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The Editor welcomes contributions to *Czech Music* on any aspect of Czech and Slovak music, past, present or future. Articles, reviews, as well as information of general interest, should be sent to:

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WHAT'S AMERICAN ABOUT DVOŘÁK'S "AMERICAN" QUARTET AND QUINTET

by Hartmut Schick

One hundred years after Antonín Dvořák's vacation in Spillville, Iowa, in the summer of 1893, during which he wrote his *String Quartet in F (Op.96)[B.179]* and his *String Quintet in E♭ (Op.97)[B.180]*, there is continuing still the controversy about the "American" character of these works, as was shown in the panel discussions at the Iowa Dvořák Centennial Symposium in Iowa City in August 1993. Much has been written on the impact of America on the music Dvořák wrote in this country,¹ mostly searching for

¹See especially Antonín Sychra: *Estetika Dvořákovy symfonické tvorby*, Praha, 1959 (German translation: *Antonín Dvořák. Zur Ästhetik seines symphonischen Schaffens*, Leipzig, 1973); John Clapham: Dvořák and the Impact of America, in *The Music Review*, 15, 1954, pp.203-211 and Clapham: Dvořák and the

possible relations between its themes and songs of African-Americans or native Americans which Dvořák might have heard there. Often it has been pointed out that the pentatonicism of his American works is nothing completely new in his compositional output, which is as right as is wrong the opinion of a broader (European) public, who regard those works as typical Dvořák, only because they are among the most famous, at the same time taking pentatonicism as characteristic of Bohemian folk song, which also it is not. Even scholars, however, rarely have tried to reveal the uniqueness of these works in penetrating the compositional structure beyond the exotic colour of their melodies.² Here, too, it seems to be fruitful to distinguish more clearly between the previously written *Symphony No.9 in e minor, (Op.95)[B.178], "From the New World"* and the Spillville chamber music.

When asking whether Dvořák's American works are really "American" or still Bohemian in style, there can be no doubt that at least Dvořák himself intended them to be essentially American. As is well known, he maintained frequently that in his "*New World*" *Symphony*, the *Quartet* and the *Quintet* he had attempted to grasp the "spirit" of American music, using the language of late nineteenth century European music.³ Obviously he was very much interested in the chants and songs of the African-Americans as well as the native Americans and in the traditional and newly created folk songs of the white population. Yet, furthermore, we should note that he considered even the songs of the Irish immigrants as an American phenomenon. Even when writing about "the influence of this country" on his *Symphony*, he says: "it means the folk songs that are *Negro, Indian, Irish* etc."⁴ To this we must surely have to add the

American Indian, in *The Musical Times*, 107, 1966, pp.863-867.

²An exception is David Beveridge: *Sophisticated Primitivism: The Significance of Pentatonicism in Dvořák's American Quartet*, in *Current Musicology*, 24, 1977, pp.25-36. See also Schick: *Studien zu Dvořáks Streichquartetten*, (Neue Heidelberger Studien zur Musikwissenschaft, 17), Laaber, 1990, pp.262-282.

³See especially the article: *Dvořák on his New Work*, in *The New York Herald*, 15th. December 1893, reprinted in Clapham, J.: *Dvořák*, Newton Abbot & London, 1979, p.201.

⁴Letter to Francesco Berger, 12th. June 1894, in *Antonín Dvořák: Korespondence a dokumenty*, ed. Milan Kuna et.al.,

Scots. Therefore, for example, the striking syncopations in Dvořák's American music ought to be taken as an American stylistic device, even if one would claim the "Scotch snap" to be their origin and not the negro spiritual or cakewalk, or similar phenomena in the music of native Americans. The same is true with the touching song-like themes which sound so Irish to our ears.

In consequence, one would have to look even on genuine Czech elements as "American" in Dvořák's American music, if they reflect his encounter with Czech immigrants who have become part of the American nation and culture themselves. Curiously enough, Czech elements, like the polka theme in the first movement of the "*New World*" *Symphony*, are totally missing in Dvořák's music just at the moment when Dvořák is amongst his compatriots, among the Czech Americans of Spillville, Iowa. This is in spite of the fact that otherwise Dvořák's "Spillville" chamber music absorbed so many external impressions the composer had received there!

This can be explained by suggesting that, in Spillville, Dvořák has defined much more sharply his self-imposed programme of writing *American* music, taking this task more seriously than he had done in his *Symphony* composed in New York just before. Basically, the *Symphony No.9 in e minor* is, in terms of style, a normal symphony of European late romanticism with only some exotic themes, even if we recognize its relation to Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, which has been pointed out by Michael Beckerman.⁵ It is a *Symphony* which still can be seen in the line of Beethoven. The slow introduction generates in a traditional manner the later main subject; the first movement exhibits Brahmsian "developing variation" in an exemplary manner; the pastoral character of the slow movement is a well-established feature of symphonies since Beethoven and Berlioz; the Scherzo unmistakably relates to the Scherzo of Beethoven's *Symphony No.9*; the recurrence of themes in later movements and especially the Finale also is by no means a new device in the nineteenth century symphony.

vol.III, Praha, 1989, p.268.

⁵Beckerman, M.: Dvořák's "New World" Largo and The Song of Hiawatha, in *19th.-Century Music*, vol.XVI/1, Summer 1992, pp.35-48.

It is not the same with the Spillville chamber music works. They seem - the *Quartet* more than the *Quintet* - to stand in direct opposition to the tradition of their genre, behaving decidedly anti-European which means, in this case, above all anti-German. Of course, such an opposition can best be demonstrated in that genre which has the most rigid and most conservative aesthetics, namely the string quartet - the most "civilized" of all the musical genres. Indeed, it is curious to observe that the younger generation of composers of string quartets are still much more adherent to these aesthetics than Dvořák was in his "American" Quartet. Just compare it with Debussy's *String Quartet in g minor (Op.10)* composed in the same year of 1893 or Zemlinsky's *String Quartet No.1 in A (Op.4)* of 1897.

Which are these unconventional or "uncivilized" features? Firstly: Dvořák's Opus 96 pretends to be nothing more than cultivated *Hausmusik*, music for domestic use. Technically it is so easy that Dvořák, being a viola player, could play the first violin part in Spillville. As a whole, it can be played without too many problems by any reasonably good amateur ensemble. With that quality, it opposes clearly the tendency of the growing professionalism in the demands of quartet writing which, since Beethoven, had lead to string quartets being composed for professional ensembles and performance in concert halls. Thus, already with regard to instrumental technique, the *String Quartet in F* belongs, so to say, rather to a place near the margins of civilization, just as Spillville was, than to Prague, Berlin or London. In terms of its contents, actually it belongs more to the open air than to a city concert hall, for it is definitely a piece of nature music, not by accident written in the classical pastoral key of F major. Thus, the first movement starts with a static but oscillating sound pattern, like Wagner's *Waldweben*. Into this sounding "landscape" obviously enters a singing, even rejoicing, man, as expressed in the melody of the viola, not by accident Dvořák's own instrument. I am sure that here we have a kind of self-portrayal of Dvořák arriving in Spillville and being overwhelmed by the nature he had for so long been missing in New York. To this also correspond the various bird-call motifs in the Scherzo.⁶

⁶These pastoral traits are discussed more extensively in Schick, H. op.cit. pp.268-273.

Now, there are pastoral works in the symphonic music of the nineteenth century but not in the string quartet and this is not by accident. Portraying nature "is just not done" in the most distinguished genre of chamber music. It is a far too uncivilized thing to do. According to European - and especially German - norms, it is a lapse in matters of style also that, in the last movement of the Quartet, Dvořák obviously inserts reminiscences of his organ playing in the church at Spillville. Elements of programme music have no business being in the European string quartet. Thus the only eminent precedent for this, Smetana's *String Quartet No.1 in e minor (From My Life)*, always was regarded as a very personal exception, criticized often enough even so.

Strictly speaking, these passages with stylized organ music also cause a formal break, for they are inserted almost in a patchwork manner. Things are similar with the new theme, which Dvořák introduces in the recapitulation of the first movement -the 'cello melody in D \flat at bar 123. Appearing without any obvious motivation, the theme vanishes without being unfolded. Just as scantily motivated would seem to be the small, pointedly simple and pentatonic *fugato* from the development section of this movement, which does not seem ever to have heard of the principle of the answering entry at the interval of a fifth. Again, in the first movement of the *String Quintet in E \flat (Op.97)* a new theme appears in the development, at bar 145, from which Dvořák also takes no consequence.

Evidently, in his American chamber music, Dvořák's musical thinking was less orientated towards the traditional rules of musical logic, such as is perfectly embodied in Beethoven and Brahms. While, since Brahms, European chamber music began to extend the development section to the whole movement, it is just this element which Dvořák reduces considerably in Spillville. In both works it is only the first movements that are shaped in sonata form, including a development section which, in both cases, is very short and looks rather unexciting. Additionally, the final rondo from the *Quintet* seems to replace quite clearly the moment of thematic working and evolution by stringing together fixed sections. The 113 bars of the first four sections are simply repeated without any change except transposition and lack any development sections at all. The first movement of the *Quintet*, in fact, follows the basic dynamic shape

of sonata form. By repeating the slow introduction at the end of the movement, the musical process becomes cyclic and seems to have no target and no real forward progress. In contrast, just imagine the slow introduction of the "*New World*" *Symphony* repeated at the end of the first movement!

The latent static nature of nearly all forms in both compositions has its equivalent in the tendency also to non-developing rhythms. In none of Dvořák's works are rhythmic ostinati more important than in the *String Quintet (Op.97)*. In the *Lento* of the *String Quartet in F*, the part for the viola is so monotonous, with an almost unchanging accompanying figure, that the usual quartet dialogue between all four instruments on equal terms is out of the question. The discursive principle of chamber music from Haydn to Brahms, which is based upon a musical logic and planned evolution, in both of Dvořák's works here declines in favour of principles belonging to the music of both African-Americans and native Americans, such as repetition and addition of melodic and rhythmic units, as well as additive structures which are either static or moving in a circle.

Of course, the abstinence from intensively thematic work and dramatic development lends this music its charming relaxed ease. Whether, however, this apparent attitude of "taking things a bit more easy", which today is known as something typically American, was in correspondence to the American mentality at the end of the nineteenth century or just Dvořák in holiday mood, remains a mystery. However, I am sure that, even then, this attitude was regarded as particularly non-Germanic and in this respect also distanced itself from Europe.

What about the specific melodic material of the two compositions? It is certainly no accident that, even up to today, the joint diligence of many experts has not been able to furnish proof of any of Dvořák's motifs originating directly from Indian or Negro music. Even the argument linking the spiritual *Swing Low* to the "*New World*" *Symphony*, in my opinion, is not a compelling one. I am convinced that Dvořák took the music of the various ethnic groups in America as no more than a fund of patterns from which he abstracted melodic and rhythmic principles, thereby preferring to use in these works such principles as were alien to European art music. Sometimes even the first idea of a theme is rather neutral, not to be

licked into pentatonic shape until later on, as Klaus Döge showed from the sketches of the *"New World" Symphony*.⁷ The third subject from the *String Quartet (Op.96)*, [see Ex.1] also does not look very "American" yet in the sketches [a]. The much stronger exoticism of the final version [b] is obviously something artificial, a product of Dvořák himself. Generally, Dvořák endeavoured to grasp the spirit of the melodies he met and marry them to his own ideas, not to adopt original foreign tunes directly as Edward MacDowell did, for example, who wrote a *Indian Suite* at this same period with Indian tunes drawn from Theodore Baker's dissertation *Über die Musik der nordamerikanischen Wilden*, (Leipzig, 1882.).



Ex.1

Naturally, not everything about the two Spillville chamber works is "American" and neither, by the same token, are they both "non-European". For example, the variations movement from the *String Quintet* corresponds very much to that from Dvořák's *String Sextet in A (Op.48)[B.80]* of 1878 and could be situated in any pre-American chamber work, even though Dvořák originally wrote the theme for a song put to English words. The *Quintet* differs from the *Quartet* in that it undoubtedly requires professional players and so, in this respect of course, belongs to "concert hall music". However, at the same time, the most anti-European movement is found in this *Quintet*, namely the *Scherzo*, with its ostinato rhythm throughout, mostly in the viola part. Even if there may be a slight resemblance to the *Scherzo* of Beethoven's *String Quartet No.7 in F (Op.59 No.1)*, in the very first bars,⁸ it is extremely unusual in European music not to start with either a melody or at least an harmonic-chordal structure. Here, instead, we find a naked, in a way flat, rhythm clearly evoking a drum, which is an invariable

⁷Döge, K.: *Dvořák. Leben - Werke - Dokumente*, Mainz, 1991, pp.272-3.

⁸I am grateful to David Beveridge for this suggestion.

accompaniment to any Indian music. No American Indian would start singing unless a drum had established its pattern in just such a way. Also the *Quartet's* last movement begins and works scarcely less obviously with a "drum" rhythm, though this is set in two parts and so at least suggests a tonic.

Thereby, Dvořák of course signals that it is actually unsuitable to accompany "Indian" melodies harmonically and in several voices, even if one tries to avoid characteristics of European harmony, such as leading notes, as he does. This contradiction between a given American music, which is essentially for one voice, and an ensemble with several melody instruments, which by itself requires a polyphonic texture, come out quite often. It appears perfectly clearly at the beginning of the *String Quintet (Op.97)* [see Ex.2]. As has never occurred in Dvořák's compositions before, the *Quintet* actually starts with only one voice throughout the first four bars (second viola). When the other four instruments enter, no contrapuntal movement arises but we hear a nature-like sound world with echo figures, floating above a drone bass of a fifth which, by bar nine, still refuses to supply the matching harmonies.

Ex.2

Another and far more extreme unharmonized passage is the entire first subject of the *String Quartet in F (Op.96)*, which is embedded only in a chord of F major. Also another harmonically static and rhythmic ostinato structure of accompaniment, reacting only every few bars on the theme, is found at the beginning of the slow movement of this *Quartet*. A similar situation occurs with the second subject of the *Finale* (see Ex.3).



Ex.3

Finally, the g minor theme of the *Finale* of the *Quintet* also is not harmonized. (see Ex.4) Only one single chord, played *pizzicato*, is underlaid, the melody thus being accompanied mainly by rhythm.⁹



Ex.4

⁹This non-harmonic accompaniment is also the main difference between the quite similar themes in Smetana's *Piano Trio in g minor (1855, rev.1857)* and Schubert's *Piano Trio No.2 in Eb (Op.100)[D.929](1827)*, which has been mentioned by John Clapham in his *Dvořák and the Impact of America, op.cit., p.208.*

A number of other themes Dvořák does provide with a regular harmonic structure, though often the leading note is missing. Even here the accompaniment is conspicuously thrifty and pointedly simple, as if Dvořák wanted to say: "actually it is about a tune originally for one voice only". Compare the main subject from the *String Quintet (Op.97)* (see Ex.5), the *Minore* theme from the *Scherzo* of the same work (see Ex.6) with its very discreet *pizzicato* accompaniment, or the plain and simple texture at the beginning of the *Finale*, as well as, from the *String Quartet (Op.96)*, the third subject of the first movement (bar 44 *et seq.*) or the second subject from the recapitulation of the final movement (see Ex.7).



Ex.5



Ex.6

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and instrumental ensemble. It is marked with a circled '12' and the tempo 'Meno mosso'. The score consists of four staves: a vocal line (soprano), a piano line, a violin line, and a viola line. The vocal line is marked 'ppp' and 'Passaggio'. The piano line is marked 'pp'. The violin and viola lines are marked 'pp'. The score includes bar numbers 289, 290, and 291. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor).

Ex. 7

Here, the vocal, soloistic air of these themes, which seem to leave the instrumental texture, is emphasized especially by the lack of the accompanying thirds which Dvořák otherwise loved so much. Parallel thirds would simply be much too "European".

Incidentally, I suspect that, at the beginning of the *String Quintet (Op.97)* (see Ex.2), a main characteristic feature of the music of both African-Americans and native Americans is hinted at in the feature of responsorial singing, the alternation between a precentor and a responding choir. Probably it is no accident that, as in the *Quartet*, it is not the first violin but the second viola which thematically begins the work, an instrument whose tone colour and pitch comes much nearer to the male human voice. The upper parts pick up the ending of the vocal phrase, echo-like, singing a shouting motif that, with its primitive two part writing, reminds one of the choral interjections in the responsorial music of the African-Americans. It is not too much a stretch of the imagination to hear, from bar 7, the first viola as an accompanying drum. Of course, to such a structure it follows that the repetition at the same pitch but different instrumentation at bar 15 naturally belongs.

In conclusion, it seems altogether rather peripheral whether any melodies or "drum" rhythms in these works are authentic or not. Far more important is that, in America, Dvořák had written chamber music that finally breaks out of the European tradition, even further than do the String Quartets of Arnold Schönberg. It is a music which often enough restricts itself to only four or five different notes, instead of dealing with the whole chromatic scale, a music rediscovering rhythm as an autonomous element which was almost

lost in late Romanticism, a music which newly discovers the one-line melody as a phenomenon in itself and not in a Wagnerian manner as the product of harmony, a music which introduces material from nature and so-called primitive music into the sacred halls of chamber music, a music which wants to be easily playable and entertaining instead of getting more and more a strain for the listener and more and more strenuous for the player.

In other words, this is music perhaps belonging to the eighteenth century or rather to the twenties of our own century, among the works of Hindemith and some French composers. At all events, it is no European music of the fading nineteenth century but - and this much more than Dvořák's *Symphony No.9 in e minor* - **really** music "from the New World".

(This article is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the Iowa Dvořák Centennial Symposium at Iowa City, Cedar Rapids and Spillville, 4th. to 7th. August 1993.)