Joseph Horowitz

Dvořák and the Teaching of American History

Classical music might at first seem an unlikely vehicle for teaching American history in middle and high schools. For one thing, America's musical high culture has long been predominantly Eurocentric: Mozart and Beethoven have mattered more than Charles Ives or Aaron Copland. For another, classical music is increasingly marginal in the culture at large. Less and less do we hear it on the radio, or read about it in newspapers and magazines.

A century ago—before the advent of popular music as we know it today—things were different. Classical music was not segregated from the American experience. And American composers were engaged in an earnest and excited search for an "American" style and subject matter. With continued waves of immigrants arriving, the young country was still feeling its way. At the center of this search were the perennial questions: "What is America?" and "Who is an American?"

A single musician—a foreigner—embodied this New World quest at the turn of the twentieth century: Antonín Dvořák, who lived in New York City from 1892 to 1895 and there composed what is still the most famous symphonic work ever conceived on American soil, the "New World" Symphony. The story of Dvořák in America intersects powerfully with the slave trade and the Indian Wars, with Hiawatha and Buffalo Bill, with the Panic of 1893 and yellow journalism.

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904). (Image courtesy of the New York Philharmonic Archives.)

Having experienced the potency of the Dvořák story at first hand in middle and high school classrooms in Brooklyn, Boston, and New Jersey, I was able in 2001 to undertake a National Education Project, supported by the National Endowment of the Humanities, that would generate a "Dvořák in America" young readers book and companion interactive DVD. A field test of these materials at interracial New Jersey middle and high schools recently has been completed. Its success was such that all three schools have elected to make "Dvořák in America" a permanent component of the American History curriculum. "Why is it," an eleventh grader asked me, "that we have all learned about Mozart and Beethoven but were never told about Dvořák?" His inquiry exposed, in a sentence, the obsolescence of Eurocentric "music appreciation"—and the opportunity, via Dvořák, to explore music and America in tandem.

The Dvořák Story

The arrival of Dvořák in September 1892 as Director of New York City's National Conservatory of Music represented a triumph of persistence on the part of Jeannette Thurber, the conservatory's visionary founder. Not only did so celebrated a European composer confer an indispensable imprimatur on the fledgling school; Dvořák, as Thurber knew, was an instinctive democrat, a butcher's son, and a cultural nationalist. Dvořák had hardly set foot in Manhattan before learning, and not only from Thurber, that (as he wrote to friends in Prague) "the Americans expect great things of me and the main thing is, so they say, to show them to the promised land and kingdom of a new and independent art, in short, to create a national music. If the small Czech nation can have such musicians, they say, why could not they, too, when their country and people is so immense." And Dvořák—overwhelmed by new excitement and attention, by the scale and pace of American life, by the caliber of American orchestras—more than took the bait. No sooner did he arrive than he began searching for an American "folk music" he could utilize—and so point the way for Americans. "It is certainly both a great and a splendid task for me," he wrote, "and I hope that with God's help I shall accomplish it. There is more than enough material here and plenty of talent."

By talent, Dvořák meant American composers and instrumentalists, including his own pupils, some of whom he found "very promis-

ing." By material, he meant American sights and sounds, American roots: "another spirit, other thoughts, another coloring . . . something Indian." There was no population in Bohemia equivalent to Native Americans, and like other Europeans, Dvořák was fascinated by them (and had already read Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* in Czech). Nor were there blacks in Hapsburg lands; in New York, he had for the first time heard such "Negro melodies" as "Deep River" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," in which he detected an American music to come.

With his rustic roots and egalitarian temperament, Dvořák was precisely the kind of cultural nationalist to inspire Americans. He proved inquisitive and empathetic, as eager to learn as to teach. His aspirations for American music resonated with the hopes of Thurber and other New Yorkers impatient for the emergence of a musical idiom as recognizably "American" as Dvořák was Bohemian.

The climactic moment in Dvořák's American career came on December 16, 1893, at the premiere of his "New World" Symphony in Carnegie Music Hall, with Anton Seidl leading the New York Philharmonic. After the second movement, the house erupted in applause. (Imagine such a thing today.) The resonance of this emotional occasion for American music was incalculable—and so was its resonance for Dvořák himself. The fate of the "New World" Symphony in Boston, weeks later, sharply focused an ongoing debate about applying music to issues of American identity. Dvořák's notion that people with "black" and "red" skin were emblematic Americans seemed distressing and implausible to blue-blooded New Englanders who traced their roots to the Pilgrims. Boston's music critics proceeded bitterly to joust with such important New York writers as Henry Krehbiel of the *Tribune*. Significantly, Krehbiel was the son of immigrants. His egalitarian views on culture and race clashed pointedly with Social Darwinist thinking at Harvard, which typically placed "caucasians" above Africans and Asians.

H.T. Burleigh, Dvořák's African American assistant, strongly influenced the composer by introducing him to African American spirituals. (Image courtesy of Jean Snyder and the Burleigh Family.)

While in America Dvořák actually acquired an American style, saturated with plantation song, Indian dance, and what Willa Cather (in her novel *The Song of the Lark*) termed "the yearning of all flat lands." Dvořák himself wrote of the Iowa prairie: "It is very wild here. There are only endless acres of field and meadow. That's all you see. You don't meet a soul. And so it is sometimes very sad—sad to despair."

The spaciousness and elegiac sadness of unpopulated American lands may easily be imagined by students listening for the first time to the slow movements of the "New World" Symphony, the "American" Quartet, or (a lesser-known work) the "American" Suite. The long melodies, simple textures, and "open" chords all evoke, in fact, the heroic or elegiac canvases of America's great landscape painters of the nineteenth century: Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Sanford Robinson Gifford.

Dvořák first heard "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and other plantation songs (the music we today call "spirituals") as sung by his African American assistant Harry Burleigh. Dvořák was greatly moved by these tunes. His own origins were humble. As a Bohemian, he belonged to an ethnic minority within the Hapsburg Empire and was forced to learn German. He identified with the oppressed. He told an American reporter:

> It is to the poor that I turn for musical greatness. The poor work hard; they study seriously . . . . If in my own career I have achieved a measure of success and reward it is to some extent due to the fact I was the son of poor peasants and was reared in an atmosphere of struggle and endeavor.

Though he did not quote plantation songs, Dvořák created memorable melodies in the same style—one of which, from the second movement of the "New World" Symphony, was turned into the spiritual "Goin' Home" by one of his students. And it was Dvorák, as well, who inspired Burleigh to transcribe the songs he had learned from his blind grandfather and sing them in concert with piano accompaniment. In later decades, when Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson stirred multitudes with "Swing Low" and "Deep River," they were following in the footsteps of Dvořák and Burleigh.

Dvořák first encountered Native Americans at Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in New York's Madison Square Garden. Later, in Iowa, he spent two weeks with the members of the Kickapoo Medicine Show, studying their music and dance. The Scherzo of the *New World* Symphony, with its tom-tom beat, is Dvořák's version of an "Indian dance." Specifically, its inspiration is the Dance of Pau-Puk-Keewis at Hiawatha's wedding, as rendered by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (and memorably depicted by the artist Frederic Remington):

> First he danced a solemn measure
> Treading softly like a panther.
> Then more swiftly and still swifter,
> Whirling, spinning round in circles,
> Leaping o'er the guests assembled,
> Eddying round and round the wigwam,
> Till the leaves went whirling with
> him . . . .

The controversy over Dvořák's version of "America" is vividly documented in newspaper reviews and articles of the period. Boston, with its New England traditions, debated New York, then as now a city of immigrants. Philip Hale, Boston's leading music critic, denounced Dvořák as a "Negrophile" and ridiculed the notion that "the future of American music rests on the use of Congo, North American Indian, Creole, greaser and cowboy ditties, whinings, yawps, and whoopings." In comparison, W. J. Henderson of the *New York Times*, reviewing the first performance of the "New World" Symphony, at Carnegie Hall in 1893, unforgettably proclaimed the centrality of African American music:

> In spite of all assertions to the contrary, the plantation songs of the American Negro possess a striking individuality. No matter whence their germs came, they have in their growth been subjected to local influences which have made of them a new species. That species is the direct result of causes climatic and political, but never anything else than American. Our South is ours. Its twin does not exist. Our system of slavery, with all its domestic and racial conditions, was ours, and its twin never existed . . . . Out of the heart of this slavery arose the sponta-

neous 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.

The most famous words Dvořák ever uttered were quoted as follows in the *New York Herald* on May 21, 1893:

"I am now satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the [N]egro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States. When I first came here last year I was impressed with this idea and it has developed into a settled conviction. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American . . . .

"In the [N]egro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay or what you will. It is music that suits itself to any mood or any purpose. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from his source."

Dvořák derived inspiration from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, based on North American Indian legends. Pictured above is Frederic Remington's rendering of the Dance of Pau-Puk-Keewis from the poem.

But an American music historian, Michael Beckerman, has recently demonstrated that these words were in fact written for Dvořák by the yellow journalist James Creelman, a major player in the newspaper wars of the day. Known as "the journalism that acts," yellow journalism not only reported but created the news. Creelman's feats included charging an enemy fort in the Spanish-American War and getting shot in the back. Before being taken to a hospital, he was visited in the field by William Randolph Hearst, who (as reported by Creelman) said, "I'm sorry you're hurt. But wasn't it a splendid fight?" Creelman's specialties included getting famous people to say famous things. As publicist for Jeannette Thurber's National Conservatory, he got Dvořák to endorse African American melodies as America's essential music. He also insured that Dvořák's words would be read abroad by important European composers, who (of course) found them outrageous and incomprehensible—reactions themselves duly reported in the American press. Even by today's standards, Creelman was a master "spin doctor."

What ended Dvořák's American sojourn was Wall Street's Panic of 1893, which overturned personal fortunes and left millions without work. Tramps roamed the country, begging or stealing. Because it bankrupted Jeannette Thurber's husband, who had bankrolled the National Conservatory, the Panic of 1893 is also part of the Dvořák story.

The Materials

Dvořák in America: In Search of the New World, by Joseph Horowitz, (Chicago: Cricket Books, 2003) is an illustrated 158 page book for middle and high school students. The principal topics include New York City in the 1890s, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, yellow journalism, plantation songs, and *The Song of Hiawatha*.

To animate personalities and situations, *Dvořák in America* is styled as historical fiction with dialogue. The incidents and conversations are closely based on primary sources. These newspaper and magazine articles are identified in an Afterword. They are also readily accessible among hundreds of pages of documents included in the companion DVD by Robert Winter and Peter Bogdanoff: *From the New World: A Celebrated Composer in America.*

Additional contents of the DVD include an audio-visual "close reading" of the "New World" Symphony: students can listen to the music while following the music or, alternatively, a running account of extra-musical resonances and references. Other audio tracks include tape-recorded reminiscences of Americans who knew Dvořák in Iowa, and Dvořák's assistant Harry Burleigh singing "Go Down, Moses." The sections on "Mapping New York" and "New York Then and Now" compare how the city looked in the 1890s and today. Tracking Dvořák's American travels, the DVD visits the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago and considers "How the Fair Judged Others" on the famous Midway, with its villages of Africans, Asians, and North American Indians. More generally, the DVD explores the immigrant experience ("Why They Came") and the way the past is reconstructed by scholars ("Who Writes History?"). ❑

Widely regarded as the leading present-day authority on the institutional history of classical music in the United States, Joseph Horowitz is the author of six books and serves as artistic consultant to more than half a dozen American orchestras. He is also the former Executive Director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, in which capacity he retooled the orchestra's educational outreach programs to center on the story of Dvořák in America.

We took a trip back in time and learned more than any book or movie could offer. Learning about a founder of American music shed light on the music that we listen to today. After all, Dvořák said that the basis of American music would be African American tunes—and in this sense ragtime, jazz, blues, and hip-hop all originated in some way from his work. This experience has been an unforgettable one that we will remember for years to come. Music is an international language and something everybody can connect with. Life would not be the same without music and American music would not have been the same without Antonin Dvořák.

—Claire Hyman and Harrison ("Alex") King, 11th graders at Columbia High School, Maplewood, New Jersey

Teaching Dvořák as American History

Jay Gavitt

Over ten years ago, educators emphasized a new way for American History students to examine Columbus and the New World, a method that stressed encounters and exchange among Europeans, indigenous Native Americans, and Africans. With this fresh approach to Columbus's "discovery" came the additional objective of continuing to examine the role of these three groups throughout the nation's history. Antonin Dvořák's visit to America invites students to examine the exchange of music that occurred among the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Europeans brought certain styles of music to the United States. African slaves developed a unique music on the plantations of the Americas. And Native Americans also created a type of music not known to Europeans. The social and cultural differences between Dvořák and peoples he encountered in the United States affected the ways in which American music developed. The results included Dvořák's own "New World" Symphony and "American" String Quartet.

Eleventh graders in a U.S. history class at Columbia High School in Maplewood, New Jersey, researched these themes through an integrated unit of study in a course that covers the end of the nineteenth century through the present day. Students found that their encounter with Dvořák was a great way to review the influences of Europeans, Native Americans, and African Americans on the emergence of an American culture. In addition, all the students created a Dvořák project using the 2004 National History Day theme: "Exploration, Encounter, Exchange in History."

Students began by reading Joseph Horowitz's *Dvořák in America* (2003). This historical fiction served to introduce the topic. The companion DVD furnished a collection of primary resources including letters, newspaper articles, pictures, and music. The "close reading" of the "New World" Symphony proved excellently suited for those not skilled in reading music. Michael Beckerman's book, *New Worlds of Dvořák* (2003), was another superb resource, particularly with regard to the author's detective work in uncovering the clandestine role of the yellow journalist James Creelman in promoting Dvořák's ideas. My class was also able to attend concerts at the New Jersey Symphony's January 2004 Dvořák Festival. While this opportunity will not return, not a season goes by without a local orchestra performing something by Dvořák.

No less than Alexis de Tocqueville did in his classic analysis of *Democracy in America* (1835), Horowitz's *Dvořák in America* illustrates how an eminent foreign visitor—an inquisitive outsider with a fresh perspective—could clarify the American experience for Americans themselves.

Suggested Reading

Beckerman, Michael. *New Worlds of Dvořák: Searching in America for the Composer's Inner Life*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003.

Horowitz, Joseph. *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005.

———. *Dvořák in America: In Search of the New World*. Chicago: Cricket Books, 2003.

Jay Gavitt served as Social Studies Subject Chair at Columbia High School, in Maplewood, New Jersey, through 2004. He is currently the principal of Shepard High School in Morristown, New Jersey. The Dvořák Web site he created for his students, with a link to student materials, may be found at <http://www.somsd.k12.nj.us/~chssocst/ssgavittus2dvorak.htm>. To contact Jay Gavitt: <chssocst@yahoo.com>; to contact Jospeh Horowitz: <horowitz4@juno.com>; and to contact Robert Winter: <rwinter@earthlink.net>

To purchase Joseph Horowitz's young readers' book at an $8 discount for $9.95, use code F26 at: <http://cricketmag.com/ProductDetail.asp?pid=753> or order by phone at: 1 800 821 0115 using code F26. The DVD, listed at $24.95, may be purchased at <http://www.artsinteractive.org> for $19.95 until August 2005.