

## Dvorák's Mission

"Dvorák in America: Finding a New Voice" by Scott Ethier, in *Humanities* (Nov.–Dec. 2003), P.O. Box 371954, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15250-7954.

When Jeanette Thurber invited Czech composer Antonin Dvorák to teach at her National Conservatory in New York in 1892, she hoped for nothing less than a transformation of American classical music. Although writers such as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville had given an American voice to literature, America's composers were still writing music that was virtually indistinguishable from that of their European models. Could Dvorák, who had taken inspiration from various Slavic folk traditions to become "one of Europe's most respected composers," teach American composers how to create music from their own traditions?

The early signs seemed promising, writes Ethier, himself a composer and a freelance writer. The New York press lauded Dvorák on his arrival, with one journalist finding in his rags-to-fame life (the composer was the son of a Bohemian butcher) a "story of manifest destiny" that should "keep alive popular belief in the reality of that precious attribute called genius." Dvorák himself found much to admire in America's music, particularly that of African Americans and American Indians.

According to Ethier, Dvorák wove these influences into his best-known symphony, *From the New World* (1893)—the most significant of

the many new works he composed in New York. "The first movement features a closing theme similar to 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' and the second movement contains the signature English horn melody reminiscent of the spiritual 'Deep River,'" Ethier says, while Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "Song of Hiawatha," provides the inspiration for the Indian-tinged melodies of other sections.

The *New World* symphony went on to become a standard of the modern orchestral repertoire, but it failed to transform American classical music. New York critics generally praised the work when it was premiered at Carnegie Hall in December 1893, but Boston critics savaged a later performance. "Such Negro melodies as I have heard I should be sorry to see become the basis of an American school of composition," sniffed composer George Chadwick.

Dvorák returned to Europe in 1894 and continued to write pieces drawn from his American experience. A new music did emerge in America within a few years, but it wasn't inspired by Dvorák. The new sound was ragtime, the creation of Scott Joplin and a host of other contemporary composers. By the 1920s, when Dvorák's students were reaching maturity, America had finally discovered its definitive sound: jazz.

### EXCERPT

## *The New Art Appreciation*

*The enormous popularity of photographs of Ground Zero suggests that many people were able to appreciate the striking visual qualities of the awful devastation, at least when it was framed and edited by the lens of a camera, the viewfinder being the modern-day equivalent of the picturesque. Indeed, the most arresting pictures—one need only think of the hauntingly beautiful images of New York City firemen encased, like sculpture, in white dust—made those of us who admired them heartlessly forget what we were looking at. Apparently, the habit of taking pleasure in visual composition alone is now so deeply ingrained that not only aesthetes but even ordinary people are capable of seeing beauty unproblematically in places where it has no right, morally speaking, to exist.*

—Rochelle Gurstein, author of *The Repeal of Reticence* (1996), in *The New Republic* (Feb. 23, 2004)