

## **Antonin Dvořák**

If one keeps in mind the few face-to-face meetings that Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904) and Johannes Brahms actually had in the nearly two decades of their friendship, then it is difficult to understand the degree of affection the two had for each other. They were in every way the opposite in temperament. Brahms was the intellectual, often brusque composer of complex, penetrating music that stimulated the brain; Dvořák, on the other hand, was the more outgoing, more approachable composer of easily comprehended music that moved the heart. Brahms was disinclined to offer music advice or review the work of the younger composers he associated with in Vienna, such as Karl Goldmark, Hans Rott, and Hugo Wolf, but he appeared eager to assist Dvořák in the preparation and publication of his works.

In one early correspondence, the older composer was quite blunt in his assessment of Dvořák's hasty treatment of his music notations:

*...I would give a good deal to be able to discuss individual points with you personally. You write somewhat hurriedly. When you are filling in the numerous missing sharps, flats and naturals, then it would be good to look a little more closely at the notes themselves and at the voice parts etc.*

Brahms was not a father-figure to Dvořák, but he did act as the younger composer's bigger brother. Dvořák would often send his manuscripts to Brahms to proofread and amend, and Brahms would then forward the works to the publisher Simrock. This was true even when Dvořák was in the United States as director of the New York Conservatory of Music of America from 1893 through 1895. Brahms reviewed and polished Dvořák's major works from the New World: String Quartet, String Quintet and the Cello Concerto, for instance. The Cello Concerto so enchanted Brahms that he uttered the comment that if he had known a cello concerto could have been written like Dvořák's, "I would have written it myself."

Following an enthusiastic performance of the *Slavonic Rhapsody No 3* by the Vienna Philharmonic in November 1879, conductor Hans Richter commissioned Dvořák to write a symphony for the following concert season. Bear in mind that Dvořák had already composed five symphonies, yet none had stirred any interest outside his native Prague. He sought out his mentor for advice on composing a symphony that would grab the attention of audience and critics alike in a sophisticated cosmopolitan capital such as a Vienna or a London. Brahms gave advice, advice which the Czech composer followed almost to the letter: Write the symphony in clearly recognizable symphonic form (i.e., follow the Beethoven or German model), avoid overuse of provincial rhythms and melodies, and keep a 'serious' tone about the overall work.

Dvořák made sure this new symphony would meet the standards laid down by Brahms. In fact, he took the extraordinary step and modeled his *Sixth Symphony* on a work of the master himself - more specifically to the latest Brahms *Symphony No 2*. The framework Dvořák devised proved so successful that he used it as the basic guide for his last three symphonies.

In 1884, the London Philharmonic commissioned a new symphony from Dvořák.

Dvořák began work on his Symphony No 7 in D minor immediately on receiving the commission. On the first page of the manuscript, he cryptically wrote that "This main theme occurred to me upon the arrival at the station of the ... train from Pest in 1884." The London premiere in April 1885 was one of the great triumphs of Dvořák's career, and critics since have often regarded his Seventh as his greatest symphony. The symphony would not be performed by the Vienna Philharmonic until 1887, when it was greeted with a cool reception. Writing to Dvořák, the conductor Hans Richter phrased things euphemistically: "Your *Scherzo capriccioso* [a lighter, less serious work] went down well in Vienna; unfortunately, the symphony [No. 7] was not appreciated as much as I had hoped, or anticipated, given the flawless performance from the Philharmonic: our Philharmonic audiences are often, well, peculiar, to say the least!" Indeed, it would take several more years for Dvořák to finally win acceptance from the Viennese public.

Despite the London success of the symphony, the publication of the *Symphony No 7 in D minor* was a hardship for Dvořák. Fritz Simrock, Dvořák's German publisher, seemed to relish frustrating the composer and brought up several conditions that Dvořák had to meet to insure publication. First, Simrock demanded a piano duet arrangement be published at the same time as the symphony. The publisher insisted that the score be published in German only and Dvořák's name 'Antonin' be in the German variation of 'Anton'. Finally, Dvořák was told that the dedication to the London Philharmonic Society would have to be omitted. To add to the troubling negotiations, Dvořák asked Simrock for an advance:

*I have a lot of expense with my garden, and my potato crop isn't very good.*

Too, Dvořák insisted that he be paid commiserate with other composers – he wanted double the three thousand Marks that Simrock offered. Only when Dvořák threatened to sell the rights to another publisher did Simrock bow to the composer's wishes of six thousand Marks.