

## Thoughts on Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 Manfred Honeck

One would think that a symphony composed in New York with the title "From the New World" would have an all-American scope. However, apart from several characteristic themes, this work is essentially Czech. Dvorak had written his Eighth Symphony in his idyllic country home in Vysoka where he could live out his love of nature by growing fruit and crops, keeping animals and enjoying the surroundings including the romantic Rusalka's Pond. His Ninth Symphony tells about his longing for this faraway idealism of his native country. It is, in a way, a musical letter for home expressing impressions from far away, but still written in Czech.

Dvorak always strikes us with his sense for tone colors, melodic lines and rhythmic structure. Beginning in the introduction with the soft, warm carpet of sound created by the lower strings, the distant horn signal and the first wild outburst of the entire orchestra, he demonstrates his intention to refine and expand his way of composing rather than turn everything upside down. Dvorak cannot deny his background which connects him closely with the music of the old Austrian culture. Even though the syncopated themes of the first movements are reminiscent of negro spirituals, one should not forget that rhythmic elements such as syncopations or the shifting of accents play an important role in Dvorak's entire oeuvre. They are a distinctive feature of his music. To a great extent, the magnificent effect of the Slavonic Dances is owed to their own concise rhythms. The same holds true for the second theme in the opening movement of the Ninth Symphony where the second accent has to be played much stronger than the previous one in order to maintain the characteristic of a Czech folk dance.

At the beginning and the end of the second movement, we hear a dirge which reminds me very much of Anton Bruckner's symphonies. It is remarkable that in the entire work the tuba plays nothing but the few notes of this choral, like an attunement for the lament of Hiawatha. Likewise, the English horn is only used here. Why? Dvorak could have employed a bassoon or a clarinet after all. It seems that he not only followed his own perception but also the treatise on orchestration by Hector Berlioz who writes about the English horn: " ... This is a melancholy, dreamy, rather noble voice ... which makes it superior to any other when the aim is to reawaken images and emotions from the past and when the composer wants to strike the secret string of tender memories." I find the middle part especially touching, its tenderness asking for a well-balanced measure of rubato playing, an art which is essential for doing justice to the composers of the old Austrian monarchy. Before the great outburst and the return of the "New World" themes, Dvorak plunges back into the cosmos of the Eighth Symphony: impressions of playing children and birdsongs remind us of unspoiled nature.

In the third movement he turns more and more toward his Czech homeland, bringing Smetana's Moldau to mind. The trio in particular bears strong witness to his deep Czech roots. I approach its first part in a more lyrical way with regard to Dvorak's special composing style. Its second part is the manifestation of a decidedly rustic landler and could have almost been written by Johann Strauß.

Apart from some minor echoes from the previous movements, the final movement is decidedly Czech. It starts with a heroic theme (which Dvorak actually adapted for the cello concerto likewise composed in New York), and incorporates a rousing polka – here, I let the basses dominate according to the old Austrian tradition, and likewise the clarinet, so typical for Bohemian music, in the second theme – before a characteristic Bohemian-Slavonic march emphasizes new and vigorous accents. It is clear that Dvorak draws from the abundant supply of Czech folklore. At the end of this movement, a popular children's song appears in the bassoons and is for the most part covered by the full strings. He likely missed his children a lot – them and much more...

It is a personal matter for me to make the “Old World” audible in the “New World”. Edwin Aldrin, the second astronaut after Neil Armstrong to walk on the moon reportedly listened to this symphony during his flight to the moon. Dvorak, himself interested in science, would have certainly been delighted about this – as much as his music delights and continues to delight us.