

## Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

### Dvorak and the creation of America

*Dvorak, Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," conducted by Leonard Bernstein, Sony Classical SMK 47547*

*Dvorak, Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, Pearl CDA 45689-8*

This year is the centennial of Antonin Dvorak's symphony "From the New World," Op. 95, in E minor, begun after his arrival in New York in 1892, and finished in 1893. It expressed the desire of Dvorak (1841-1904) and his friend Johannes Brahms (1833-97) to transfer the discoveries of European classical music to America—at the very time that the operas of Brahms's factional enemy, Richard Wagner, were washing these shores in great Romantic waves.

The best remains Furtwängler's 1952 interpretation, a jubilant celebration of the creation of America as a single great idea to benefit humanity. This symphony is a long theme and variation, and Furtwängler treats each theme in an extended *cantabile* line, building up to a mighty whole.

*Don't* waste your money on Sony's recent release of Leonard Bernstein's 1962 version. This is one of 100 CDs of early Bernstein recordings for Sony's predecessor, CBS Records, being issued after the trolley-car conductor's recent demise. Some may find it very passionate, with its wild contrasts between loud and soft, fast and slow, but the "passion" appeals to the wrong part of the anatomy.

Bernstein's interpretation is 20th-century movie music, music as an emotional conflict between its themes, with each theme representing a different, atomized movie character.

The oboe solo in the second movement, for example, is presented as a lone Indian, far away—and oblivious to musical phrasing. (Bernstein's long reign as queen of the American musical scene gives a clue as to why it has been a century since any classical symphony was composed.)

### 'More from the whole!'

In 1877, the Czech-born musician Dvorak became a protégé of Brahms. *Johannes Brahms as Man, Teacher and Artist*, by Gustav Jenner (1865-1920), another Brahms student, gives insight into their method. Brahms's motto was: "More from the *whole!*"

This had two levels. First, a student composer must start with some basic material, be it a scale, a short theme, or a poem. He or she must assimilate every nuance, until it can be almost reproduced in sleep. "Whenever he discussed a song with me, the first order was to investigate whether its musical form corresponded to the text *throughout*," Jenner wrote. "He reproached errors in this regard with special severity, as a lack of artistic sense or the result of inadequate penetration of the text. . . ."

"Then he would recommend that before composing a poem, I should carry it around in my head for a long time and should frequently recite it to myself aloud."

Second, the material is to be *transformed* by the composer, as a scientist, having assimilated chemistry, combines elements into a new compound. The particulars of the poem or theme are put aside, in order to penetrate into its core, its *pre-conscious idea*.

From that unit idea, the musician is to generate a new unit idea in music: "He therefore advised me, if at all possible, not to proceed to the working-out of a song until its full plan was

already in my head, or on paper. 'Whenever ideas come to you, go take a walk; then you'll find that what you had thought was a finished idea, was only the beginnings of one,' Brahms said. 'In the case of a strophic song-text, there is an underlying mood which is maintained through all the varied images.' "

### 'Folk' themes transformed

In an article in the *New York Herald Tribune* before the "New World" Symphony's Dec. 16, 1893 premiere, Dvorak described how he applied this method to show how classical music could be constructed from American themes.

He described the aspects of Native American melody to be mastered, as a song writer first masters the poem. He said that there are laws underlying Negro and Indian music, *universal* laws also found in Scottish and other music worldwide. "In both [Negro and Indian music,] there is a peculiar scale," he wrote, "caused by the absence of the fourth and seventh." He went on to show the relation to the Greek and medieval modes, referencing their use by Verdi in *Aida*.

"Now, I found that the music of the Negroes and of the Indians was practically identical," he wrote. "I therefore carefully studied a number of Indian melodies and became thoroughly imbued with their characteristics, their spirit."

Dvorak then described his transformation of this material. "It is this *spirit* which I have tried to reproduce in my symphony. I have not actually used any of these melodies. I have written original themes embodying the peculiarities of Indian music, and have developed them, with all the resources of modern rhythm, harmony, counterpoint, and orchestral color."