

Introduction to Classical Music, MUSI 101-- DL2

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Concert Report I

On Sunday, February 24, 2013 I had the pleasure of attending an “All Dvořák Concert” performed by the Mason Symphony Orchestra. The concert was held in the Harris Theatre on the Fairfax campus of George Mason University. There was a pre-performance discussion at 3 pm, followed by the concert itself at 4 pm with an additional panel discussion during the intermission.

Because we have not studied Dvořák yet, before going to the concert I read about the composer in The ABC of Classical Music – The Great Composers and Their Greatest Works by Keith Anderson, published by Naxos of America and in our class text, The Enjoyment of Music, Eleventh Shorter Edition by Kristine Forney and Joseph Machlis. A brief summary of what I learned is given in the next paragraph.

Antonin Dvořák (1841 – 1904) was born in the Bohemian section of (what is now) the Czech Republic. He was a violinist as well as a composer. His works include nine symphonies of which the best known is Symphony No. 9 (From the New World), “an important cello concerto”¹, two sets of Slavonic Dances, overtures, chamber music, popular songs and operas.

The concert opened with two Slavonic Dances: Slavonic Dance, Op. 46, No.1 in C Major and Slavonic Dance, Op. 46, No 2 in E Minor. Dance No. 1 is done in a fast tempo in triple meter. It is a bright and energetic piece with a very exciting climax at the end. One thing that I found interesting was how the melody and focus switched back and forth between the strings, woodwinds and other sections.

When I saw two Slavonic Dances listed on the program, I expected them to be fairly similar. But I was surprised to find that was not the case. Dance No. 2 is a more somber piece (in a minor key). It is in a slow duple meter. It does have some faster sections in the middle, but is not as lively as No. 1. The ending is soft and slow, a sharp contrast to the powerful ending of No. 1. During the intermission, one of the panelists described the mood of this piece as “sad, nostalgic.” Of the two Slavonic dances, I prefer the first.

The orchestra next performed two (of the four) movements from Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op 95 (From the New World): II Largo and III Scherzo. (I was surprised that the First Movement was not

included. It seems that the beginning would always be included.) Symphony No. 9 is nicknamed “New World” because Dvořák wrote it during the time he spent in the United States in the 1890s.

The second movement Largo is a slow tempo, as expected. “The second is usually the slow movement of the cycle” (p. 159)². It is in duple meter. I am very familiar with the theme in this movement, not because of previous exposure to classical music, but, strangely enough, through my interest in country music. One would think that country music could not have much in common with classical music, but country music artist Don Williams recorded a song called “Miracles” that uses this theme as the melody. The oboe was featured beautifully playing the theme throughout this movement.

The Scherzo movement followed. “In the early nineteenth century, the minuet was replaced by the scherzo, a quick-paced dance in triple meter” (p. 161)². Scherzo is the Italian word for “jest” and characterized “by abrupt changes of mood” (p. 161)². The movement starts very fast – I would describe it as almost “frenetic.” There were some slower sections, and I did seem to hear bits of the motives from the Largo (because it is so familiar to me) here and there.

During both the pre-concert and intermission discussions, significant time was spent discussing the New World Symphony as “program music.” Apparently Dvořák has indicated that this symphony was based on (or inspired by) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s The Song of Hiawatha. A few minutes of a recording was played where the music and text were superimposed or interleaved. This helped me understand the concept and helped me imagine how the poems associated with Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons might sound if used with the music.

Following the intermission, the second half of the program was the performance of the “important cello concerto” mentioned above: Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 104. All three movements were performed. Kenneth Law was the cello soloist. I was most looking forward to this part of the concert because the cello interests me (it was one of the two instruments I chose to write about in one of our early blogs).

The First Movement, Allegro, starts out majestic and powerful. It has a very “minor” sound with a feeling of tension or suspense. I was surprised that the cello soloist didn’t actually start to play until several minutes into the piece. During those first few minutes he sometimes had his eyes closed and appeared to be absorbing the mood. During this movement there was a cello-flute duet with strings accompaniment which I thought had a very beautiful sound.

In the Second Movement, Adagio ma non troppo, the cellist started playing very close to the start. This movement has a mournful sound. During the discussions it was noted that Dvořák’s sister-in-law Josephine died around this time and perhaps this is reflected here. Two parts of this movement that I found interesting were a section where the solo cellist was accompanied by the ensemble cellists lightly plucking their strings and another section where the cellist was accompanied by the French Horn section.

The Third Movement, Finale, seemed the most emotional to me with the most lyrical melody. I noticed that sometimes in this movement the cello would play a melody which would then be repeated by the orchestra and vice versa. There was a short part where the cello and first violin played together, and another section featured the clarinet.

I have been to “Pops” orchestra concerts before, where selections have included pop songs, Broadway tunes and some light, familiar classical numbers. But this is my first experience attending what I would consider a serious classical concert. I thought the concert was very enjoyable and the discussions were very informative. I look forward to attending many classical concerts in the future.

References:

1. The ABC of Classical Music – The Great Composers and Their Greatest Works by Keith Anderson

published by NAXOS of America

2. The Enjoyment of Music, Eleventh Shorter Edition by Kristine Forney and Joseph Machlis published

by W. W. Norton & Company

PROGRAM

Slavonic Dance, Op. 46, No. 1 in C Major Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Slavonic Dance, Op. 46, No. 2 in E Minor

Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95 (*From the New World*)

II. *Largo*

III. *Scherzo*

Igor Sarmientos, *Guest Conductor*

INTERMISSION with PANEL DISCUSSION

Joe Horowitz & Angel Gil-Ordóñez
with Dr. Tom Owens & Dr. Dennis Layendecker
& doctoral student, Igor Sarmientos

Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 104

I. *Allegro*

II. *Adagio ma non troppo*

III. *Finale*

Kenneth Law, *Cello Soloist*
Dr. Dennis M. Layendecker, *Conductor*