

## ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK.



THE coming of Antonín Dvořák<sup>1</sup> to be director of the National Conservatory of Music is an episode in the history of musical culture in America which has unusual elements of interest. In the story of his life there is a tinge of romance which makes its perusal peculiarly delightful in this age of high average talent and prosaic plodding. It is a story of manifest destiny, of signal triumph over obstacle and discouraging environment. To rehearse it stimulates hope, reanimates ambition, and helps to keep alive popular belief in the reality of that precious attribute the name of which seems almost to have dropped out of the current musical vocabulary. Never in the history of the art did the critic of contemporary music have so little use for the word genius as he has had since the death of Chopin.

In Dvořák and his works is to be found a twofold encouragement for the group of native musicians whose accomplishments of late have seemed to herald the rise of a school of American composers. The eminent Bohemian has not only won his way to the exalted position which he occupies by an exercise of traits of mind and character that have always been peculiarly the admiration of American manhood, but he has also placed himself at the head (or if not at the head, then at least in the front rank) of the nationalists in music. I do not like the term, but I cannot think of a better. Dvořák's example turns attention again to the wealth of material which lies, never yet thoroughly assayed, scarcely touched indeed, in the vast mines of folk-music. The significance of his compositions lies in their blending together of popular elements and classical forms. These forms were as romantic, as free, in their origin as the people's songs and dances; and in the hands of genius they will always remain pliant and plastic, in spite of the operations of that too zealous conservatism which masquerades as classicism.

There is measureless comfort in the prospect which the example of Dvořák has opened up. It promises freshness and forcefulness of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic contents, and newness and variety in the vehicles of utterance. It drives away the bugaboo of formlessness, which for so long a time has frightened the souls

of fearful conservatives, by pointing the way to a multifarious development of forms. For the present the analysts will be obliged to label the new contents and the new vessels, but that will not matter. The phrase that music is a cosmopolite owing allegiance to no people and no tongue is become trite. It should not be misunderstood. Like tragedy in its highest conception, music is of all times and all peoples; but the more clearly the world comes to recognize how deep and intimate are the springs from which the emotional element in music flows, the more fully will it recognize that originality and power in the composer rest upon the use of dialects and idioms which are national or racial in origin and structure.

The fate which gave the world a composer of music robbed Bohemia of a butcher. Franz Dvořák, the father of Antonín, was the village butcher and innkeeper at Nelahozeves (Mühlhausen), and his ambition touching his son, who was born on September 8, 1841, ran no higher than to bring him up so that he might take his place in what seemed the natural line of succession. In forming this resolve, which was broken down only after a long struggle, the father showed no appreciation of the extent and character of his son's musical gifts; yet in this he was scarcely blameworthy. A love for music, and a certain aptitude in the practice of the art, are the birthright of every Bohemian. "I had frequently been told," wrote Dr. Burney over a century ago, "that the Bohemians were the most musical people of Germany, or perhaps of all Europe; and an eminent German composer, now in London, had declared to me that if they enjoyed the same advantages as the Italians they would excel them." The great historian was skeptical in the premises, being convinced that "nature, though often partial to individuals in her distribution of genius and talents, is never so to a whole people," and being unable to account for climate (the influence of which in the direction indicated he was ready to confess) operating more in favor of music upon the Bohemians than on their neighbors, the Saxons and Moravians. Nevertheless, soon after his arrival in the country he was privileged to discover one cause of the preëminence of the Bohemians in music. At Czaslan he found a school full of "little children of both sexes, from six to ten or eleven years old, who

effect of the accent is to cause the ř to be pronounced like the German letters "rsch." The name is therefore to be pronounced "Dvorschak."

<sup>1</sup> The Bohemian language contains a sibilated *r*, the modification of the usual sound being indicated by the accent over the letter, as in the composer's name. The



were reading, writing, playing on violins, hautboys, bassoons, and other instruments." After that it was easy for him to understand how the nobility of the country could maintain orchestras in their houses. In keeping servants it was impossible to do otherwise, "as all the children of the peasants and tradespeople in every town and village throughout the kingdom of Bohemia are taught music at the common reading-schools, except in Prague, where, indeed, it is no part of school learning, the musicians being brought thither from the country."

It was the village schoolmaster at Nelahozeves who taught Dvořák to play the violin and to sing, probably with no greater expectations than those aroused by scores of the boy's schoolmates, though it was noted afterward that Antonín had betrayed more than common interest when the itinerant musicians enlivened the church holidays by playing at his father's inn. Before the lad was twelve years old he himself could take a hand with the peripatetic fiddlers and blowers. In 1853 he was sent to school at Zlonitz, where an organist taught him a little theory and introduced his hand to the keyboards of the pianoforte and organ. This instruction endured two years, when his father, who meanwhile had transferred his residence to Zlonitz, sent him to a more advanced school at Kamnitz, where his mind was to receive its final polish, and where, in particular, he was to acquire the German language in obedience to the law of the land. Unlike his musical studies, this was not a labor of love. Dvořák had inherited all the fierce hatred which the Czechs feel for the Germans, and even to-day necessity alone can persuade him to speak or write the German tongue. His cantata "The Spectre's Bride" and his oratorio "St. Ludmilla" were composed to Bohemian words, which were then translated into German, and from the German into English.

It was while he was at Kamnitz that he first became ambitious to exhibit his skill as a composer. It may be that a very obvious and laudable aim was behind a surprise which he prepared for his father after he had been studying a year with Organist Hancke. He had not yet won his father's consent to follow music-making rather than sausage-making for a living. Returned to the paternal inn with its *obligato* abattoir at Zlonitz, he surprised his father by producing the orchestral score of a polka, which he proudly placed in the hands of the convenient band for performance. It was indeed a surprise. Instead of the expected harmonies, the young composer's ears were assaulted by fearful discords, due to the circumstance that the trumpets played a fourth higher than the harmony permitted. Trumpets are transposing instruments, but Antonín did not know that

fact, and had written his music for them in the key that he expected to hear. This unhappy experiment, though it may not have caused any embarrassment, at least did not help him to beat down his father's stubborn opposition to his adoption of music as a profession, and it was a long time before he gained permission to go to Prague and enter the organ-school maintained by the Society for Ecclesiastical Music. The permission, when it came, brought with it little guarantee of financial support, and for three years after he entered the school in October, 1857, he kept himself alive by playing the viola in a band of eighteen or twenty men who regaled the frequenters of cafés and other public resorts with popular dances, potpourris, and overtures. In this way he earned twenty-two florins a month (about \$9), adding something to this sum by playing with the bandmaster in sextets at an insane asylum, where his knowledge of the organ also found occupation. As yet he had never had an opportunity to study the scores of the masters or to hear an opera. On one memorable occasion four cents would have bought him the privilege of hearing "Der Freischütz" from the cheapest place in the opera-house; but the sum was more than he had in his pockets, and an effort to borrow resulted in failure. It was not until he became a member of a theatrical orchestra that he made the acquaintance of operatic literature beyond the overtures and potpourris which were the stock-in-trade of the popular bands. Concerts of the better class he managed to hear occasionally by slipping into the orchestra and hiding behind the drums.

In 1862 a Bohemian theater was opened in Prague, and the band to which Dvořák belonged was hired to furnish the music. It was a modest undertaking, but it made a powerful appeal to the patriotic feeling of the Czechs, and in time was developed into the National Theater. The change was a welcome stepping-stone for the budding musician. With some of his associates he was drafted into the larger orchestra of the greater institution. He now made the acquaintance of Karl Bendl, a popular and admirable composer, who placed in his hands the scores of Beethoven's septet and the quartets of Onslow, and thus opened the door of the classics to him. How great a stimulus to his zeal, industry, and ambition these scores were, can only be imagined. He began at once to compose in the higher forms, producing a quintet for strings in 1862, finishing two symphonies before 1865, and trying his 'prentice hand on an opera. But these compositions all went into his desk; he did not venture before the public until 1873, when, having received an appointment as organist at St. Adalbert's Church, he quit playing in the theatrical or-



chestra, took unto himself a wife, and celebrated his good fortune by writing the music for a cantata entitled "The Heirs of the White Mountains." The subject was patriotic, and the markedly national characteristics of the music won for the cantata prompt and hearty recognition in Prague. It was followed in 1874 by a symphony in E flat, two nocturnes for orchestra, and a scherzo for a symphony in D minor. Prague, which has ever been prompt to recognize genius (as witness that episode in Mozart's life which flowered in "Don Giovanni"), now saw in the young man of thirty-three a possible peer of Gyrowetz, Wanhal, Dionys Weber, Wranitzky, Duschek, Ambros, Dreyschock, Kalliwoda, Kittl, Moscheles, Napravnik, Neswadba, Smetana, Skroup, and other favorite sons, and the National Theater commissioned him to compose an opera.

Not long before, Wagner had been in Prague, and Dvořák had become, as he says, "perfectly crazy about him," following him through the streets to catch occasional glimpses of "the great little man's face." More than this, Dvořák had just heard "Die Meistersinger." Under such influences he wrote the music of "The King and the Collier," and produced a score which on rehearsal everybody about the theater agreed in pronouncing to be utterly impracticable. It could not be sung, and was abandoned until 1875, when Dvořák took the book up again and composed it afresh, giving himself up wholly to the current of his own ideas, and making no effort to imitate the manner of Wagner. He had learned that it was given to but one to bend the bow of Ulysses. In its new musical garb the opera was performed, and again popular favor was won by the national tinge in the music and by its elemental strength.

The time had now come for the Czech to show himself to the world. In the control of the Austrian Ministry of Education (*Kultusministerium*) there is a fund for the encouragement of musical composers. This is doled out in stipends, the merit of applicants being passed on by a commission appointed for the purpose. Dvořák sent to Vienna a symphony and his opera, and received a grant of \$160. The next year he applied again, and though his thesis consisted of his now celebrated "Stabat Mater" and a new opera, "Wanda," nothing came of the application. On a third trial, which was supported by the book of vocal duets called "Sounds from Moravia" ("Klänge aus Mähren") and other compositions, the commission, which now consisted of Johannes Brahms, Johann Herbeck, and Dr. Edward Hanslick, recommended a grant of \$240. More valuable than the stipend, however, was the interest which his music had awakened in Brahms and Hanslick. The latter sent offi-

cial notification of the action of the commission, which the former supplemented with a personal letter in which he informed the ambitious composer that he had advised Simrock to print some of his compositions. An invitation came from the Berlin publisher soon after, Dvořák composed a set of Slavonic dances as piano-forte duets, the dances soon after found their way into the concert-rooms of Berlin, London, and New York (Theodore Thomas brought them forward in the latter city in the winter of 1879-80), and the name of Dvořák became known to the musical world. It was reserved, however, for the composition which the Austrian Commission had ignored to lift him to the height of popularity and fame. On March 10, 1883, the London Musical Society performed his "Stabat Mater." The work created a veritable sensation, which was intensified by a repetition under the direction of the composer three days later, and a performance at the Worcester festival in 1884. He now became the prophet of the English choral festivals. For Birmingham, in 1885, he composed "The Spectre's Bride"; for Leeds, in 1886, "St. Ludmilla"; for Birmingham, in 1891, the "Requiem Mass," which last work was produced in New York and Cincinnati within six months of its first performance in England. Meanwhile two or three of his symphonies, his symphonic variations for orchestra, scherzo capriccioso, dramatic overture "Husitská," and his Slavonic dances have become prime favorites with the audiences for whom Mr. Seidl caters in New York, Mr. Nikisch in Boston, and Mr. Thomas in Chicago. Last year the composer who had not four cents in his pocket to buy admission to "Der Freischütz" thirty years ago, and who was glad to accept a stipend of \$160 from the Austrian government less than twenty years ago, signed a contract to perform the functions of Director of the National Conservatory of Music for three years at a salary of \$15,000 a year.

The forcefulness and freshness of Dvořák's music come primarily from his use of dialects and idioms derived from the folk-music of the Czechs. This music is first cousin to that of Russia and Poland, and the significance of the phenomenon that Dvořák presents is increased by the rapid rise of the Muscovite school of composers exemplified in Tschai-kowsky, Rimsky-Korsakow, and Cui. Ever since the beginning of the Romantic movement the influence of folk-music has been felt, but never in the degree that it is felt now. Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert made use of Hungarian melodies, but none of them was able to handle their characteristic elements in such a manner as to make them the vital part of their compositions. Something of the spiritual essence



of the music of the Northland crept into the music of Gade,—the melancholy brooding inspired by the deep fiords and frowning cliffs, the naive, sunny pleasures of the mountain pastures,—but the feelings lacked frankness of proclamation. Chopin laid the dance-forms of Poland under tribute, and Liszt, the prince of transcribers, made the melodies of Hungary native to the pianoforte. But Chopin was most national in the stately measures of the aristocratic polonaise, and Liszt sang the melodies of the Magyar in the vernacular of the ubiquitous gipsy.

Meanwhile the cry was universal for new paths and new sources in the larger forms of music. The answer has come from the Slavonic school, which is youthful enough to have preserved the barbaric virtue of truthfulness and fearlessness in the face of convention. This school seeks to give free expression to the spirit which originally created the folk-songs of the Slavonic peoples. Its characteristics are rhythmic energy and harmonic daring. The development of orchestral technic has placed in its hands the capacity for instrumental coloring, which not only helps to accentuate the native elements of the music, but lends it that barbaric vividness in which Tschaikowsky and Rimsky-Korsakow delight. There are many places in which the folk-songs and dances of Bohemians and Russians touch hands, but the more ancient culture of the Czechs is seen in the higher development of their forms and rhythms, as it is also manifest in the refinement of Dvořák's treatment of the national elements in his compositions. The Bohemian language is unique among modern languages, in that, like Latin and Greek, it possesses both accent and quantity independent of each other. This circumstance may have had something to do with the development of the varied rhythms which a study of Dvořák's music reveals. More than melody, rhythm proclaims the spirit of a people. If you wish to study a splendid illustration of this truth,—a truth significant enough to demand the attention of ethnologists,—listen to a performance of Dvořák's "Husitská" overture. It is one of the few compositions by the Bohemian master in which he has treated a

melody not his own. He is not a nationalist in the Lisztian sense; he borrows not melodies but the characteristic elements of melodies from the folk-songs of his people. In the "Husitská," however, he has made use of an old battle-song of the Hussites, which dates back to the fifteenth century. "Ye warriors of the highest God and his laws, pray to him for help, and trust in him, that in the end ye always triumph with him;" thus run the words. Think of them in connection with those fierce fighters, of whom it is related that they went down upon their knees, whole armies of them, and chanted such prayers before attacking their enemies! But your imagination will not be able to conjure back the spirit of such a battle-hymn unless it is helped by the music. Try the opening phrase, then,—the phrase which lies at the foundation of Dvořák's overture,—upon the pianoforte:



A phrase for Cromwell's Roundheads—each syllable a blow, each blow implacable, merciless! Note the meter:  $\cup - \cup - - \cup - - \cup - -$ . The medieval grammarians call it Ionic minor tetrameter, and good old Bishop Aldhelm describes it as fitted for "brayings and bellowings." You shall look in vain for an example of it in the whole body of English poetry; but in Horace's ode "Ad Nebulen" (Liber III, Carmen xii) you may find it putting on antic airs:

Miserar' est nequ' amori dare ludum, neque dulci  
Mala vino laver'; aut exanimari, metuentes  
Patruæ verbera linguæ.

Did the elegant Latin poet catch the rugged step from some northern barbarian upon whom he chanced in the streets of Rome? Who shall say?

H. E. Krehbiel.







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