

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Dvorak and Bruch, March 21-23, 2025
Dvorak – Symphony #9 (From the New World); Bruch – Scottish Fantasy

By Jonathan Berkowitz

Antonín Dvořák (1841 to 1904)

After Russia, the most significant European nation to produce composers was Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic. Notables were Antonin Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana. Although Bohemia had a distinguished musical tradition, Smetana was the first to use its folk songs as the basis for Czech art music. However, credit must go to Dvořák for popularizing it. His music has been played worldwide since the late 1870s and has never been out of the repertory.

In his own day, Dvořák was the idol of Prague. Hans von Bülow called him, “next to Brahms the most God-gifted composer of the present day.” He wrote prolifically in all forms, with a unique voice and great versatility. Some music lovers underestimate him, regarding him as a very good second-rank composer. Perhaps they were misled by the innocence and transparency of his music, which has a strong peasant strain. He respected the classic forms and wrote in primary emotional colours, without subtlety, or pretensions of an intellectual or revolutionary nature. Of the late romantics, he was the happiest and least neurotic; for him, life was wonderful and uncomplicated. Dvořák’s pupils loved his sweetness, gentleness, and dedication.

It takes more than simplicity and happiness to produce great music. Dvořák had an inexhaustible supply of melodies, the best of which are patriotic. He was a complete original who excelled at expressing his love for his native land.

Dvořák was a musician and nothing more. Barely literate, not widely read, he did have one passion outside of music: trains! He could be found every day at Prague’s main train station, memorizing timetables and befriending locomotive engineers.

Born in a quaint village near Prague, Dvořák’s talent was apparent at a young age. His father, an innkeeper and butcher, recognized and nurtured his son’s gift. Serious music lessons began at age 12, financed by an uncle. In his teens he enrolled in the Prague Organ School and began studying composition. Although he composed prolifically, his early attempts passed without critical reception or public performances. Those compositions up through 1870 either had no known premieres or were premiered in 1888 or later.

Dvořák remained almost unknown outside of the Prague area until 1873 when he won the Austrian State Prize for Composition. The jury included Johannes Brahms, who was deeply moved by Dvořák’s mastery and talent, and recommended him to Brahms’ publisher, Simrock. Dvořák signed a contract which allowed his music to gain international acclaim and recognition.

In 1878, he published his *Slavonic Dances* for piano duet; they were an immediate and great success. The music critic Louis Ehlert wrote, “Here at last is a hundred per cent talent; and, what is new, a completely natural talent.” Five years later, Dvořák’s setting of *Stabat Mater*, his first piece of a religious nature, was performed to great acclaim in London. He was invited to visit Britain, the first of many visits there. In response to a commission from the London Philharmonic Society, Dvořák composed his *Symphony No. 7*.

In 1892, Dvořák was invited to New York by Jeannette Thurber, a wealthy philanthropist, to serve as director of the National Conservatory of Music which she had helped found. Her hope was that Dvořák could stimulate the development of “American” music, on a foundation of African-American and Native American traditions. Dvořák told the *New York Herald* that “America can have her own music, a fine music...the natural voice of a free and great nation.” In his three years in the United States, Dvořák produced several works that are known as “American”, culminating in his *Symphony #9*, subtitled *From the New World*. The symphony started a controversy fueled by Dvořák’s own contradictory remarks about the score. More about this in the analysis following.

Brahms and the publisher Simrock continued championing Dvořák’s music while he was in America. Brahms even did the tedious job of proofreading the manuscripts! Dvořák said, “I don't believe there is another musician of his stature in the whole world who would do such a thing.”

After completing his *Cello Concerto in B minor*, homesickness and his partially unpaid salary spurred his decision to return to Prague in 1895. There he spent his final years composing—especially opera and chamber music—and teaching at the Prague Conservatory.

In 1904, the first Czech Musical Festival featured a program almost entirely of Dvořák's music. According to reports, thousands of singers sang his oratorio *Saint Ludmila* and thousands of listeners celebrated his *New World Symphony*. Sadly, Dvořák was ill and unable to attend. He died a month later, leaving many unfinished works.

Dvořák composed in nearly every musical form. He wrote nine symphonies, five symphonic poems, major choral works, an oratorio and a cantata, and three concertos for solo instrument and orchestra—one each for piano, violin, and cello. The latter is widely believed to be the greatest of all cello concertos. He also wrote operas, song cycles, a great deal of chamber music, notably, string quartets, string quintets, and piano trios, as well as piano music.

During Dvořák's lifetime, only five of his symphonies were widely known. The sixth was the first one published. After his death, four unpublished symphonies were discovered which led to huge problems regarding how to number them. The *New World Symphony* has successively been called the 5th, 8th, and 9th. Further complicating things, the opus numbers were not given in writing or publication order. Some composers and publishers gave higher opus numbers to Dvořák’s early works to improve sales. Eventually, all of his compositions were catalogued chronologically by Jarmil Burghauser and scholars today often refer to Dvořák's works by their B numbers (for Burghauser).

English conductor Julius Harrison commented that lukewarm performances of any orchestral piece by Dvořák are rare because “each instrumental part is instinct with life. Nothing stagnates, for Dvořák’s ear was fully alive to every voice in the harmony.” Dvořák's style combined a national idiom with symphonic tradition, absorbed folk influences and used them effectively. Ultimately, his legacy transcended national boundaries. His timeless melodies and lush harmonies made an indelible mark on the world of classical music.

Symphony No. 9, “From the New World”, Op. 95, B. 178 – Antonín Dvořák

Orchestration: 2 flutes (2nd = piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd = English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, triangle, and strings

The *New World Symphony* premiered in New York City in 1893. Dvořák’s biographer John Clapham wrote, “Without question this was one of the greatest triumphs, and very possibly the greatest triumph of all that Dvořák experienced” in his life. When the Symphony was published it was “seized on by conductors and orchestras” all over the world. One might say this Symphony was “out of this world” since Neil Armstrong took a recording of it to the Moon during the Apollo 11 mission in 1969.

Howard Posner, writing for the LA Philharmonic, asks, “Has there ever been a work so beloved, so recognized, and yet so impossible to give a fair hearing as the *New World Symphony*? By the mid-20th century, it was so much a part of American culture that it was familiar to people who had never even heard it. So much in it has been quoted and rehashed that it now sounds like a cliché.” The Symphony is remarkable for its sheer number of memorable tunes, nearly all of which are the kind you hum after the concert.

A masterpiece of unity of form and flawless content, the Symphony’s four-movement structure is constructed with unerring architectural expertise. It uses the principle of reminiscence: themes from previous movements return at crucial points in each subsequent movement, giving the symphony its sense of unity. Other key characteristics are the use of the pentatonic scale (five-note scale which does not contain the fourth and seventh note of a traditional major scale), syncopated rhythms (when a usually weak beat becomes the stressed one), dotted rhythms, and the esoteric Aeolian minor mode.

Dvořák was interested in Native American music and the African-American spirituals he heard in while in the United States. He met Harry T. Burleigh, a Black student at the National Conservatory where Dvořák was the director. Burleigh sang traditional spirituals to Dvořák and claimed the composer had absorbed their “spirit” before writing his own melodies.

In an article published in the *New York Herald* on December 15, 1893, Dvořák further explained how Native American music influenced his symphony: “I have not actually used any of the [Native American] melodies. I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music, and, using these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, counterpoint, and orchestral colour.” He also stated that he thought of the second movement as a “sketch or study for a later work, either a cantata or opera... which will be based upon Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*” (Sadly, Dvořák never actually wrote such a piece). And the third movement scherzo was “suggested by the scene at the feast in *Hiawatha* where the Indians dance”.

In 1893, a newspaper interview quoted Dvořák as saying “I found that the music of the negroes and of the Indians was practically identical”, and that “the music of the two races bore a remarkable similarity to the music of Scotland”. He was probably referring to the pentatonic scale, which is typical of both musical traditions. (The pairing of this Symphony with Bruch’s *Scottish Fantasy* is a fitting combination.)

Whether or not Dvořák borrowed melodies from African-American or Native American sources, Leonard Bernstein claimed that the Symphony was truly multinational in its foundations, with virtually nothing American about it. But, as Posner notes, that's like saying there is nothing American about hot dogs because they are made from a sausage that originated in Frankfurt. Yes, the melodies influenced Dvořák, as did Bohemian melodies, but what he wrote came from his own genius.

The first movement—**Adagio – Allegro molto**—begins with a brief, slow introductory melody. The exposition is based on three thematic ideas. The first is characterized by phrases that announce and then respond. You'll hear it again at key points in each of the following movements. The second starts in a basic minor key, then undergoes a transformation so that it resembles a Czech polka. The closing theme harkens to the African-American spiritual *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. This theme also appears in later movements. The development focuses on the first and third themes. The recapitulation repeats the main theme plus the second and closing themes transposed up a semitone, creating a dramatic feel. The movement ends with an impressive coda with full timpani, where the main theme is restated by the brass above the full orchestra.

In the second movement—**Largo**—Dvořák's genius shows in how he goes from E minor, the key in which the first movement ends, to the distant D-flat major of the *Largo* without sounding jarring. His solution to use seven magical and unforgettable chords begins the second movement. Those chords are like a musical version of "once upon a time". Then a solo *cor anglais* (English horn) plays the famous main theme accompanied by muted strings. This was originally written for a clarinet, but Dvořák switched it to the *cor anglais* which he said reminded him of the voice of Harry Burleigh. The movement's middle section nostalgically leads into a funeral march above pizzicato steps in the basses. Then, a quasi-scherzo incorporates this movement's theme together with the first movement's main and closing themes. The *Largo* ends with the soft return of the main theme and introductory chords.

Several sources said that the slow movement was inspired by episodes in Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, which Dvořák had read in Czech translation, but they can't say which parts. The principal theme, the English horn's famous song, sounds more like a harmonically sophisticated spiritual. Years later, in 1922, William Fisher, one of Dvořák's National Conservatory students, wrote lyrics to it, turning it into a popular song called *Goin' Home*. It is often mistakenly considered a folk song or traditional spiritual.

The third movement—**Scherzo: Molto vivace**—was, according to Dvořák, influenced by Longfellow's description of "the feast where the Indians dance." However, the rhythm in the first theme, played by the woodwinds, can be found in Czech folk songs. This stirring tempo is interrupted by a trio middle section reminiscent of one of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*. The first part then repeats, followed by a coda echoing the first movement's main theme.

The final movement is marked **Allegro con fuoco**. After a brief introduction, the horns and trumpets play the movement's main theme against sharp chords played by the rest of the orchestra. The clarinet presents the second theme above the strings. This weaving of the two themes with the main themes of the first three movements shows Dvořák's prolific imagination. An abbreviated recapitulation precedes a majestic coda, where the movement reaches its climax, incorporating ideas from the first three movements one last time. A final surprise is in store in the last few

seconds: just before the final chords, listen for a boogie-woogie walking bass, as if Dvořák was recalling a ragtime pianist. As Howard Posner remarks, “Genius is often hard to explain.”

Truly, the *New World Symphony* is neither an American nor a Czech work but a unifying amalgamation. If music is truly a universal language, Dvořák’s fluency is on full display. While the Symphony may have been “made in America”, it will be “played in Canada” and brilliantly so, by our VSO.

Max Bruch (1838 to 1920)

Max Bruch was a Late Romantic composer, violinist, teacher, and conductor who wrote more than 200 works. Born in Cologne in 1838, to a policeman father and a singer mother, he showed great musical talent early, especially on the violin, which became the conduit for his musical voice. He began composing at the age of nine, but very few of those early works have survived.

Winning the Frankfurt Mozart Stiftung Prize at the age of 14 launched a long career. He moved among musical posts in Germany and even spent three seasons as conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic Society. Rising anti-German sentiment prior to World War I resulted in his compositions having more limited appeal in Britain and the United States than they deserved.

He returned to Germany where he composed and taught from 1890 until his retirement in 1910, after which he gave master classes until his death. He was a highly respected teacher; two of his notable students were Ottorino Respighi and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Bruch died in Berlin in 1920. The epitaph carved on his gravestone reads, “Music is the language of God.”

Bruch’s promise of greatness never quite came to fruition. He lived and worked in the shadow of his friend Brahms, who was more popular and highly regarded. He revered the classicism of Mendelssohn and Schumann and was highly critical of the New German School led by Wagner and Liszt. That made him very unpopular with critics and with his contemporaries.

Among his 200 works are operas, symphonies, large-scale dramatic works for chorus and orchestra, and concertos. His friendships with star violinists Ferdinand David, Joseph Joachim, Pablo de Sarasate, and Willy Hess, led to nine pieces for violin and orchestra which brought him international success. Bruch called the piano a “dull rattletrap” and famously remarked, “the violin can sing a melody much better than a piano, and melody is the soul of music.” [This writer vehemently disagrees!]

Bruch’s most popular works are all for solo string instruments with orchestra: his *Violin Concerto No. 1, in G minor*, Op. 26 is still one of the most popular. Joachim considered it to be one of Germany’s four great violin concertos, along with those by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms. Joachim even suggested that Bruch’s concerto was the richest and most seductive of them all.

His two other works still widely played are the *Scottish Fantasy* for violin and orchestra, which we will hear tonight, and the *Kol Nidrei (Adagio on Hebrew Melodies)*, Op. 47, for cello and orchestra, which is based on the prayer that starts Judaism’s Yom Kippur service. The success of *Kol Nidrei* led many to mistakenly believe that Bruch was Jewish. Despite his family’s denial of any Jewish ancestry, the Nazis restricted the performance of his music during the Second World War because

he was considered a “possible Jew” for writing music with a Jewish theme. As a result, his music was largely forgotten in German-speaking countries. Today, people confuse Max Bruch with Ernest Bloch, who was Jewish, and was known for his passionate composition with a Jewish subject for cello and orchestra.

Most of his other compositions have the same personal and lyrical Romantic style but languish in obscurity. His compositional style was very conservative and he broke no new musical ground. Bruch remained a champion of the Romantic ideals of melody, emotion, and spirit, shunning the modern trends developing with Schönberg and Stravinsky. But his works do have beauty, imagination, and energy. His melodic inspiration came from folk music, as the *Scottish Fantasy*, *Kol Nidrei*, and *Songs and Dances on Russian and Swedish Folk Melodies* for violin and orchestra can attest.

Although his reputation deteriorated and he fell, rather unfairly, out of favour, his lush melodies and rich harmonies still have the ability to charm and dazzle audiences.

Scottish Fantasy in E-flat major, Op. 46 – Max Bruch

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, harp, strings, and solo violin

The ***Scottish Fantasy***, for violin and orchestra, is a four-movement composition on Scottish folk melodies. “Fantasy” refers to Bruch’s own description of the piece as a violin concerto “with free use of Scottish melodies.”

Bruch got some help with fingering and bowing from the great violinist Joseph Joachim. However, the work was dedicated to another virtuoso violinist, Pablo de Sarasate, because Bruch was dissatisfied with Joachim’s performance at the work’s premiere. Bruch’s composition, in a sense, unites two great violin rivals.

Bruch was intrigued by folk music which this composition and numerous others are based upon. Not an ethnomusicologist, Bruch’s interest lay in the spirit rather than the actual construction of the songs. Although Bruch never visited Scotland he had access to authentic Scottish melodies at the Munich Library. The prominent role of the harp is also a nod to Scottish tradition. However, it is debatable whether he had ever heard a Celtic harp played when he wrote the piece.

The first movement is marked ***Grave—Adagio cantabile***. It begins with a brief and sombre introduction played by the brass. The violin soon enters, continuing the slow tempo. That is followed by a warm, richly scored working of the first of the Scottish songs, *Auld Robb Morris*. It is set as a folk-like duet for violin and harp. Listen for it again at the end of the second and fourth movements.

The main part of the second movement—***Scherzo: Allegro***—is based on an energetic dance tune, *The Dusty Miller*. It is full of virtuosic variations, accompanied by drones and locomotive-like rhythms. In a playful surprise, the movement seems to come to an emphatic high-volume conclusion, but then the violas return to *Auld Robb Morris*, joined by the soloist in a wistful daydream.

That leads directly into the third movement—**Andante sostenuto**—which is based on the tender folksong *I'm A' Doun for Lack O' Johnnie*.

The fourth movement is marked **Finale: Allegro guerriero**. Bruch borrowed this term (*guerriero* means “warlike”) from the preface to Mendelssohn’s “*Scottish*” *Symphony*. The movement is based on the traditional tune *Hey Tuttie Tatie*, which is found in the patriotic anthem *Scots Wha Hae*. Berlioz used the same tune in his overture *Rob Roy*. Bruch incorporates contrasting lyrical passages, and then, one more time just before the final ending, the soloist recalls *Auld Robb Morris*.

Audiences loved the piece when it premiered and still do. The *Scottish Fantasy* embodies the essence of Romanticism in its evocation of the landscapes and melodies of Scotland, a land of misty moors, ancient castles, and timeless beauty. The work’s themes, harmonies, and passion display Bruch’s gift for storytelling and love of nature.