

Brahms & Dvořák

Friday, August 30 – 7 pm

Robert Bernhardt, conductor

Blake Pouliot, violin

DVOŘÁK

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op.95 “From the New World”

(40’)*

Adagio – Allegro

Largo

Molto vivace

Allegro con fuoco

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

BRAHMS

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op.77

(41’)*

Allegro non troppo

Adagio

Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op.95 “From the New World”

Antonín Dvořák

(b. Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841 / d. Prague, 1904)

First performed: December 16, 1893 in New York

Last ESO performance: May 2009

“Z nového světa,” wrote Dvořák on the title page of his *Ninth Symphony* – “From the New World.” Those words have served as the cause of misunderstanding and assumption ever since he etched them. The first work entirely conceived and written in the United States by Dvořák, the symphony was first performed nine days before Christmas, 1893 at Carnegie Hall.

Dvořák had come to New York in 1891 at the invitation of the National Conservatory of Music, to head its composition department and be its artistic director. He was by this time a famous composer, and the American school was anxious that the man who had been celebrated for infusing the indigenous music of his native Bohemia into western art music could help show American composers how to do the same with American indigenous music. To him, “From the New World” was a postcard greeting, almost – the place from which his work came. But critics in Europe lost no time in assuming that Dvořák had quoted from native American and African-American music throughout the symphony, which in fact was not the case. “This is not true,” Dvořák protested. “I composed the work there, but the motives are my own.”

What Dvořák did borrow from the “native” music he heard in America were some of its idioms; harmonic tendencies, rhythms and syncopations, and drone accompaniments he heard in spirituals and native songs find their way into Dvořák’s ever-melodic natural style, resulting in a work which has been a favourite from its first performance. It begins very simply, out of mists sounded on cello, then flutes. It is shaken to life, and the Allegro begins loudly and boldly. The syncopated main subject is set against sylvan contrasts in the woodwinds – and the almost playful combination of “town and country” is quite suited to a European’s perception of America.

Hymn-like harmonies usher in the second movement’s famous theme, first played in an extended solo for English horn. A flute ushers in a contrasting song with an elusive aboriginal American feel to it. This song, like the first, is explored in various instrumental colours, building a sense of passion and drama. Just before settling back into the memorable opening theme, a birdsong in the woodwinds ushers in a climactic moment recalling material from the opening movement’s grandeur. The tender Largo ends as quietly as it began.

Timpani and triangle dominate the vigorous main subject of the Scherzo – a rousing dance-like section of bracing, pent-up energy. A melody for flute and oboe provide a rustic change of mood and pace, though this theme is quickly syncopated into its own dance. A fleeting reference to the main music of the first movement is heard, followed quickly by yet another dance, symmetrically presented by woodwinds alternating with the violins. All of this material is repeated almost exactly, ushering a grand climax.

An irresistible sense of drive begins the finale, leading to a bright, pulsing trumpet theme, urged on by the strings until hushed by a lovely clarinet theme. But the movement – like the pride and industry of the country for which it was written – cannot be contained, and the blustery good nature rouses the music once again. Distant calls in the brass once again herald music from the opening movement – and even a reference to the second movement is featured in the flutes. With these features as unifying elements, grand and rhythmic swagger keep the finale’s momentum at a consistent boil – a rollicking yet ever-melodic conclusion to the symphony.

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op.77

Johannes Brahms

(b. Hamburg, 1833 / d. Vienna, 1897)

First performed: January 1, 1879 in Leipzig

Last ESO performance: November 2018

Two violinists played major roles in the career of Johannes Brahms. A major boost to the start of his life as a public artist came from Eduard Reményi (1828-1898), a violinist who made something of a career as a touring virtuoso, specializing in a crowd-pleasing faux gypsy style. Beginning in 1853, Reményi took Brahms on tour with him as accompanist, and it was certainly during this time that Brahms got the inspiration for the famous *Hungarian Dances* which proved quite lucrative for the blossoming composer. And it was Reményi who introduced Brahms to another Hungarian expatriate – and the other violinist so central to Brahms' art – Joseph Joachim.

In Joachim (1831-1907), Brahms found a kindred artistic spirit, and probably his best friend (other than Clara Schumann), and it was for him that Brahms composed his only *Violin Concerto*. The process of the work's composition was a taxing one for both men; Brahms constantly cajoled Joachim for advice on writing the violin part – and would then unceremoniously ignore nearly every suggestion Joachim made. Joachim demonstrated amazing patience and restraint, as he knew that his patience would be rewarded with a masterpiece. The work's premiere in Leipzig, with Brahms conducting for his friend, met with a cool response, so Brahms declined to conduct the Viennese premiere. That was a pity, as the work was rapturously received there. It took several years for the concerto to take its place as the third great pillar in the German romantic violin concerto pantheon (alongside Beethoven's and Mendelssohn's), however. Even the conductor of the Viennese premiere, Josef Hellmesberger, famously described the work as, "a concerto not for, but against the violin."

As ever with his concertos, Brahms assigns the orchestra and violin equal importance in the *Violin Concerto*. The orchestral introduction is long, with several important musical ideas presented in an opening filled with passion and dignity. When the violin enters, while it is certainly to the fore, it is often accompanist to ideas in the orchestra as much as it is the instrument presenting the main melodic material. This is a lyrical movement (and longer than the next two combined), but its gentle melodies are often interrupted by disquieting interjections and unsettled tonalities. There are moments of grandeur amid the violin's intense flights with and around the lyrical main ideas, with particular emphasis on the violin's upper register (the better to be heard above the orchestra – a factor of which Brahms was particularly conscious). Brahms relied on Joachim (who was also a composer) to fashion his own cadenza.

The second movement is a set of variations on a theme first presented by – the oboe? "Does anyone imagine I'm going to stand on the stage, violin in hand, and listen to the oboe playing the only tune?" huffed no less than the great Sarasate as to why he did not take up Brahms' concerto. The violin is key to the movement, however, presenting embellishments on the oboe's song. In the final movement – not quite a rondo, not quite sonata form – Brahms gives a bit of a nod, perhaps, to his old friend Reményi, with a gypsy-tinged dance in which both orchestra and soloist take some rough and tumble delight. Brahms labeled the movement *Allegro giocoso* ("happy and jocular"), though it was Joachim who

pressed him to add *ma non troppo vivace* (“but not too lively”), adding cursively that without that qualifier, it is “otherwise difficult.”

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