

■
Antonín Dvořák

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

Completed on: 24 May 1893; premiered: 15 December 1893 in New York; published: Berlin 1894

On 1 October 1892, Dvořák took the post of artistic director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. For an institution that aspired to the title of the premier school of music in the USA, gaining the Czech composer, with perfect command of English, and only recently awarded a *honoris causa* degree from the universities in Prague and Cambridge, was a great opportunity. It was hoped that with him, the problem of creating an American national music would be solved. It was believed that this could be done with the indigenous melodies of Native and African Americans. Dvořák was familiar with them – he had a collection of press materials, including eight examples of sheet music, from a performance of the Iroquois and the Comanche in 1879 in Prague. However, the composer never quoted any melodies, even in the Czech Republic, where on an everyday basis he had to deal with a naïve idea of national music as a collection of folk songs. "I have no intention," said the composer in an interview for the *Chicago Tribune*, "of adopting melodies sung at the plantations, be it Creole or from the south, and arranging them as themes [...]. But I study original melodies so I can familiarise myself with their characteristic features and am ready to create musical images that maintain and develop these features."

Hence, Dvořák intended his Symphony No. 9 to be part of his pedagogical mission in America, to show young American composers the source of inspiration and the methods used. Therefore, its form is lucid, and the themes are clear and natural, yet at the same time constructed in such a way that they can counterpoint one another. However, the meaning of this four-movement Symphony goes far beyond this educational purpose.

- The isolated impulses of the brass instruments that segment the lyrical introduction (*Adagio*), give origin to a sharp arc of the first movement's theme (*Allegro molto*), and the rhythmical figure of the strings that divide it (French horn and later oboe), gives origin to the second theme (flute and oboe unison). The third theme, beginning in the lowest register of the flute, is a reverse of the first theme – both when it comes to its outline and colour. Every note of this composition stems from the thematic material and hence the entire

work is permeated by these "characteristic features" of harmony, rhythm and melody, the most striking of which is the pentatonic, used quite freely.

- The second movement (*Largo*) is in fact two songs, full of pentatonic devices, of which the first is a reprise and the other a rondo in form. It opens with a chant-like motto of wind instruments that is repeated soon after and then shortly before the ending – always closed with a tremolo of timpani. The main, "pendulum-like" melody of the first song (in D flat major) is led by the English horn. The second song (in C sharp minor), at a slightly faster tempo, juxtaposes two melodic threads: one developing a persistent figure with a triplet, and the other, a kind of a hymnic cantilena, situated over a fanciful counterpoint. Now the lyrical culmination of the *Largo* takes place; however, the dynamic culmination comes unexpectedly from outside – in an interjected, lively and scherzando-like link, where the main themes of the first and second movement meet.

- The third movement (*Scherzo. Molto vivace*) is a rondo. A dynamic refrain separates two trios, the first of which is repeated twice, while the second plays the role of a middle episode. Everything directs the attention here – from the initial, bold entry of tutti, to the canon-based presentation of a sharply articulated motif (flutes, clarinets) that is continuously growing, and whose unpredictable pulse amazes any listener trying to count the measure. The music here contrasts with the mood of the preceding movement in almost all parameters imaginable: the key, tempo, articulation, dynamics, and type of motion.

- The beginning of the fourth movement (*Allegro con fuoco*) leaves no doubts that this is a real "grand" finale. A series of massive impulses precedes a classically constructed theme that is almost without equal in symphony music in terms of architecture, solemnity and the power of sound. The second lyrical theme (solo clarinet) maintains the same tempo. The development is based solely on the transformations of the main themes from the previous movements that lead to a very rhythmical culmination. Once again, all of the main themes meet in the coda "set in motion" by a more and more densely repeated figure of the French horn.

The premiere of the Symphony brought Dvořák great success. It was performed under the baton of Anton Seidl. Shortly before delivering the score to him, the composer added the headline on the title page: "From the New World". This message has been circulating the globe ever since.

Maciej Negrey