During Antonín Dvořák’s formative years his musical training was modest, and he was a competent, but hardly distinguished, pupil. As a teenager he managed to secure a spot as violist in a dance orchestra. The group prospered, and in 1862 its members formed the founding core of the Provisional Theatre orchestra in Prague. Dvořák would play principal viola in that ensemble for nine years, in which capacity he sat directly beneath the batons of such conductors as Bedřich Smetana and Richard Wagner. During that time Dvořák also honed his skills as a composer, and by 1871 he felt compelled to leave the orchestra and devote himself to composing full time. In 1874 he received his first real break when he was awarded the Austrian State Stipendium, a grant newly created by the Ministry of Education to assist young, poor, gifted musicians — which perfectly defined Dvořák’s status at the time — as well as in 1876 and 1877, when he received the same prize again. In 1877 the powerful music critic Eduard Hanslick, who chaired the Stipendium committee, encouraged him to send some scores directly to Johannes Brahms, who had served on the competition jury. Brahms, in turn, recommended Dvořák to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock, who contracted a first option on all of the young composer’s new works.

The spirit of Brahms hovers over many pages of Dvořák’s Seventh Symphony, which is undoubtedly the darkest and potentially the most intimidating of his nine. His Sixth Symphony in D major, composed four years earlier, had also seemed to be a reaction to Brahms, its pastoral mood emulating to some extent Brahms’s Second Symphony (1877), also in D major. Since then Brahms had released his confident, sinewy Third Symphony, which Hans Richter (who conducted its premiere in December 1883) dubbed “Brahms’s Eroica.” A month later, in January 1884, Dvořák traveled to Berlin to hear it performed and was appropriately impressed by its powerful effect. By the end of that year he began to write his Seventh Symphony, which echoes some of the storminess and monumental power of Brahms’s Third. What’s more, Dvořák kept in touch with Brahms about the new symphony he was working on, and apparently his mentor offered encouragement to grapple with this new symphony of serious mien. In February 1885, Dvořák wrote to Simrock:

I have been engaged on a new symphony for a long, long time; after all it must be something really worthwhile, for I don’t want Brahms’s words to me, “I imagine your symphony quite different

**In Short**

**Born:** September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, Bohemia  
**Died:** May 1, 1904, in Prague  
**Work composed:** December 13, 1884, to March 17, 1885; slightly revised just after its premiere; its dedication reads, “Composed for the Philharmonic Society of London”  
**World premiere:** April 22, 1885, at St. James Hall in London, at a concert of the Royal Philharmonic Society, with the composer conducting  
**New York Philharmonic premiere:** January 9, 1886, Theodore Thomas, conductor; this marked the work’s US Premiere  
**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** November 1, 2016, Pablo Heras-Casado, conductor  
**Estimated duration:** ca. 39 minutes
from this one [i.e., Dvořák’s Sixth],” to remain unfulfilled.

As his reputation grew in the early 1880s, Dvořák gained a particularly staunch following in England, and the rapturous reception of his Stabat Mater when it was performed in London in 1883 made him a true celebrity there. On the heels of that triumph, the Royal Philharmonic invited him to conduct some concerts in 1884, in the course of which his Sixth Symphony made such an impression that the orchestra immediately extended a commission for Dvořák to write one specifically for them, which he was to conduct the following season. As one might have predicted, the new work scored another English success for its composer. Just after the premiere he wrote to a friend in Mirovice, Bohemia:

**Views and Reviews**

Donald Francis Tovey, the distinguished early-20th-century music analyst and professor at the University of Edinburgh, blew hot and cold on the subject of Dvořák’s symphonies, but he was overwhelmed by the Seventh. He wrote:

I have no hesitation in setting Dvořák’s [Seventh] Symphony along with the C major Symphony of Schubert and the four symphonies of Brahms, as among the greatest and purest examples in this art-form since Beethoven. There should be no difficulty at this time of day in recognizing its greatness. It has none of the weaknesses of form which so often spoil Dvořák’s best work, except for a certain stiffness of movement in the finale, a stiffness which is not beyond concealing by means of such freedom of tempo as the composer would certainly approve. There were three obstacles to the appreciation of this symphony when it was published in 1885. First, it is powerfully tragic. Secondly, the orthodox critics and the average musician were, as always with new works, very anxious to prove that they were right and the composer was wrong, whenever the composer produced a long sentence which could not be easily phrased at sight. … The third obstacle to the understanding of this symphony is intellectually trivial, but practically the most serious of all. The general effect of its climaxes is somewhat shrill. … His scores are almost as full of difficult problems of balance as Beethoven’s. … These great works of the middle of Dvořák’s career demand and repay the study one expects to give to the most difficult classical masterpieces; but the composer has acquired the reputation of being masterly only in a few popular works of a somewhat lower order. It is time that this injustice should be rectified.

*Dvořák with his wife, Anna, in London, where the Seventh Symphony was premiered in 1885*
Before this letter reaches Mirovice you will perhaps know how things turned out here. Splendidly, really splendidly. This time, too, the English again welcomed me as heartily and as demonstratively as always heretofore. The symphony was immensely successful and at the next performance will be a still greater success.

Following the English performances, Dvořák edited a passage of about 40 measures out of the symphony’s second movement and communicated the emendation to Simrock with the assurance, “Now I am convinced that there is not a single superfluous note in the work.” It would be hard to disagree with him; from a composer who was sometimes given to leisurely rhapsody, the Seventh Symphony is remarkably taut and rigorous throughout.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

— J.M.K.

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**The New York Connection**

Antonín Dvořák, who lived in New York from 1892 through 1895 while serving as director of the National Conservatory of Music, spent much of his time in the Stuyvesant Park neighborhood. The National Conservatory was located at 126-128 East 17th Street, on a site now occupied by Washington Irving High School. Dvořák and his family took up residence at a nearby townhouse, at 327 East 17th Street, between First and Second Avenues.

That home was razed in 1991 to make way for an AIDS hospice, and, at the same time, the block was renamed Dvořák Place. A sculpture of the composer, donated to the Dvořák American Heritage Association by the New York Philharmonic, was installed in Stuyvesant Square Park, just across the street from where the composer had lived, in 1997.

— The Editors

*The sculpture of Dvořák by Ivan Mestrovic, at Stuyvesant Square Park*