Thoughts on Dvorak and the American Indian: Historiography and the Concept of Nation

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Antonin Dvorak's pronouncements on America's musical potential were best documented in the now infamous article "On the Real Meaning of Negro Melodies," written by that practitioner of yellow journalism Henry Krehbiel. In this article, published in May 1893, Dvorak praised the creative potential of African American music. In an era of genteel racism, the Dvorak's ideas were scandalous at best, but ultimately helped to legitimize an entire school of African-American composers and compositions, and now it seems fairly certain that Harry Burleigh, the so-called Negro spiritual left their indelible stamp on the *New World Symphony*.

On the topic of the American Indian, the other "primitive" music of America in the 1890s, Dvorak was less voluble, perhaps made reticent following the storm generated by his praise of African-American music. After the premiere of the *New World Symphony* and the Spillville chamber works, he mentioned "Negro" and "Indian" music that he had been "deeply interested in," and mentioned that the two chamber works "breathed the same Indian spirit." (*NY Herald* December 15, 1893) Now, Dvorak was no ethnomusicologist, and even the field at that time was far from objective; a sense of the primitive red man pervaded the study of these "simple" monophonic melodies, although scholars like Frances Densmore (subject of the recent film *Songcatcher*) were making strides to record and document the music of disappearing Indian nations. While Dvorak made few comments as such about American music, and there seems to be little sonic evidence of it in his works, there is substantial evidence that he was influenced by the idea of this original American music.

After his arrival in New York, Dvorak was asked to write an opera based on Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*. Jeannette Thurber, his employer and the founder of the National Conservatory, had some years earlier attempted to start an American opera company. In the spring of 1983 Mrs. Thurber took Dvorak to Buffalo Bill Cody's *Wild West Show* to help in inspiring him. Most of the performers in the show were Ogalala Sioux from the Pine Ridge reservation in Dakota Territory - two years earlier the site of the massacre at Wounded Knee - and viewers of the spectacle saw re-enactments of the everyday life on the Plains and also of Custer's last stand at the Little Big Horn, and at the end of the performance the performers circled the arena under a banner reading "Former Foe-Present Friend." Dvorak never finished this opera but used Longfellow's lengthy poem as a guide to his *New World Symphony*, which has been the topic of Beckerman's research in the last several years. While the *Symphony* does not reveal any specific American Indian musical influences, the atmosphere created is much like that of Longfellow's poem: an idyllic view of the *other* in a pastoral setting without too much attention to specific ethnographic details.

As mentioned earlier, the late 19th century was a time of burgeoning ethno-musicological activity concerning the American Indian, and so it is possible that Dvorak may have been exposed to publications and articles on this "newly" discovered form of American music. Dvorak's friend and critic at the *New York Daily Tribune*, Henry Krehbiel, is supposed to have given the composer three transcriptions of Iroquois songs, and we can only speculate on what else Dvorak may have come across during his American sojourn. Before Dvorak's travels to

America, a well-known article in the Czech periodical *Dalibor*, entitled "Songs of the American Indian," had appeared in 1879, written by V. J. Novotny. This article must certainly have been familiar to Dvorak, given the composer's close relationship with Novotny.

The other documented Indian influence on Dvorak was the visit of a traveling Indian medicine show to Spillville in July, 1893. Dvorak's first American secretary and Spillville native, Josef Kovarik, erroneously reported that the group was "Kickapoo and belonged to the Iroquois tribe," and that the composer was intrigued by their music during their two week residence in Spillville. During this time, Dvorak was at work on his *String Quintet*, which he would complete on August 1. Kovarik notated a "Kickapoo" melody that is similar to one found in the first movement of the *Quintet*, and Otakar Sourek considered the drum rhythm of the first and last movements to have been influenced by the Indian show. John Clapham went so far as to argue that the Indians involved were specifically the Menimonee of Wisconsin. Kovarik has been shown to be a less-than-reliable source (many of his published reminiscences were well after the fact), and we cannot know for certain that any of the music played for the Dvorak was actually Menimonee in origin. (The traveling medicine show was, like Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show*, made up of a hodgepodge of different nations and tribes, assembled as actors in exotic spectacles to astound, and at the same time to fleece, white audiences.)

Dvorak's Spillville summer was the first time that the composer beheld the American wilderness (indeed, his entire *New World Symphony* had been written while he was still living in New York City!). Dvorak also composed, in addition to the *String Quintet*, his *String Quartet in F*. This work's American influence has been evident in the composer's obsession with the song of the scarlet tanager that appears in the scherzo of the *Quartet*.

This, then, is a synopsis of what are commonly known and cited as Dvorak's forays into the rich resource of American Indian music. I would like to offer another argument, one first written about by Frederick Crane, a professor emeritus at the University of Iowa. It concerns the Lento of the *Quartet* and, in my mind, is the best-argued case for a purely "Indian" musical influence in Dvorak's work. Crane states that the slow movement of the Lento "particularly reflects the melodic style of the Plains Indian." Sourek considered the influence to be African-American, Jarmil Burghauser found it to represent the "melancholy grandeur of the plains," while Walter Cobbett, in his survey of chamber works, believed that this movement "reveals to us the composer dreaming in solitude in some silent forest in America, and letting his thoughts fly back to his own far-away land." That Crane singles out the Plains Indians style is fortuitous, since the leader of the medicinal company, Big Moon, and his squaw and others in the show were known to be Sioux or Lakota, both Plains peoples. This style of the Lento is characterized by descending and often terraced melodic lines, by use of the pentatonic with its major seconds and minor thirds, and by slightly off the beat drumming. Vocal timbre tends to be high and nasal and drums generally serve as a continual background. The instruments used are generally restricted to rattles and drums and, at times, the flute.

The texture of the opening bars imitates a solo voice with a highly repetitive accompaniment. The second violin, viola, and cello play a rhythmic accompaniment to a melody

that is presented twice by the first violin, then twice by the cello. The melody occurs a total of twelve times in the movement.

The melody itself has several Plains features as well. It is pentatonically inflected (based on a DFGAC scale) and moves primarily by seconds and thirds. The opening contour is descending, but then turns back upon itself after four bars. Dvorak's tune also begins a twelfth above the final, as do many Plains style songs. The opening octave leap used by Dvorak in the theme is found in many Sioux melodies. And by fortuitous circumstance, one melody collected by Frances Densmore uses the same opening melodic material as Dvorak's Lento.

The combination of elements: drone-like, syncopated accompaniment, compass of a 12th, solo voice with percussive background, and opening octave leap are typical of Plains style.

How, then, do we approach all this? Was Dvorak an amateur ethnomusicologist who absorbed the "Indian" style to such a degree that he could write a Sioux melody that contained all its salient features? Perhaps, or was he just a good listener. Dvorak was an expert at program music -- a fact not evidenced until after Brahms' death in 1897, which allowed the composer to forgo his mentor's classicism for more Romantic genres. Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, written while Brahms was still alive, contains a hidden program; was Dvorak loath to divulge his Romantic leanings to his classicist mentor? It seems so. In fact, in the year following Brahms' death, Dvorak wrote a Wagnerian opera and several tone poems based on grisly Erben ballads. As a composer, Dvorak understood how to assimilate a style to convince listeners that they were witnessing the transformation of a young mermaid into a woman or the Sioux spirit of the Iowa wilderness. As a so-called "peripheral" composer, Dvorak had to know how to sell his music to audiences; as a non-German, there were different requirements for his success than mere architectonic mastery.

While the Lento is strikingly similar to Plains song, we cannot in the least argue that the sources of Dvorak's Indian influences were authentic, and the Kickapoo Indian show itself was anything but that. It no doubt preyed upon genteel American stereotypes of Native culture as a way to appease their love of exoticism, just as the Buffalo Bill show sought to recreate history before American audiences. Imagine these shows to be much like Bizet's portrait of the Spanish Gyspy Carmen for French audiences, or a Las Vegas strip that allows one to visit Paris, the Pyramids, and Renaissance all on the same evening.

As a composer responsible for bringing cosmopolitan fame to Czech music, Dvorak understood that what was important was not so much authenticity as what you could reasonably sell to the public. Consider for example, his hasty jotting down of the words "From the New World" on his symphony and his later pronouncements against it; he argued that he was still a Czech composer, that he could not change his musical style, and that his style really just reflected impressions from the new world; it didn't document them. Dvorak understood, as Mike Beckerman has pointed out, the necessity of making connections between the sonic evidence and some other aspect of reality in order to make nationalism work. This is one aspect of music historiography that musicologists are loath to problematize. Instead we go digging for exact tunes that Dvorak might have heard during that Spillville summer so that we can make his claims

legitimate. But it is not a question of legitimacy here; it is a question of the confluence of several elements that make up the elements of musical nationalism.

These elements are:

Sonic events: Folk melodies (real, stylized or created), Harmonies based on such melodies, dance genres/rhythms, inflections of the pastoral or idyllic, instrumentation or tone colors, structural treatments (development or repetition).

External elements: Descriptive title, composer's reputation or self-stylings, writings, national image.

Socio-Cultural contexts: Need/receptivity to musical nationalism, venues for dissemination (print culture), reception and or canonization of works.

And the two most important nationalist genres, which are tone poems and operas.

Dvorak's *New World Symphony* is a programmatic reflection of the *Song of Hiawatha*; his *Sonatina, op. 100,* for instance, is a reflection of Minnehaha Falls in St. Paul, Minnesota.

I suspect that Dvorak's Spillville chamber works, are programmatic as well, because it seems as though in his later life the composer used such devices as a means for inspiration. (Consider the cello concerto, a paradigmatic absolute genre, which is a lament over the composer's sister-in-law's impending death.) What is programmatic in the *Quartet in F*? It may well have been the composer dreaming of the wild American plains, pining for his Czech countryside, or some other completely unrelated narrative. The simple fact that Dvorak wrote these works while living on American soil should be enough to enable us to consider them portraits of this country, because Dvorak could not help but have been influenced by his new, often exotic surroundings. That he was reticent about his creative impetus and processes is nothing new to musicologists; composers often reveal very little about the inner workings of their craft. We seem as Americans still bent on irrevocable proof that we as a people did indeed possess the necessary raw materials needed to create an American style. If Dvorak had used the motif of white Americans rather than African and Native Americans, would there have been and would there still be such debate over the national import of these works? I think not.

And so the search for the authentic Dvorak and his authentic American music goes on. If Dvorak had been a German composer, we might not look so hard, but "peripheral" composers must be exotic yet realistic, authentic yet fanciful. They must satisfy the demands of aesthetic appreciation while fulfilling the needs of a culturally anxious audience. And as we seek to write a balanced cultural history of America's search and Dvorak's role in it, we must reconcile our notions of nationalism with authenticity; two poles from which Dvorak's American works have been approached.