



Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Concerto No. 2 in B Minor B. 191

Composed: From 1894-1895

Orchestration: 2 flutes (2nd = piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, strings, and solo cello

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904), the great Czech composer, occupies a special place in the hearts of American concert-goers. This is due in part to the fact that ‘Classical Music’ (or Western Concert Music) is an inherited European tradition that was imported to the ‘New World’.

Take a moment to think, who are the ‘Great American Composers’? Charles Ives (1874-1954), George Gershwin (1898-1937), Duke Ellington (1899-1974), Aaron Copland (1900-1990), Samuel Barber (1910-1981) and Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)... they are all distinctly *20th century* composers. Cases could be made for pre-20th century composers such as Amy Cheney Beach (1867-1944) and/or John Sousa (1854-1932) but are they really as universally known or celebrated as Dvořák?

In the late-19th century, the American philanthropist Jeanette Thurber (1850-1946) saw this lack of an American ‘national style’ as a problem needing solving.¹ In 1885, she established The National Conservatory of America and in 1892 and the three following years she paid a staggering \$15,000/year (which by today’s standards is about \$400,000) for Dvořák to serve as the institution's director, to teach, and of course, to compose. Thurber’s goal was for Dvořák to do for America what he did for Czech culture: incorporate the folk idioms of the land into the

¹ A long-standing cultural narrative, or even the fabrication of one after-the-fact, is essential a strong sense of Nationalism (especially the 19th century brand). Without a robust ‘culture’ to call their own, a fledgling country’s ability to assert identity, legitimacy, and sovereignty is limited. For example, Finland’s long path to independence from Russia in the mid-19th century gave birth to the national epic poem the *Kalevala* in 1835 (the influence for J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* and also where Kaleva, MI takes its name). Jean Sibelius’s (1865-1957) piece *Finlandia*, based on the *Kalevala*, would become the battle-cry for Finnish independence. Subsequently, Sibelius’s face is on the Finnish 100 Markka bill and demonstrates his status as a cultural and historical hero. What composer would you like to see on the \$20 bill someday?

music of the concert hall. Out of this period comes *Symphony No. 9 "From the New World" B. 178*, the "*American" String Quartet No. 12 B. 179*, and of course, this *Cello Concerto No. 2 in B Minor, B.191*. All of these pieces incorporate Native American and Afro-American rhythms and melodies into the time-tested European genres. This vision, however, did not become the dominant trend in American compositional style: the Thurber family's funds eventually ran dry and developments in the 20th century lead to fragmentation rather than unity among composers.

As the "No. 2" correctly identifies, this piece was not Dvořák's only cello concerto. His obscure Concerto No. 1 in A Major B. 10 (1865), with its strong Wagnerian flavor, was never orchestrated as he saw it as a mistake. In fact, Dvořák was rather disdainful of the cello:

"The cello... is a beautiful instrument, but its place is in the orchestra and in chamber music. As a solo instrument it isn't much good. Its middle register is fine-- that's true-- but the upper voice squeaks and the lower growls. The finest solo-instrument, after all, is-- and will remain-- the violin. I have also written a 'cello concerto, but am sorry to this day I did so, and I never intended to write another.'"²

Lucky for us he did. Upon hearing the Cello Concerto No. 2 of the Irish-American Victor Herbert (1859-1924), a fellow teacher at the conservatory, Dvořák was inspired to attempt the genre again. What Dvořák learned from Herbert's concerto was how to present the cello without covering it as the dark timbre of the cello is easily lost in thick orchestral tutti. Dvořák's masterful orchestration is sensitive to this and the concerto performs less like a virtuoso-centric piece and more like a symphony. Perhaps this is why Dvořák's *Concerto No. 2 in B Minor* is recognized, not only as the 'King of Cello Concertos', but also as one of the most loved works of concerto repertoire of any instrument.

Recommended Listening

Victor Herbert Cello Concerto No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 30

Lynn Harrell & the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields & Sir Neville Marriner (1988)

Program Notes by Chas Helge

For the Benzie Area Symphony Orchestra Concert: Sunday, June 25th, 2017

Chas Helge is a Doctor of Musical Arts student at the University of Oklahoma. In 2013, he received the Indiana University Austin B. Caswell Award for writing. He currently serves as a graduate assistant to Dr. Sanna Pederson and Dr. Michael Lee and their musicology courses.

² Smaczny, Jan. Dvořák: Cello Concerto. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK. 1999. Pg. 1.