

Quincy Symphony Orchestra

November 19, 2011

PROGRAM NOTES

Compiled by Dr. Lavern Wagner

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Opus 95, “From the New World”Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

By 1892, Antonin Dvořák had established an international reputation for himself as a composer of importance. He had come a long way from his beginnings as a country boy in Bohemia. In England he had been lionized by London society, and had received an honorary doctorate from Cambridge. Returning to Prague, he was appointed Professor of Composition, Instrumentation, and Musical Form at the conservatory. Now he received an offer to be director of the National Conservatory in New York for the princely sum of \$15,000 per year, ten times the salary he was receiving at the Prague Conservatory.

Soon after assuming his position in New York, Dvořák was visited by Harry T. Burleigh, a black student at the conservatory, but not one of Dvořák’s own pupils. Being keenly interested in the music of black Americans, Dvořák seized the opportunity to invite Burleigh to sing spirituals for him. Dvořák became convinced that black folk music provided Americans with material from which an authentic national musical art could be developed, just as he had created a national art music in Bohemia by basing his works on Bohemian folk music. The *Symphony from the New World*, composed between January and May 1893, was the first result of Dvořák’s newly found interest in the music of black Americans.

Immediately after he had finished the *Symphony from the New World*, Dvořák, with his wife, servants, and family of seven children, traveled to Spillville, IA, a small Czech community in northeastern Iowa, to spend the summer. The house in which the Dvořák family lived on the second floor is today a museum remembering the summer the composer spent there while he wrote his *String Quartet in E-flat*, known as *The American*. Deeply religious, Dvořák played the organ in the village church in Spillville during that summer.

While some critics have said that if Dvořák’s *Symphony from the New World* is American music, it is being heard through the ears of a Bohemian, there is also much of the symphony that rings true to the black musical heritage. It was erroneously believed that some of the themes were quotations from black music of slavery days, especially the beautiful melody of the second movement. However, this melody was actually composed by Dvořák himself.

The first movement begins with a somber melody sung by the cellos, then carried on by the flutes and oboes, with drum beats and chords for the winds responding. The main theme is faintly suggested by violas, cellos, and two horns over violin tremolos, then carried on by the horns and string support. Flutes and oboes provide a transition to the second theme, introduced by the flute and continued by violins. The similarity between this theme and the spiritual, “Sing Low, Sweet Chariot”, has often been noted.

An elegiac song for the English horn over string harmonies in the second movement sounds as if it might be a spiritual, but the melody is Dvořák’s own. Given words, it became famous as a song “Goin’ Home.” A faster agitated section brings a new melody in flutes and oboes over tremolo strings, then a lively tune in the oboe. The return of the spiritual-like melody eventually leads to a quiet close to the movement.

The Scherzo opens with a lively tune for the flute and oboe, a tune which sounds much like an American Indian dance, and a contrasting subject by the same instruments follows. The middle part of the Scherzo has not one, but two trios, each in a different key. The coda here uses the opening Scherzo material and the main theme of the first movement.

The finale is set in motion by a jubilant main theme in the horns and trumpets against full chords in the rest of the orchestra. Then a dance tune appears, sounding like a plantation reel. These two themes form the basis for the development section with backward glances to themes of earlier movements: the second movement melody, the opening Scherzo melody, and the main theme of the first movement. This material is also used in the coda. This characteristic of the symphony has led to it being cited as a prime example of cyclic musical form – the material of the entire symphony being contained in miniature in the last movement.