

New World Inspirations

Our concert presents three works written in North America. Two by composers from the USA and Mexico draw on folk music of those countries. The third is the well known symphony by Dvořák called “From the New World”. But we open with the waltz that has come to represent Vienna.

Strauss: An der schönen blauen Donau (On the beautiful blue Danube)

When he wrote this most famous of all Viennese waltzes in 1866, Johann Strauss Jr had achieved success far beyond that of his late father. He was *Hofballmusikdirektor* (Director of Imperial Balls), he had a famous orchestra that played nearly every night in ballrooms and casinos, and he had written almost a hundred waltzes, many them quite popular. But 1866 was a bad year for gaiety. Austria had lost a seven-week war with Prussia, ending its influence in much of what subsequently became a unified Germany. As a result, most of the balls were canceled. Strauss had new music, but nowhere to play it.

He had been asked a year earlier to write a concert piece for the Viennese Men’s Choral Society. So he took up that commission and wrote a set of waltzes, some to be sung by the men of the society to words supplied by one of the members. At the last minute Strauss added a title, from a poem he had enjoyed about the Danube — which has never run blue, of course.

The title has nothing to do with the words, which are satirical about the lost war. The opening lines, sung to the first waltz: *Wiener seid’s froh!/
Oho! Wieso?* (Viennese be happy!/
Oho! How so?) The first performances were, by Strauss’s standards, received poorly, so he decided to junk the words and produce a version for orchestra alone. That version is usually performed, although verses added later about the “blue Danube” are sometimes sung in Austria.

With the words gone and a piano reduction prepared, the work became sensationally successful, so much so that the publisher had to order a second set of engraved printing plates. Decades later, in a family outing with Brahms, Strauss’s stepdaughter asked the great man to autograph her fan. He complied, sketching the first bars of the Blue Danube, and adding “Unfortunately not by J. Brahms.”

A “closed position” dance (the bodies touch occasionally between the chest and the knees), the waltz was regarded as a scandalous low class activity in the 1700s. But it often happens that low art, properly tamed, becomes high art. By the mid-19th century the waltz was the favorite dance of polite European society, especially in the Austrian empire.

The Viennese version of the dance uses a strong first beat, a second beat a bit early, and a softer third beat. In concert waltzes such as the Blue Danube, there is an introductory section, then the waltzes with many repeats, ending with an extended coda.



Johann Strauss statue in the Stadtpark, Vienna

Florence Price: Concert Overture No. 1

Florence Smith was born in Little Rock to mixed race parents in 1887. Her father was the only black dentist in town (it was said the governor was a secret patient). Her mother, a teacher, gave Florence her first musical instruction and recognized her special talent. Valedictorian of her high school class, at 16 she went to the New England Conservatory, where she was a stellar composition pupil of George Chadwick. (On her mother's advice, she presented herself as Mexican.) Finishing at 19, she returned home briefly, then became the head of the music department at what is now Clark University in Atlanta. In 1912 she married lawyer Thomas Price and returned to Little Rock.



In 1927, after a black man was lynched and a white mob destroyed much of the black business section of Little Rock, the Prices moved to Chicago, where Florence resumed her studies, teaching and composing. In 1932 her Symphony in E minor won the Wanamaker competition, and the next year it was performed by the Chicago Symphony. But her requests to get her other orchestral works performed usually went unanswered. She wrote arrangements of spirituals for Marian Anderson, one of which was the final number in the famous 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial.

Florence Price died in 1953. In 2009, during renovation of an old house she had rented near Chicago, a large number of her scores and manuscripts were found, and are now kept at the University of Arkansas. This discovery led to renewed interest in her work and numerous new performances.

Her musical style is basically late romantic. One could say that she followed successfully the advice given by Dvořák, to use spirituals and other black American music as sources in creating a uniquely American idiom. Marquese Carter, whose doctoral research is about Price, said in a 1918 New York Times interview: "Florence Price is a representation in music of what it means to be a black artist living within a white canon and trying to work within the classical realm."

The work we play is based on two verses of the spiritual "Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass", a call for conversion and repentance. (The composition date is unknown, but there is a second concert overture dated 1943.) After a short introduction the orchestra plays the melodies, which are based on a pentatonic scale — the fourth and seventh tones of the usual scale are rarely used. These are treated in a set of free variations, creating a sort of rhapsody, contrasting the quiet plea of the first verse ("Sinner, please don't let this harvest pass.") with the triumph of the other verse ("My God is a mighty man of war!"). Price uses a large orchestra, and the brass section is given a major role.

Márquez: Danzón No. 2

The *Danzón* is a hybrid dance, originating in Cuba and also popular in Mexico and Puerto Rico. Its roots include the European contradance and the syncopated rhythms of the African slaves of the Caribbean colonies. Its immediate predecessor is the *Habanera*, the contradance of Havana. In Mexico it is a formal dance, slow but with up-tempo sections, similar to the *Tango*. The basic rhythmic pattern is: ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ |. Typically the melodies are in the minor mode.

As with the waltz, in its early forms the *Danzón* was regarded as low class, scandalous if danced by respectable people. Now it is seen as a dance mainly for the older generations, or for formal occasions.

We play the second of nine *Danzones* by Arturo Márquez. It is a concert piece for large orchestra, although ballet companies have choreographed it. In recent years it has been a popular item in concert programs. It was played by the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, in their celebrated 2007 international tour.

There are two main melodic themes, one slow and languorous, the other upbeat. But the principal material is rhythmic, with lots of percussion and percussive effects in other instruments.

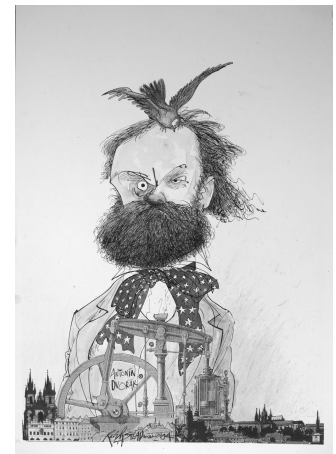
Dvořák: Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, "From the New World"

Antonín Dvořák was born in 1841 in a Bohemian village in the cultural hinterlands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now in the Czech Republic. He bootstrapped from a provincial education to gain renown as a composer and also, remarkably, attain a major place in American music. At age 19 he found employment in Prague as a violist in the National Theater orchestra conducted by Bedřich Smetana, Bohemia's leading composer. In his early 30s Dvořák left the orchestra to compose full-time, plunging his growing family – his wife Anna bore 9 children – into poverty. Several awards of an Austrian State Prize for struggling artists kept them afloat. Johannes Brahms, a juror for the grant competitions, convinced his Berlin publisher to print some of the obscure Bohemian's works. These proved an instant commercial hit and Dvořák rocketed to international fame.

At age 50 Dvořák received an honorary Doctorate of Music from Cambridge University and was appointed Professor at the Prague Conservatory. Despite such accolades, he remained a homebody who reveled in the simple pleasures of beer drinking, train spotting, and pigeon breeding. A Czech nationalist, and an agoraphobe prone to severe performance anxiety, Dvořák withstood pressure to emulate his mentor Brahms and move to Vienna's prestigious music conservatory.

Nonetheless, in October 1892 Dvořák began a new job, not in the imperial capital, but across the Atlantic. Visionary philanthropist Jeannette Thurber offered the composer a massive salary to direct a new National Conservatory in New York City. Beyond the money, Thurber lured Dvořák with a unique challenge. He had helped create a distinct musical identity for his motherland. Could he now teach composers in the USA to do the same? Dvořák embraced the mission and pondered the central

Arturo Márquez was born in Álamos, Sonora, Mexico. Through his grandfather (a folk musician) and his father (a *mariachi* player), he was exposed to several musical styles. He started composing at age 16, and then attended the Mexican Music Conservatory. His music incorporates forms and styles of his native country. The *Danzones* are based on the music of the Veracruz region, on the Gulf coast.



Caricature of Dvořák, pigeon on head, by Ralph Steadman

question, what is American? As a descendant of peasant stock and member of an ethnic minority, the composer's fundamental instincts were egalitarian. The National Conservatory admitted students of all races and social classes. Dvořák absorbed music he had never heard before, searching for national roots. A statement attributed to him in the *New York Herald* drew strong responses, both pro and con: "In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music." While a zealous journalist probably manufactured this quote, there is little doubt that Dvořák supported the sentiment and admired African-American colleagues such as Henry Burleigh, who sang spirituals to him. Dvořák also gravitated to Native American music heard during summer sojourns to Spillville, Iowa.

Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 in E minor, "From the New World," the best-known composition of his American adventure, premiered on December 16, 1893 in New York's Carnegie Hall. The work received wild applause. Then a long debate began about its sources. Some argue that, beyond a brief hint of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" in the first movement, Dvořák's "New World" lacks references to spirituals or blues and the symphony is more Czech than American. Others join New York Times critic W.J. Henderson who perceived a strong African-American influence linked to the sad history of our country's Peculiar Institution: "Out of the heart of ... slavery arose the spontaneous musical utterance of a people. That folk-music struck an answering note in the American heart. If those songs are not national, then there is no such thing as national music." By contrast, a prominent Boston critic, while catching the same musical overtones, disparaged the notion of black-inspired national music and slurred Dvořák as a "negrophile."

In newspaper interviews coincident with the symphony's premiere, Dvořák pointed to another inspiration — *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem derived from Ojibway Indian legends. Prof. Michael Beckerman (New York University) elucidates this connection in *New Worlds of Dvořák: Searching in America for the Composer's Inner Life* (2003). Dvořák had loved a Czech translation of the poem made by a friend in the 1860s. Soon after the composer's arrival in New York, Thurber presented him with a copy of the English original, intending it to be the source for a future opera. While that project failed to reach fruition, Beckerman concludes as "indisputable fact" that at least the two middle movements of the 9th Symphony are tone poems based on Longfellow's epic. Although often parodied for its trochaic meter, stressing the first syllable of each pair, *Hiawatha* remained popular for decades. Dvořák was not alone in responding to the image of the "noble savage" and the tragic romance in which Hiawatha earns Minnehaha's love and travels far with her across the plains, only to lose her in a wintry famine.



Death of Minnehaha, by Frederic Remington

Dvořák credited Longfellow's chapter "The Wooing of Minnehaha" as source for his symphony's marvelous second movement. Beckerman asks why the movement begins as an Edenic pastoral, with a haunting English horn solo, yet grows increasingly sad. This may reflect Dvořák's awe of the "pristine and primeval American spaces" through which the newlyweds travel to Hiawatha's distant village. The composer's letters reveal he found the country's sheer vastness unsettling: "You don't meet a soul...and you are glad to see the huge herds of cattle in the woods and meadows which,

summer and winter, are out to pasture in the broad fields...[It] is very 'wild' here, and sometimes very sad – sad to despair." However, Dvořák completed the 9th symphony in New York before ever setting eyes on the Great Plains. Moreover, his agoraphobia does not account for the music's evolution into a funeral march. Beckerman posits that this segment portrays Minnehaha's death, after Hiawatha returns "empty handed, heavy hearted" from a desperate hunt for game in the icy forest. Fittingly, although he first marked the movement *Andante* (walking speed), upon hearing conductor Anton Seidl rehearse it at a far slower pace Dvořák decided "it is much better in this way!" and amended the tempo marking to *Largo*.

The ensuing *Scherzo*, in Dvořák's words, "was suggested by the scene at the [wedding] feast in *Hiawatha* where the Indians dance, and is also an essay I made in the direction of imparting the local color of Indian character to music." Listeners may imagine tom-toms in the rhythmic pulse. The main figure is the jokester and magician Pau-Puk-Keewis, an adversary to the statesman-like Hiawatha, and treated by Longfellow as an Antichrist figure.

Dvořák dropped no more programmatic hints, but it seems implausible that he composed the symphony's dramatic fourth movement as purely abstract music. Beckerman proposes that the Finale portrays the terminal battle between Hiawatha and Pau-Puk-Keewis. That evil genius resents Hiawatha and finds an opportunity to kill all of his animals, especially his favorite pet mountain chickens (a crime that the pigeonier Dvořák would especially abhor). Hiawatha vows revenge. Beckerman pulls off a speculative tour de force, declaiming Longfellow's text over Dvořák's music to create a compelling melodrama, the poet's story and trochaic tetrameter perfectly aligned with the score. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21as9ePuJo8>] Thus, the fiercely dramatic opening sets Hiawatha's vow: "I will slay this Pau-Puk-Keewis, / Slay this mischief-maker! / Not so long and wide the world ... / That my wrath shall not attain him." Racing triplet figures illustrate Pau-Puk-Keewis's antelope-like dash for safety. Hiawatha catches and kills the wizard, whose soul transmogrifies into a flying bird and escapes to the mountains. Hiawatha continues in pursuit, calling on lightning and thunder gods for aid. They bring down "the jutting crags of sandstone." Then "Dead among the rocky ruins / Lay the cunning Pau-Puk-Keewis / Slain in his own human figure."

The question remains, how did Dvořák transform the noble, albeit outdated, sensibility of Longfellow's poem to a portrayal of the New World that, despite its sorrowful moments, infuses contemporary audiences with a peculiarly American optimism? "The key," wrote Beckerman in an earlier article (1992) "may lie in [Dvořák's] fondness for trains and pigeons." Rather than betraying "childlike simplicity," these interests reveal that the humble man from a provincial background had a universalist outlook. He desired to "travel, crisscrossing invisible lines of passage, forging connections with distant realms," and was willing "to...network, both in his imagination and in reality." Beckerman concludes, in words that resonate even more strongly in 2019: "Today, when society seems threatened by a massive balkanization on the basis of race, ethnic group, gender, religion and class, we should perhaps keep Dvořák in mind....he was speaking for humanity...and beautifully, too."