

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

Dvorak's unmet challenge to American composers

"Dvorak String Quartets," the Britten Quartet, EMI Classics 54413

"Samuel Coleridge-Taylor," Virginia Eskin, piano; the Hawthorne String Quartet; Koch International Classics 3-7056-2H1

"Great American Piano I: Gottschalk," Leonard Pennario, piano, Angel EMI 64667

America's failure to produce a great Classical composer has obscured the story of Antonin Dvorak's 1892-95 stay at New York's National Conservatory of Music, the centennial of which should be more widely celebrated. Dvorak (1841-1904) and his friend Johannes Brahms (1833-97) sought to teach us the Classical method of Bach and Beethoven here.

These "dead white European males," ironically, nearly taught us how to write African-American, pioneer, native American, and other American national music of universal beauty and significance. A new CD of Dvorak's "American" string quartet and two CDs of compositions on "American" themes, bring Dvorak's challenge, and our compatriots' failure, into focus.

Dvorak arrived in 1892 to head the conservatory, invited by its sponsor, New York philanthropist Jeanette Thurber, a former music teacher determined to create an American school of composers. She won the school's designation "National" from Congress by granting free tuition to poor students and encouraging blacks and immigrants.

Real American music

Dvorak insisted on Brahms's method, which involved taking any initial musical idea as a *unit concept* and then

uplifting it through counterpoint (see *EIR*, Jan. 22, p. 55). He shocked the elites not only by training black composers such as Harry Burleigh, Maurice Arnold, and Will Cook, but also by urging them to study "Negro melodies, the songs of the Creoles, the red man's chant, and the ditties of the homesick German or Norwegian," as he wrote. "I did not come to America to interpret Beethoven or Wagner for the public. I came to discover what young Americans had in them, and to help them to express it."

Self-expression did not mean venting rage like today's rap singers. It meant that American composers must discover the laws behind our folk tunes, just as Brahms explored simple German tunes in his "Volkslieder," and then *transform* them into new polyphonic creations.

Unfortunately, after Dvorak left, his students slid back toward mere imitation of folk melody. Some of Dvorak's students mentioned above even were the teachers of Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and other composers of sensual modernist noise.

The Britten Quartet's performance of Dvorak's "American" string quartet Op. 96 in F, composed in Spillville, Iowa in 1893, shows what Dvorak had in mind. They do an intelligent and musical job of bringing out every cross-voice and new idea. While Dvorak's are not at the level of Beethoven's quartets, this performance captures Dvorak's essential "Brahmsian" rigor of creating new thematic development.

Variations or piano bar

Koch International's release of works by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1885-1912) starts to show the problems, although he was not trained in America. Born in London of a physician from

Sierra Leone and an Englishwoman, he was trained in Europe as a composer, conductor, pianist, singer, and violinist. His magnificent Clarinet Quintet on this CD follows a rigorous Classical chamber music approach in the tradition of clarinet works of Mozart and Brahms. The use of the clarinet as a distinct mezzo-soprano against the violins is strikingly vocal.

The impact of Coleridge-Taylor as a black composer was strong in the U.S., which he visited many times, helping to form the Coleridge-Taylor Society of Washington, a chorus of 200 black singers.

Coleridge-Taylor's more famous piano settings of Negro spirituals, however, go against the Brahms-Dvorak approach. They focus on the folk melodies *per se*, and merely embellish them, repetitiously almost in the manner of the modern "piano bar" background music. The composer's emotional fixation upon the melody prevents him from transforming it, as in a true theme and variation.

EMI's new CD of piano music by Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869) is even more like barroom music. Said to be America's first "nationalistic composer," he was one of the first to compose on American themes, and to play them for European audiences. Studying in Paris in the 1840s, he was lionized as a pianist by everyone from Chopin to Victor Hugo.

But although Dvorak wrote of his admiration for Gottschalk, this may have more to do with his virtuosity and his later tireless work playing for the Union troops in the Civil War. I can't speak for the rest of his music, but there is little of the Brahms method on this recording. Gottschalk is trying to write theme and variations, but these are just themes which repeat themselves, and anticipating future "jazz" modes, are embellished with what in our century are called "riffs" in the high registers.