some way to the life and times of Antonin Dvorak. It is less a traditional novel, more a collection of inter-related portraits whilst the title of the work refers I believe to the numerous 'loves' of Dvorak's life. And so we find Dvorak in love with Bohemia, with his sister-in-law Josephine, with nature, with his children; and also with religion, with past masters (such as Beethoven), with beer, with folksong, and of course, with America. For it seems that Skvorecky's primary interest lies with this last and quite significant 'love-affair', as at the heart of his novel and through much of its course, there is an evident fascination with the relationship between Dvorak and the New World.

It is perhaps not unsurprising that Skvorecky shows such an interest in this relationship. Following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he and his wife Zdena Salivarovna fled to Canada and in 1971 set up *68 Publishers* which over the ensuing twenty years published banned works by various Czech and Slovak authors. Skvorecky also taught at the University of Toronto where he was eventually appointed Professor Emeritus of English and Film, before retiring in 1990. Although Skvorecky is very highly regarded in his native Czech Republic (along with numerous awards for his writing – including a nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1982 – he was awarded the *Order of the White Lion* by the President of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel in 1990) he has nonetheless stayed firmly resident in Canada and is even now regarded by some as a 'Canadian' author; this despite the fact that he still writes novels in his native Czech. So his interest in a Czech artist's time spent in the New World is clearly not an idle one; a view further enforced by an evident wealth of research into the historical background behind Dvorak's visit.

The idea of bringing Dvorak to America was entirely the brainchild of Jeanette Thurber, the glamorous wife of the American Millionaire Francis Thurber. Her initial plan was to create a *National Conservatory of America* with a new indigenous school of composition and performing. Ms. Thurber (who was herself educated at the Paris Conservatory) saw Dvorak as having the ability to combine in music the rigour of the great Germanic tradition with the uniqueness of an individual national character. The idea was that if Dvorak could incorporate traditional American Folksong (i.e. something of an American Character) into a large-scale work, he could (with his grasp and knowledge of form, counterpoint and structure) thus create the first quintessentially 'American' musical masterpiece – and such a work could then kick-start a whole new tradition of American composition.

It was an extraordinary and admirable ambition and for many years she laboured in her quest for its success. Previous to this, she had tried to establish the *American National Opera Company* and for two whole years she attempted to keep this

expensive venture afloat with disastrous financial consequences (estimated losses at the time ran to hundreds of thousands of dollars). As one character puts in Skvorecky's novel, "there were only two seasons, but what seasons they were! Really Mr. Garrigue – wasn't the collapse worth it?" Some years later with the idea of a National Conservatory up and running, she offered Dvorak \$15,000 as an annual salary – a huge incentive for the Czech composer to up stakes and move to New York.

And yet although the financial gain was undoubtedly great, Dvorak was already a keen student of America and showed considerable interest in the project for its own sake. From the moment he arrived in America, he seemed to enjoy much of what it had to offer. But nor was his interest in America newly found. In an interview with the *New York Herald* concerning the premiere of his Ninth Symphony, the composer openly admits his long-time fascination with America as shown through his interest in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*: "I first became acquainted with it [Hiawatha] about thirty years ago through the medium of a Bohemian translation. It appealed very strongly to my imagination at that time and the impression has only been strengthened by my residence here." Indeed it is without doubt I think that there was a special relationship between the composer's last symphony and this particular poem by Longfellow. In the same interview, he recounts, "The second movement is an Adagio. But it is different to the classic works in this form. It is in reality a study or a sketch for a longer work, either a cantata or an opera which I propose writing and which will be based on Longfellow's Hiawatha. I have long had the idea of someday utilizing that poem. The Scherzo of the Symphony was suggested by the scene at the feast in Hiawatha where the Indians dance, and is also an essay I made in the direction of imparting the local colour of Indian character to music."

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Skvorecky is quick to explore the obvious influence that this American poem had on Dvorak's ninth and I think he does so with some real imaginative flourish. For instance, through the historical character of Harry T. Burleigh, he makes a direct comparison between the English horn's solo part and a song that Burleigh's grandfather used to sing. As he has Burleigh relate, "He [Dvorak] said that when he heard me sing, he suddenly realized my voice had the same timbre as an English horn and the English horn was just the thing to suggest a lonesome voice echoing across the prairie. That was the voice of my granddaddy, Josephine, who turned to Jesus when he was all alone ... now people say that the voice on the prairie is supposed to express Dvorak's longing for his homeland ... but think about this, Josephine, whose voice is it, that English horn? And what homeland was he longing for?"

It is an imaginative stroke by Skvorecky to connect the Largo from the Ninth Symphony to a Negro Spiritual as sung by Burleigh and his grandfather as this is not the typical interpretation of either its genesis or meaning. In his excellent book on Dvorak the eminent Dvorak scholar Michael Beckerman points to three critical traditions or ways of seeing Dvorak's Largo – and I think these are worth expounding upon. First of all there is the view, which he primarily attributes to Henry Krehbiel who wrote for the *New York Daily Tribune*, that the Largo was inspired by the wooing scene from 'Hiawatha'. A second tradition cites Minehaha's funeral scene (also from Longfellow's poem) as the primary source of inspiration, whilst a third tradition, unusually, ignores the influence of Longfellow's poem altogether. Although

Beckerman acknowledges the possibility that Dvorak's inspiration from *The Song of Hiawatha* may have been of a general nature, he argues that the first section of the Largo most likely referred to the passage in Longfellow's poem that describes the homeward journey. In this passage Longfellow describes how Hiawatha matched his pace to Minehaha's steps and that thus the journey was slow and deliberate – capturing somewhat the opening atmosphere of the Largo. He goes on to argue that the piece's central section (the poco meno mosso) is directly related to Minehaha's funeral. His reasoning is that the musical characteristics are strongly tied to those of a funeral march throughout this section. Beckerman also describes how Dvorak changed the tempo indication for the movement several times. Originally the tempo for the Largo was actually an Andante. But it seems that Dvorak changed it to a Largo after visiting the prairie for himself. I agree with Beckerman that it is likely that Dvorak had a slightly Euro-centric view of the American prairie – that is, something similar to a European landscape – though from his eventual encounter with the prairie in the summer of 1893, it is clear that he was deeply affected by his visit. In a letter to Emil Kozanek in September 1893, he wrote, “it is very strange here. Few people and a great deal of space. A farmer's neighbour is often four miles off ... it is very ‘wild’ here, and sometimes very sad – sad to despair.” So for Beckerman, the Largo thus encapsulates two separate scenes from Longfellow's poem whilst simultaneously reflecting Dvorak's own experience of the Prairie.

Either way, both Beckerman and Skvorecky would agree that America is at the heart of the Ninth's inspiration. However, Skvorecky widens his lens to include other works which he thinks bear a uniquely American stamp. As his character Jeanette Thurber recounts, “He wrote this American suite [the Piano Suite in A Major] right after his great symphony – not even a month had passed, then this. The fifth movement is the most American, perhaps more American, than anything else he ever wrote.” In a different way, the opera *Rusalka* is also held up to scrutiny. Skvorecky devotes no less than two chapters to it, giving a detailed thesis regarding the possible inspiration behind the opera. Although it should be pointed out that Skvorecky does not attempt any kind of rigorous argument – this is after all a novel, not an academic paper – he nonetheless clearly tries to persuade the reader towards a specific point of view. He presents a richly imagined scenario where Dvorak, whilst in Iowa, encounters a woman bathing by the light of the moon and later an African American man making his way down the river by dawn. Both these separate images, Skvorecky suggests, are direct inspirations for the two central characters in the opera, thus once again arguing for the influential role played by America in the later works of Dvorak.

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Thankfully though, Skvorecky doesn't exclusively focus on Dvorak's relationship with the New World, despite its clear importance. For example, the reader is given an extensive and in-depth portrait of his love for his sister-in-law Josephine, and he takes great care in illustrating the profound relationship between this and the Cello Concerto in B minor. Throughout, the reader is given a powerful sense of the extent of her influence on his life and when she dies the sense of tragedy is palpable and deeply moving and Skvorecky excellently captures Dvorak's undoubted despair. The Cello Concerto is thus portrayed as pure grief. Skvorecky also paints a vivid picture of the relationship Dvorak had with his many children, both alive and deceased. Indeed it is tempting to draw parallels between Minehaha's funeral and the death of

Dvorak's first child. And perhaps this could be another explanation for the deeply felt elegiac quality of the Largo from the Ninth Symphony. I think it very likely that Dvorak would have empathized strongly with this scene and as such the influence of his children and family on his music is subtly evident.

The book has its lighter moments too. Dvorak was apparently an avid train watcher and there is a delightful scene where he disappears off in New York getting lost watching trains. Skvorecky also includes a wonderful scene which captures the composer's love of birdsong and describes how Dvorak "began to conduct with his hands while gazing up into the tree where the scarlet tanager was still scolding. He chuckled and began whistling loudly along with the bird. It was like a duel in sound."

Though Skvorecky's novel is undoubtedly entertaining and most certainly thought provoking, it must be said however that one cannot really capture the precise nature of influences on an artist. The imagination is fuelled in so many ways, it becomes virtually impossible to say exactly where inspiration began and how it was transformed, even transmogrified into a finished artistic object. For this reason, I think Skvorecky's novel works somewhat better than perhaps an academic argument would in this regard. Poetic licence and literary imagination afford him the necessary room to postulate and speculate on Dvorak's many loves and influences whilst freeing him from the heavy demands of scholarship. And yet it is all anchored by strong research which lends the novel an authentic and believable quality. *Sine scientia ars nihil est*. Overall it is a neat achievement which provokes the imagination and helps foster I think new insights into Dvorak's late period.