

CD 1

1 Slavonic Dance in G minor, Op. 46 No. 8

The man who wrote that music (it comes from one of his Slavonic Dances) was one of the most travelled composers in musical history – even *before* he first set foot outside his native land. Almost every day during the 1880s this stocky, bristle-bearded man, the son of a Bohemian butcher, made his way to the Franz Josef Railway Station in Prague, advanced purposefully to the marshalling yards, and there, for an hour or two, became lost to the world in the enraptured study of steam locomotives. To Antonín Dvořák the locomotive engine was one of the greatest achievements of the human mind, and one of his few regrets in life was that he himself hadn't invented it. Apart from trains, and, of course, music – the only subject, by the way, in which he was highly educated –, Dvořák enjoyed the study – or more accurately, the company – of birds (he was a dedicated breeder of pigeons). Now birds and trains may not, on the face of it, have much in common, but to a man descended from the Czech peasantry, who for decades were forbidden to travel by their German overlords, both could be said to have represented freedom, and with it the promise of discovery.

When at the age of sixteen he first arrived in Prague, in a hay cart, Dvořák was in every sense a provincial. He'd been born, and had spent most of his childhood, in a village near the banks of the river immortalised in music by Smetana in *Vltava* (or 'The Moldau'). Remarkably, the village, like the surrounding countryside, remains today much as it was in Dvořák's childhood. What it wasn't, of course, then, was a place of pilgrimage for music-lovers the world over, but it became so even before Dvořák's death. Among the early pilgrims was the English musician Sir Henry Hadow, who found it just as lovely, peaceful and colourful as much of Dvořák's music.

HADOW: The clean, well-kept cottages sun themselves upon a slope of the low hills, or nestle among the trees by the river bank: a tiny stream comes trickling along the shallow dale like a tributary: at its mouth a great square castle rises on a spur of jutting sandstone, and seems to dominate the very landscape by feudal right. Behind are uplands of corn and pasture and orchard where you may idle for half a summer's afternoon, watching the play of light tremulous among the leaves, the smoke curling lazily from the cluster of red

roofs, and below them the brown turbid river and the long timber rafts floating down it to the Elbe.

Here it was that Dvořák's father, František, plied the same double trade as his forbears – not only serving as the village butcher but keeping the village inn; and from the moment Dvořák was born it was assumed by the rest of the family that he would carry on the family business when he grew up. His musical gifts were already evident in his very early years, but musical talent seemed almost to grow out of the Czech soil, to the point where it was sometimes in danger of being taken for granted. Dvořák's father, too, was highly musical and played in the village band. The idea that the young Dvořák might be another Mozart never entered anyone's head. At the age of eight he sang in the local church choir and joined his father in the band, and it's quite possible that he might have stayed there if he hadn't been sent at the age of twelve to learn German at a school in the nearby town of Zlonice. It was from his teacher there, an organist and leader of his own private band, that Dvořák had his first real introduction to the formal techniques of music. It was a turning point. From then on, Dvořák was in no doubt that music had to be his life. Whether it could also be the source of his livelihood was another matter. His family had no money to speak of, he was far from being an exploitable prodigy, and the chance of a proper musical education seemed to him at that point like little more than a pipe dream. By the time he'd reached his middle-teens, he remained, in effect, a basically uneducated farm boy, and, like his father and grandfather before him, he started work as an apprentice butcher. On 2 November 1856 his status was officially confirmed.

OFFICIAL: We, the undersigned office-holders of the honourable Town Guild of Butchers, do hereby confirm that Antonín Dvořák of Nelahozeves, born on the 8th September 1841, was bound to the butcher's trade, as apprentice, on the fifth day in the month of November 1854, the apprenticeship to run for two years. Insofar as the aforesaid Antonius Dvořák conducted himself honestly, faithfully and industriously during said period, and having learned the trade of butcher well and properly, he was presented to the assembled gathering, under the chairmanship of the superintendent of this Guild, on the first day of November 1856, and declared to have served his apprenticeship successfully. Having made out for the above-named Antonius Dvořák, this Certificate of Apprenticeship, we hereby beg that he should be recognised henceforward as a properly taught butcher's journeyman and that he should everywhere be

received with the courtesy due him. In witness whereof this certificate of apprenticeship is hereby awarded by the undersigned and under the Guild Seal Ordinary, on the second day of the month of November 1856.

Returning to the village many years later, with an English friend, memories of his childhood came flooding back to him.

DVOŘÁK: Look there, at the little village with the long name of Nelahozeves. And at that low building in the shadow of Prince Lobkowitz's castle... That's where my father had his inn, whilst at the same time carrying on his trade of butcher. There, in that little house, I was born. And it was here, in this lovely countryside, that I spent my poor childhood.

FRIEND: The Master's voice went suddenly soft as he said this. He then fell silent for a time, as his dark, moist eyes took in once more that so familiar scene. Then, as his gaze came to rest on a particular point, his face was transformed by a curious, almost mischievous smile.

DVOŘÁK: You see that little church there... that's where I suffered my debut as a solo violinist. I'll never forget how terrified I was when I tuned my fiddle! Or how my bow shook when I started playing! But it actually turned out pretty well. When I finished, a buzz of enthusiasm ran through the whole choir, everyone gathered round me, smiling happily and clapping me fondly on the shoulder, and our neighbour, the leader of the violins, actually gave me a whole groschen! That was the happier side of my youth, though even the darker side was interesting, however many tears it cost me. And look there! That's where I used to go with my father to buy cattle. When he entrusted one of them to me, on our way home, it would often give me the slip, out of sheer high spirits, or drag me into the nearest pond. At moments like that, I can tell you, I was not to be envied! But all the calamities and trials of my young life were sweetened by music – my guardian angel.

If music was Dvořák's 'guardian angel', her chief agent at this point was Antonín Liehmann, the schoolmaster and organist at the nearby town of Zlonice, who was responsible for the bulk of

Dvořák's early musical education. There were times, though, when Dvořák might well have reflected that being dragged into a pond by a cow was preferable to the teaching methods of Doctor Liehmann:

DVOŘÁK: He was a good musician, but he was quick-tempered, and if you couldn't play a passage, you got as many cuffs as there were notes on the sheet... He was rather old-fashioned, and his ideas of harmony were different from today's – but he had a good grasp of thoroughbass; he could also read and play figured bass fluently, and he taught us to do likewise. But if you ever had trouble working it out, you could count on several boxes on the ear before you knew what was happening.

It's ironic how many music teachers of that time, indeed from time immemorial, have chosen that method of disciplining their pupils. Even the young schoolmaster Schubert did it – though in his case the pupils weren't musicians. But it's likely that Dvořák was speaking more as a reporter than as a former victim.

Despite being born to the butcher's trade (not a profession for sentimentalists), Dvořák was slow to acquire the toughness, the capacity for rough and tumble, widely associated with peasant children. Physically he was robust; but psychologically, emotionally, he was a delicate child – as we learn from his cousin, Anna Dušková.

ANNA: Our little Toníček was scarcely out of nappies when he was given the apron and hatchet which are the insignia of the butcher's trade... As a child, he often played for guests – and oh what a bustle and to-do there was in preparing for these 'concerts'! My cousin Františka helped my aunt in the business at that time, and even after Antonín's death she used to recall how timid and fearful he'd been as a child. Before one of his concerts he accidentally broke a plate and was so upset he was almost inconsolable. Even then, his high-strung, nervous temperament was plain to see. Later, when Antonín showed little promise of taking to the butchery business, it was largely due to the influence of his teacher Liehmann that my Uncle was persuaded to release him from the family calling and give him to music.

Thanks to Liehmann, and an uncle who was able to give him financial support, he was brought to the attention of friends in Prague, the capital city of his native Bohemia – hence his arrival in the hay cart in 1857, to begin his musical education in earnest. Here, aged sixteen, and experiencing a city for the first time in his life, he was enrolled at the Organ School of the Society for Church Music in Bohemia. As he well understood, it was a momentous occasion – and a scary one. Here, for the first time, he came into contact with trained musicians of the highest calibre, and with sophisticated fellow students, many of whom saw him as nothing more than a country bumpkin who must have got into the school by mistake. Decades later, he looked back at those days with something less than nostalgia.

DVOŘÁK: At the organ school everything, even the organ itself, smelt mouldy. And if you really wanted to learn anything you had to know German. Anyone with good German could be amongst the class's leading members, but without it you didn't stand a chance. My own knowledge of German was poor, and even when I knew something I often couldn't manage to get it out. My fellow-pupils all looked down their noses and laughed at me, both to my face and behind my back. And later on they *still* laughed at me. When they discovered I was composing, they said among themselves, 'Just imagine that little Dvořák! Do you know that he *composes* too?' And of course all those who laughed at me got on far better than I did.

Dvořák never underrated the solid theoretical grounding he got there, but his most important education lay outside the school. In the musical life of Prague (one of the most musical cities in the world), and in its libraries, he discovered in the works of the great masters a treasury beyond his wildest dreams. After hearing a performance of Beethoven's ninth symphony, he came running out, quite overwhelmed, crying '*I* must write music like that!' That privilege, he soon discovered, remained Beethoven's alone. What he could do, though not yet, of course, was to write music which was utterly and inimitably his own.

2 Symphony No. 8 in G, Op. 88 (mvt 3: Allegretto grazioso – Molto vivace)

Part of Dvořák's Eighth Symphony, in G.

3 As with many composers, Dvořák's road to self-discovery was a long one, which he travelled with a rare single-minded determination. In addition to the organ, he studied singing and musical theory, and spent long hours with the music of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, who remained his lifelong heroes. He also played the violin and viola in one of the Prague orchestras, where he was joined in 1858 by the young Adolf Čech, later to succeed Smetana as Music Director at the National Theatre. He didn't find Dvořák an easy colleague.

ČECH: I joined the orchestra as a viola player. 'You will play at the same desk as Dvořák,' said the Director, and introduced me to a young man with a mane of tousled, thick black hair. We were both less than twenty at that time. And I can tell you that playing with Dvořák was no easy matter. Now my playing did not please him, now he was annoyed with the next desk, at other times he was dissatisfied with the conductor – or with himself. And now and again he would stop playing altogether and start humming some scrap of melody to himself.

Another orchestral colleague, Jan Kváča, also suggests that the young Dvořák could be a difficult customer.

KVÁČA: He was very easily roused, quick-tempered and impatient. On the whole, however, he dealt with those who annoyed him by the simple expedient of avoiding them wherever possible.

But then he had a lot on his mind.

In 1859, the small allowance from his uncle came to an end, leaving him to fend for himself. For the next few years he lived in considerable poverty. He made what money he could from his orchestral playing and some private teaching, but it was barely enough to provide him with lodgings, much less to attend to his musical needs.

KVÁČA: Dvořák was too poor to have his own piano and so he often came round to our apartment to play his things over. My mother hardly welcomed these visits, since he always left his footmarks on the newly scrubbed floor. So he took a room elsewhere, where a piano was put at his disposal, but sometimes he took too great advantage of it. When some idea occurred to him in the middle of the night, for instance, he got up and played it over at once, so as not

to forget it, never considering for a moment that everyone else was asleep. This was the main reason why he changed lodgings so often. And when he lived with our mutual friend Mořiz Anger, he would often monopolise his piano all day, so Mořiz barely got a look-in, at his own instrument.

But then this was a young composer of relentless determination. We get another glimpse of this from his cousin Anna.

ANNA: My mother, who was the life and soul of our household, had recently rented a larger apartment so that she could earn more money by taking in lodgers, including our Antonín, who shared the room with another student. When we moved yet again into a house with a garden, Dvořák lived in a nice three-windowed room with two other lodgers. He had a piano, hired from his tailor at two gulden a month, a table opposite it and behind it his bed. He often composed immediately on waking – in bed – and whenever he got an idea, he played it over on the eiderdown. When he used to write at the table, he often held the quill in his teeth and played with his fingers, very intently, on his jacket or on his legs. Then, after a while, he would move to the piano and play it over, usually singing at the same time.

It was during these early days as a struggling orchestral musician that Dvořák first came face to face with a lot of contemporary music, especially by Wagner and Schumann, both of whom had a strong influence on his own development. For the moment, though, Dvořák was known, insofar as he was known at all, as a merely average instrumentalist and a potential choirmaster. It was during this period that he first really committed himself in earnest to composition, but, even then, he kept it very much to himself. For ten years, his activities as a composer remained a closely guarded secret. To begin with, he stuck to relatively intimate media: a string quartet, a string quintet, songs and so on, all of which show the clear influence of his beloved Schubert – an influence that remained audible throughout his creative life.

During the decade of his tireless, secret experimenting with this form and that, Dvořák felt himself being pulled in two directions at once. On the one hand he was tempted to follow the powerful influence of Wagner and concentrate on opera, of the most organic and symphonic kind; on the other hand, he inclined towards the classical traditions of sonata, symphony, and the aristocratic discourse of chamber music. In the end, although he did write ten operas, he opted for

the classical path, partly (but only partly) because the operatic highroad seemed already to have been claimed by Smetana. Throughout the years of his self-imposed isolation, Dvořák's attitude to his own compositions was both confident and stringently self-critical. The very fact that he burnt a large portion of what he wrote suggests that he anticipated the attentions of posterity. The sketchbooks and rejected scores of mediocrities, after all, are seldom of interest to anyone. Late beginner he may have been, but Dvořák knew early on that he wasn't cut out to be a mediocrity, by anyone's standards. He was also, at this early stage of his adult life, something of a loner.

ANNA: My parents were very pious people and said their prayers, morning and evening, kneeling. Mother invited Toníček to join them: 'But Auntie,' he replied, 'I prefer to pray there at the window, where I can look out onto the green and at the sky.' Never once did I hear my cousin speak vulgarly, flippantly or indelicately. He was of noble character, through and through, and of the highest morals. His conduct was without reproach. He never came home late, had no female acquaintances and no love affairs. Indeed it used to be said in our family that 'Antonín was afraid of women'. I do recall his saying on occasion: 'That's a pretty girl!' but this was as far as he went. Once, the young people of two or three neighbouring families arranged a fancy-dress party at our place because we had a piano. They invited Antonín to join them and to play for them; but that night he didn't come home at all, sleeping for the first time somewhere else.

Anna was wrong about the girls, though. Among the few works which survived Dvořák's private holocaust was a song cycle said to have been inspired by a girl of sixteen whom he was determined to marry. He called the cycle *Cypresses*, and while the songs themselves don't rank particularly highly in Dvořák's output, let alone in the wider field of lieder, the arrangements he later made of them for string quartet are among the most touching miniatures in the chamber music repertoire.

4 Cypresses, B. 152 (No. 3: 'When thy sweet glances')

5 The *Cypresses* may have survived to reappear in other guises, but many of their contemporaries fared less well. Among the major undertakings Dvořák consigned to the flames at the time were two orchestral overtures, a string quartet, an entire mass in B major, a clarinet

quintet, and a raft of incidental music for the Czech National Theatre. But it was with music for the theatre that he finally decided to come out of hiding, as it were.

In June 1875, readers in Prague discovered in a music magazine that a completely unknown member of the National Theatre Orchestra had written and submitted to the management a full-length three-act comic opera, *King and Collier*. As things turned out, the management returned the score without comment of any kind. A bitter disappointment, certainly, but that magazine article marked the first time Dvořák's name had ever appeared in print, and he was nothing if not resilient. Even in the absence of any comment, he set about revising it. By the time he resubmitted it, three years later, it had been almost entirely rewritten, and this time it was accepted. It was with the performance of its overture, at a concert conducted by the great Bedřich Smetana, that Dvořák's public career was finally launched, though hardly as a skyrocket. He had to wait another year before a note of his music was published, and then it was a single song. Some months later, however, he composed what was to be his first real success – as we learn from a report in the *Chronicle of the Prague Choral Union 'Hlahol'*.

CHRONICLER: On the 9th of March 1873, 'Hlahol' held an extraordinary concert in the New Town Theatre at which, in addition to a male choir and orchestra, a choir of ninety ladies appeared for the first time. This concert was remarkable also for the rare novelties included in the programme, of which the greatest success was achieved by the magnificent 'Hymnus' of Antonín Dvořák.

The deep national feeling of that work was to be a characteristic of Dvořák's music for the rest of his life. It was a characteristic of his countrymen. For many long, pride-wounding years, Bohemia, or the Czech Republic as we now call it, had been under German rule. The flood tide of nationalism which now swept over the country had found its first musical hero in Smetana, whose patriotic symphonic poems had put the country on the international map, musically speaking, and whose personal influence had already helped to shape Dvořák's own musical destiny (when Smetana took over the directorship of the Czech National Theatre orchestra, Dvořák was one of his viola players, and the two men later came to know each other well).

In 1873, however, Dvořák left the theatre orchestra and took up an appointment as organist at the Church of St Adalbert. Among the choirboys at the church was one Josef Förster, later to become a distinguished composer.

FÖRSTER: We met every Sunday and every church feast day: Antonín Dvořák, the organist of St Adalbert's, and I, a mere chorister. He regularly came in whilst I and the other boys were putting the music on the desks, renewing snapped strings, putting resin on the bows, hanging up the horns and trumpets, and so on. He paid no attention to anybody, greeted no one and sat down straight away at the organ. Since he sat with his back to the choir, following the conductor's beat in a mirror above the keyboard, I seldom saw Dvořák's face but I recollect how, as a child, the severe expression and the invariably serious appearance of this man, always so deep in his own strange thoughts, made me feel afraid.

I am absolutely certain that no one at that time had any idea how great an artist filled that humble post. Dvořák's improvisations were by no means commonplace, but they did not proclaim an exceptional gift. No one dreamed that the poor organist, with his paltry monthly salary, could be found sitting at his table, in his rare leisure intervals, working industriously at a big opera. Still less did they suspect that he had already, at home, a number of scores which, some years later, were to make his name famous throughout the whole of the cultivated world.

With the success of *Hymnus*, however, Dvořák had arrived to take his place among the most remarkable composers of the day, and he confirmed his hard-earned confidence by marrying, in 1873 – his bride being none other than the sister of his earlier flame, the inspirer of the *Cypresses*. It was the beginning of a long, happy and productive partnership. His wife, Anna Čermáková, was both an accomplished singer (a contralto at the National Theatre) and a woman with a keen but unobtrusive head for business.

A year or so later, now thirty-three years of age, Dvořák had the pleasure of hearing one of his symphonies for the first time when Smetana conducted the third in its entirety. It was this, full of Wagnerian overtones, that was to bring about a major turning-point in Dvořák's life. If he hadn't yet altogether discovered his own unmistakable musical voice, he had at least written a work which was to make that discovery possible.

6 Symphony No. 3 in E flat, Op. 10 (mvt 1: Allegro moderato)

Part of the Symphony No. 3 in E flat.

7 Encouraged by friends and admirers, Dvořák submitted the work to a Viennese commission which awarded government grants to poor ‘Austrian’ musicians (and since Bohemia was then part of the Habsburg empire, Dvořák qualified for entry).

TOWN CLERK: The Town Clerk’s Office of the Royal Capital of Prague hereby confirms, for the purpose of gaining a State grant, due official investigation having been made, that Antonín Dvořák, teacher of music, born in 1841, married and father of one child unprovided for, has no property, and that, except for a salary of 126 gulden which he receives as organist of the Church of St Adalbert and 60 gulden which he earns monthly by the private teaching of music, he has no other source of income.

Prague, June the 24th, 1874.

The commissioners included both Eduard Hanslick, the immensely influential Viennese critic, and Johannes Brahms, both of whom felt a great and immediate enthusiasm for Dvořák’s music. The result earned him an award of 400 gold florins, far and away the largest sum he’d ever received, and, more importantly, the championship of the two most powerful musicians in Austria. Brahms in particular became a passionate advocate of Dvořák’s music and a close friend, as well as an honoured mentor. But this otherwise happy, even exciting year was also clouded by anguish.

In many ways, Dvořák, like Bruckner, was a relatively simple soul, but it would be wrong to assume, as many did (and, alas, still do), that he was therefore essentially a lightweight, a man unacquainted with the deepest of spiritual experiences. He wasn’t, perhaps, a profound composer, in the way that Bach and Beethoven (and indeed Bruckner) were, but he was as capable as anyone of loneliness and grief, and one of the works which helped very substantially to spread his fame had deep personal roots in both of those emotions. His *Stabat mater*, depicting the lamentations of the Virgin Mary at the Cross, was begun shortly after the death of his baby daughter Josefa, after a brief illness. Before he finished it, a little under two years later, he’d lost two more children: another daughter, Růžena, and his three-year-old son Otakar. Dvořák, then in his mid-thirties, thus brought to his portrait of parental grief an almost tragic immediacy which, of course, he would much have preferred to do without. Yet it was precisely this immediacy, this sense of unmistakable sincerity, that gave the work its great power and demonstrated to an international audience that Dvořák was a composer of major significance.

Stabat mater, Op. 58 (Quando corpus morietur)

8 Within four years of his ‘coming out’, the erstwhile closet composer had achieved a celebrity which continued and increased through the rest of his life. But it was his first winning of the Austrian award, and its aftermath, that carried his name and reputation beyond the borders of his native Bohemia. Nor should it be thought that all the music he wrote during this period was coloured by the loss of his children. Dvořák’s temperament was a curious mixture of reserve (even shyness), flat-footed self-assertion, and a geniality which could never be kept at bay for long. His delight in simple pleasures, complemented by his irrepressible love of music, runs through his work like a golden thread. But his simplicity, which was genuine almost to a fault, was also deceptive. Many people, especially some of those who knew about his very limited general education, even put it about that Dvořák was not actually very intelligent. One eminent German went so far as to call him ‘a talking monkey’. True, he was not, outside music, very cultured, in the usual sense of the word, nor in his manner and deportment would anyone have taken him for an aristocrat. True, too, that he was generally a man of few words, but that’s hardly the same thing. We get an interesting slant on this matter from his younger friend, the composer Leoš Janáček, thirteen years his junior. The two men were close, and often went on long excursions together with hardly a word exchanged between them. When Dvořák was asked a question, by Janáček or anyone else, there was no guarantee that he would respond at all, which could be disconcerting, no doubt. But not to Janáček, who knew just what was going on.

JANÁČEK: Dvořák was almost continually deep in thought. But his intelligence was of a quite special kind. He was a man who thought exclusively in tone and seldom paid heed to anything else.

And while he was certainly far from illiterate, he wasn’t verbally articulate. When he did pay heed, which was probably far more often than even Janáček perceived, his first thought was never to express it in words. It’s ironic but true that even many writers, some of them very distinguished, are inarticulate and hesitant in speech. Many could paraphrase a gossipy character in the novels of E.F. Benson and say ‘How do I know what I think till I see what I write?’ So a composer might say ‘How do I know what I think till I hear what it sounds like?’ Of course Dvořák was intelligent! And he certainly had his deeper, even profound side. But he was also a genuine ‘man of the people’, as they say, and he communicated with a directness and a total lack

of condescension that endeared him, through his music, to millions. A good example is another work written in the wake of little Josefa's death, the E major Serenade for Strings, whose popularity has continued unbroken from Dvořák's time to our own.

9 Serenade in E for strings, Op. 22 (mvt 2: Walzer)

10 The winning of the Austrian Stipendium, to give it its proper name, was more than a step up on Dvořák's ladder to fame and fortune. It marked the beginning of one of the most touching and significant friendships in musical history. Dvořák's first letter to Brahms, formal but sincere in every line, is a far cry from the stylised self-abasement that characterises the letters of the eighteenth century (Bach's and Handel's, for instance).

DVOŘÁK: Prague, Third of December 1877

Honoured Sir,

I have lately received a letter from the esteemed Professor Hanslick in which he informs me that at a recent session with His Excellency, Minister Stremayer, I was, on your kind recommendation and that of the Professor, awarded a grant for artists. At the suggestion of the esteemed Professor Hanslick, I venture to address these few lines to you, honoured Master, in order to express to you my deep-felt thanks for the kindness you have shown me.

What I count a still greater happiness, however, is the sympathy you have been good enough to accord to my modest talent and the favour with which (as Professor Hanslick tells me) you received my Czech vocal duets. Professor Hanslick now advises me to procure a German translation of these songs which you, dear Sir, might be so kind as to recommend to your publisher. It is my duty to address myself to you with one more request that you should be good enough to be of assistance to me in this matter, which, for me, is of such great importance. It would be, indeed, not only for me but also for my beloved country, of immeasurable value if you, honoured Master, whose works delight in such great measure the whole musical world, would give me such an introduction.

With the earnest request that I may continue in the future to enjoy your highly valued favour, I beg your kind permission to forward to you for your inspection some of my chamber music works and compositions for orchestra.

I have the honour to be,
Your most respectful and devoted
Antonín Dvořák

Brahms answered, near enough, by return of post.

BRAHMS: Dear Sir,
Allow me, briefly, to thank you for your letter and for the great pleasure given me by the works you sent. I have indeed already taken the liberty of writing about them to Mr Fritz Simrock. From the title it would appear that the Duets are still your property, in which case you could sell them to Mr Simrock. The only thing needed now is to get a good German translation. Can you manage that? I beg you, however, not to rush the matter, lest the work suffer in consequence. In the meantime you could perhaps send the folio to Mr Simrock to have a look at. The rest will then follow. Forgive my haste, but I should not like to have the matter delayed. Hoping to hear further from you, and favourably, I remain, Your very respectful and entirely devoted Johannes Brahms.

To get such a letter from Brahms in the first place would have made Dvořák's day, but the connection to Simrock, Brahms's own publisher and one of the most powerful and influential in the whole of Europe, marked a turning-point in Dvořák's career. And in writing to Simrock Brahms had hardly minced his words. Having first recommended Dvořák's Moravian Duets in no uncertain terms, he returned to the campaign after 'inspecting' the selection of chamber music that Dvořák had mentioned.

BRAHMS: I have no idea what risks you are prepared to take with this man. Nor have I any idea about business matters, or what interest there is for larger works. I have only my eyes and my ears. But get him to send you his two string quartets, and have them played to you. The best that a musician can have, Dvořák has – and it is in these compositions. In short I can say only that I heartily recommend Dvořák, both in general and in particular.

No more was necessary. With Brahms behind him, Simrock effectively put Dvořák on the international map. When he next wrote to Brahms, Dvořák thanked him in the best way he knew how.

DVOŘÁK: I now venture, most highly honoured Master, to approach you with a request. I hope that you will see fit to allow me, out of gratitude and with the deepest respect for your incomparable musical works, to offer you the dedication of my D minor String Quartet. It would be for me the highest honour to which I can aspire. To subscribe myself thus as bound to you in eternal gratitude would render me, I assure you, the happiest of men.

Your devoted Servant,

Antonín Dvořák.

At the beginning of 1878, Brahms left Vienna on a concert tour of Germany, and was thus away both for the arrival of Dvořák's letter and the subsequent appearance of the man himself (it was Dvořák's first visit to the city). It was a disappointment to both men. In later accepting the dedication of the quartet, Brahms also offered Dvořák some advice, presented with a gentleness not generally associated with him.

BRAHMS: Dear Sir,

I am extremely sorry to have missed you when you were here. The more so because I have in general such an aversion to writing letters that I cannot hope to make up for the loss by correspondence. But rest assured that it gives me the greatest pleasure to occupy myself with your things. I would give a great deal, however, to be able to discuss individual points with you personally. You write, if I may say so, somewhat hurriedly. When filling in the numerous missing sharps, flats and naturals, it would be good to look a little more closely at the notes themselves and at the voice parts etc.

Forgive me the observation, but to an artist as rare as yourself it is very desirable to point out such things. I also accept the works just as they are, very gratefully, and consider myself greatly honoured by the dedication of the quartet.

Accept once more my best thanks, and warmest greetings from Your entirely devoted

Johannes Brahms.

Brahms's words of caution should not be taken as disparagement of the quartet itself, which is among the most attractive of Dvořák's works.

11 String Quartet in D minor, Op. 34 (mvt 1: Allegro)

CD 2

1 There's no reason to suppose that Simrock didn't share Brahms's enthusiasm for the D minor Quartet, but he was a canny businessman as well as an enlightened publisher and he knew that it wasn't through string quartets, however good, that he was going to make Dvořák a household name right across Europe. It was through splashier, more exotic and colourful works, suited equally to the concert hall (as orchestral works), and the middle-class parlour (as piano duets). The result was a commission for Dvořák's first set of Slavonic Dances, and they scored a hit from the start, probably beyond Simrock's wildest hopes.

2 Slavonic Dance in C, Op. 46 No. 1

3 With their tunefulness, their lively, catchy rhythms, and Dvořák's brilliant orchestration, the Slavonic Dances won over audiences in their thousands, but they scored an even greater hit with amateur pianists. In the drawing rooms and studios of musical homes around the world, they quickly became staples of the piano duet repertoire. And no wonder. Apart from anything else they can be tremendous fun to play.

4 Slavonic Dance in A, Op. 46 No. 5

5 With the success of the Slavonic Dances Dvořák's reputation spread like wildfire, and by 1880 his works were being widely performed on both sides of the Atlantic. By no means all of this was due to Simrock. Also influential was the German composer and critic Louis Ehlert.

EHLERT: I was sitting one day in a very bad humour, buried in a heap of musical novelties, when suddenly two works by a composer totally unknown to

me immediately engrossed my fullest attention: Slavonic Dances for four hands and Moravian Songs for soprano and contralto by Antonín Dvořák. The composer is a Czech. He lives in Prague and until a few years ago was a viola player in the Opera there. He has published, as yet, very little, but is reputed to have a great quantity of compositions ready, including quartets and symphonies. And this is all I could find out about him. To put the matter shortly: here, at long last, is a one hundred per cent talent and, what's more, a completely natural talent. I consider the Slavonic Dances to be a work which will make its triumphant way through the world in the same way as Brahms's Hungarian Dances. But there is no question here of imitation; his dances are not in the least Brahmsian. Divine Providence flows through this music and that is why it is altogether popular. There is not a trace of artificiality or constraint. Everything is so effectively and colourfully arranged. To what extent and what material has been taken from Czech folk music I do not know; but it hardly matters. We are confronted here with perfected works of art, not with some pastiche stuck together from scraps of national melody. As always among talents of a high order, humour has an important place in Dvořák's music. He writes such jolly basses that the heart of every musician must laugh within him. The duets, based on very charming folk verses, are also notable for their wonderful freshness. On reading them I felt in my heart as if I were watching lovely girls pelting each other with sweet-scented flowers on which the dew was still sparkling. I do not say yet we have genius here, for that we must await further works, but undoubtedly we have before us an exceptionally pleasing talent. And that is something of which we are badly in need. For the men who awaken the greatest interest at the present time are so dreadfully earnest. I cannot help thinking how splendid it would be if a musician should once again appear among us about whom we should as little think of quarrelling as about the coming of spring. It is incumbent upon anyone who finds a jewel on the public highway to report his find. I therefore implore the reader to look upon these lines from that perspective – and from yet another. For just as all advertisement is repugnant, so every effort is justified which aims at shortening, for real talents, the gloomy period of undeserved obscurity.

The article produced a positive ‘run’ on the music shops, and made Dvořák a star in Germany almost literally overnight. As a token of his gratitude, he dedicated to Ehlert the splendid Serenade for wind instruments – a work whose relative neglect today is hard to understand.

6 Serenade for wind instruments, Op. 44 (mvt 1: Moderato, quasi marcia)

Part of the first movement of the Serenade for wind instruments, Op. 44.

7 The speed with which the Dvořák bandwagon started rolling after Ehlert’s article must have been both exciting and a little daunting for the composer himself. Close on the heels of its publication, Simrock now brought out three new Slavonic Rhapsodies, the Serenade for wind, the String Quartet in E and the String Sextet, two sets of songs, more Moravian Duets, and other works, all in a matter of months. Nor was Simrock Dvořák’s only publisher. Simultaneously Bote & Bock published five of Dvořák’s compositions, including the Theme and Variations for piano, the Serenade for strings, and the Piano Trio in G minor. Dvořák had sprung with astonishing suddenness from relative obscurity to international celebrity. And the torrent of publications was soon followed by a corresponding rash of foreign performances. Some of the Slavonic Dances were played in Hamburg and Nice in January 1879, and in London in February. The second Slavonic Rhapsody was given in Dresden on 3 September, No. 3 had its world premiere in Berlin three weeks later, and early in the new year No. 1 was performed in Baltimore, Maryland, thus introducing Dvořák to America. On both sides of the Atlantic, from Riga in the east to New York and Cincinnati in the west, Dvořák’s music was championed by many of the greatest soloists, ensembles, orchestras and conductors in the world. As early as April 1880, less than five months after Ehlert’s article, the first concert devoted entirely to works by Dvořák was given in Hamburg, the birthplace, appropriately enough, of Johannes Brahms. Among the works on the programme was the extraordinarily sweet and lyrical Romance in F minor for violin and orchestra.

8 Romance in F minor for violin and piano, Op. 11

9 In Ehlert’s first letter to Dvořák, he made a request often made of the suddenly famous.

EHLERT: If you have a picture of yourself, do send it to me. One likes to know what the person in whom one takes an interest looks like.

The first verbal description of Dvořák's appearance that we know of comes from around the same time and was penned by a Prague bookseller and writer, one L. K. Žižka.

ŽIŽKA: Dvořák was interesting as a person. When I first saw him he must have been close to 40. Not very tall, rather thick-set, but restless, unable to stand still for a minute. His face was not very refined, but so distinctive that you could never forget it. Dark-complexioned, with a short, tousled beard that sometimes seemed to stand on end; his features were rather sullen, with two very pronounced vertical furrows above his nose. His brown eyes kept wandering abstractedly and had a far-away expression. Later, Dvořák wore a pince-nez for reading but perched it almost on the end of his nose beside a wart. He rarely took off his outside coat even when indoors, and kept his hat – a bowler – on his head. Occasionally, when engaged in conversation about musical matters, would he take it off, rather mechanically, and put it down somewhere, only to put it on his head again a little time later.

Another interesting memoir comes from the theatrical manager František Šubert.

ŠUBERT: Notwithstanding the flashing of the eyes, which at times looked searchingly, almost mistrustingly, at times with the open gaze of a child, and notwithstanding the mobility of the lips, Dvořák's face had always a certain dreaminess and even meditateness of expression. He looked as a rule very serious, rarely did he laugh. Nor did he himself often joke, though he was amused by the jokes of others. He used to come and see me at my office at the National Theatre either when he had finished some work – something new or the revision of an old work – or when rehearsals of his works were on. I do not remember him ever sitting down. He usually walked to and fro or stood at my desk or at the window, gazing into space, now in one direction, now in another, spoke or listened. And it would happen that in the middle of a sentence he would suddenly break off and become lost in thought. In his mind some musical idea had taken wing and was soaring and singing like a skylark, and sometimes he straight away began to whistle it. Only after a while, and as if there had been no interruption, he would return to reality and to what he was saying. Or during a conversation about a certain subject, he would suddenly

start speaking about something quite different, his mind fully occupied with it. Sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, he would turn on his heel with a greeting, or even without, and be gone. And he would maybe return in a few days 'to finish what we were talking about'. That was all due to the music in him. He thought, for the most part, not in words but in tone. It was almost to be seen in his eyes and face, a constant boiling and gushing up of the geyser of sound in those innumerable melodic combinations which form the substance of his work.

Many people, seeing him for the first time, found it hard to reconcile this rather eccentric, unworldly, apparently *simple* man with the highly sophisticated music that seemed so effortlessly to flow from his pen.

10 Symphony No. 6 in D, Op. 60 (mvt 1: Allegro non tanto)

The opening moments of the Symphony No. 6 in D, perhaps the most evidently Brahmsian of all Dvořák's symphonies.

11 It was dedicated to the great conductor Hans Richter, who understood very well what an honour this was. As he wrote at the time:

RICHTER: My dear and noble Friend,

On my return from London I find your splendid work awaiting me whose dedication makes me truly proud. Words do not suffice to express my thanks: a performance worthy of this noble work will prove to you how highly I value both it and the honour of the dedication. Forgive me for not having written immediately after my arrival in Vienna. The preparations for the Philharmonic Concerts and theatre work of all kinds did not allow my studying the symphony properly, and without a thorough acquaintance with it I did not wish to write to you. If I do not manage to give a performance of your symphony in this series of Philharmonic Concerts, I shall give a special concert of my own in order to present your work to the public before the end of the season. It will certainly be performed, as well as one of your Rhapsodies, at the second concert of my London season; I gave the one in A flat last year.

Once more my very warmest thanks and kindest regards, Your ever devoted,
Hans Richter.

The circumstances surrounding its first performance were enough to explain why there was one piece of advice from Brahms on which Dvořák resolutely refused to act. Both Brahms and Hanslick were convinced that Dvořák's career and his development as a composer would be greatly enhanced if he left Prague and took up residence in Vienna – as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms himself had done before him. Dvořák was already acutely sensitive to the fate of his country at the hands of the Habsburg dynasty in Austria, and to the continuing animosity and condescension of the German-speaking peoples towards his native land. As it happens, it was Richter, its dedicatee, who was originally to have conducted the symphony's premiere in Vienna, but anti-Czech feeling put an early stop to that plan. This likewise strengthened Dvořák's refusal to write a work in German for the Vienna Imperial Opera, despite pleas from the management (and from Hanslick and Brahms, too, of course). Nevertheless, it was *in* Germany that the Sixth Symphony had its first performance outside Prague, and few who heard it then had any doubt that it was the work of a major master at the very peak of his powers. Nor could they help but realise, especially in the third movement, the 'Furiant', that his Czech background – no, it was much more than that – that his Czech *identity*, played an essential part in his musical make-up, and that it was *central* to much of his most exciting and most original music. And the ironic fact is that Brahms himself, for all his championing of Dvořák's music, and his liking for the man, shared in the generally anti-Czech sentiments of the Germanic lands as a whole. Perhaps his desire for Dvořák to move to Vienna was motivated in part by the hope of de-Czechifying him, so to speak.

From the beginning, Dvořák was blessed with a natural humility which endeared him easily to people, both personally and through his music, and this quality he never lost. Despite the enormous musical sophistication he acquired, Dvořák was never a very worldly man, and it was entirely characteristic of him that for much of his career, his study doubled as the family parlour. He often composed at the kitchen table, with the bustle and clatter of his family surrounding him like a kind of noisy cocoon. But the international clamouring for Dvořák resulting from his skyrocketing fame meant that such cosy luxuries now became more intermittent. Nothing in the flurry of his burgeoning celebrity excited him more than his first invitation, in 1883, to visit England, a country where his music was already well known and with which he was to have a mutual love-affair that lasted for many years. The music-loving public in England (and by no

means only in London) knew him not only through such guaranteed crowd-pleasers as the Slavonic Dances but also through the more intimate and poignant world of his chamber music.

12 Piano Trio in F minor, Op. 65 (mvt 3: Poco adagio)

Part of the F minor Piano Trio, written shortly before Dvořák's departure for England in 1844.

13 Dvořák, at forty-two, was world-famous but an inexperienced traveller. London was like nothing he'd ever imagined. Overwhelmed by its sheer size on his arrival, he wrote to his father, now an inn-keeper in the Czech town of Kladno.

DVOŘÁK: Oh how I wish you could see this great city for yourself. With all its bustle and its sheer vitality it would simply take your breath away. There's no point in trying to describe it, because no one who hasn't seen, or heard it, could possibly believe it. Imagine only this: if all the Czech inhabitants of Bohemia were to gather together, they still wouldn't equal the number of Londoners.

But it wasn't just the size of London that impressed him.

DVOŘÁK: If the entire population of Kladno were to visit the Royal Albert Hall, where I'll be conducting my *Stabat mater*, there would still be plenty of room for more. That, if you can credit such a thing, is how big the Albert Hall is!

In size and appearance, the Albert Hall remains much the same as it was in Dvořák's day. But what he encountered inside the hall was another matter. As he stepped onto the podium to begin the first full rehearsal of the *Stabat mater*, he was confronted by forces whose like, though quite typical of Victorian England, has today disappeared from the face of the earth.

DVOŘÁK: Facing me were no fewer than 250 sopranos, 160 altos, 180 tenors and, again, 250 basses. As for the orchestra, the strings alone boasted 24 first violins, 20 second violins, 16 violas, 16 cellos *and* 16 double basses! The

effect, as you can well imagine, was simply stupendous; indeed it was just as impossible to describe as London itself.

Indescribable, and nowadays, undemonstrable. Forces like that betokened not only enormous wealth but the boundless self-confidence of an empire which honestly believed that the sun would never set on it. And of course those who dwell (or think they do) at the hub of the universe can afford to be generous – something which Dvořák soon discovered for himself.

DVOŘÁK: At the concert my appearance was greeted with a storm of applause. The general enthusiasm grew steadily from item to item and at the end the reaction was so great that I had to thank the audience time and time again – and all the while the orchestra and chorus overwhelmed me from the other side with the heartiest ovation of their own. It all turned out, in short, better than I could have hoped for. The English are a good, warm-hearted and music-loving nation – and it's a well-known fact that once they take a liking to someone, they remain faithful to him. God grant that it may be so with me.

It was. And that mention of a 'music-loving nation' was both absolutely true, and ironic. Ironic because between Purcell in the late seventeenth century and the emergence of Elgar late in the nineteenth, England failed to produce a single composer of the front rank, hence the contemptuous description of it by the Germans as 'Das Land ohne Musik' – 'the land without music'. No. Not fair. Yes, they had to import their favourite composers from abroad – Handel and Haydn in the eighteenth century, Mendelssohn in the first half of the nineteenth, and Dvořák in the second. But in how many countries in the mid-nineteenth century would a thousand hopeful music-lovers be turned away from a sold-out concert featuring Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet, Beethoven's 'Archduke' Trio and Schumann's *Carnaval*? Come to that, in how many countries *today*?

The English, already familiar with Dvořák's music, responded to the man with a feeling which could fairly be described as love. With his doggy, peasant-like appearance, his simple warmth, and his reticent authority he made at first a startling contrast with England's earlier idol Mendelssohn, but the public response to him was if anything even more rapturous. When he left England he was not only a famous composer but well on his way to becoming a *wealthy* one, and he carried in his pocket a £2,000 commission from an English publisher.

14 Once home, with the spoils of his latest successes, Dvořák bought a modest country house near the mining village of Vysoká, not far from Prague. Here, with his steadily expanding family around him, he settled down to work, and basked in the beauties of nature all around him. It was only the first of his country retreats – his family soon outgrew it – but for the moment it suited him down to the ground. It's also from this time, and in this place, that he took up rearing pigeons. Indeed it became almost an obsession with him. He certainly preferred it to music as a subject of conversation – and he loved going to the inn of an evening and chatting with the locals. He loved just listening to them. They were his roots: shepherds, miners, hostellers – and, yes, butchers and grocers. Not that he turned up his nose at the educated. Among the first of his new acquaintances here was Bohumil Fidler, organist and choirmaster at the nearby town of Příbram.

FIDLER: The Master's first retreat at Vysoká, where he always spent the holidays with his family, was an ordinary walled granary behind the villa in the woods where Count Kaunitz used to keep his carriages and sledges. Only when it got about that Dvořák planned to spend the summer there was the place adapted as living quarters. Later, when the Master had a larger family, he bought from his brother-in-law a big place known as 'The Sheepfold' from which there's a lovely view of the nearby village of Třebesko. He fenced the place in, built a small one-storey house in the middle and laid out a lovely large garden round it. Here, surrounded by his family, whom he loved above everything, he spent many happy holidays and created many beautiful works.

The Master was fond of going to church in Třebesko or Bohutín and playing the organ at mass. What he liked best of all, however, was to accompany the congregation singing, and often used to say that a hymn sung by the people is far preferable to a badly performed mass sung by the choir. More than once he remarked to the choirmaster in Bohutín, Mr Peták:

DVOŘÁK: You know, in Prague they don't sing as they do here. They sing, too, of course, but it's not the same thing. Because here the people are still a little religious.

Dvořák himself was devoutly religious, with the same kind of unquestioning, all-pervasive faith that had characterised Bach and Haydn. As far as we can tell, he was never troubled in the slightest degree by the yawning, the *clamorous* doubts that had been unleashed by the Industrial

Revolution in the eighteenth century, and compounded in the nineteenth, to an almost spectacular degree, by the theories of Charles Darwin. As never before in human history, God was on trial – but Dvořák, with his essentially simple and luminous faith, was nowhere near the courthouse. It was his belief in God above all else that sustained him through the loss of several children, and he was deeply troubled by the atheism of his idol and benefactor Brahms.

DVOŘÁK: Such a man, with such a soul – and yet... he doesn't believe in anything. He believes in... nothing.

One thing that Brahms and Dvořák had very much in *common* was their love of nature. Both were great walkers, and found the outdoors invigorating to both mind and spirit. As Dvořák wrote to a friend not long after settling into his new house at Vysoká:

DVOŘÁK: I've been here for some days now, in the loveliest woods where I'm spending the most wonderful days, in near-perfect weather, and I'm filled with ever-new admiration as I listen to the enchanting song of the birds. In doing so, however, I never think of composing – for that you must take my word, even though it seems unlikely, since most composers are inspired to work by the singing of birds, and in listening to them beautiful melodies often occur to them – but I give myself up entirely to the sheer enjoyment of it, and work only when I feel rested and have gained new strength. Don't laugh at me for wanting once to write poetically, but it's such a lovely morning today – quite indescribably lovely! And to think that here in this solitude I shall at last have my own piano! I bought it in Prague, with my own money, and am now going with a big wagon to fetch it from Příbram.

It would be wrong to think that Dvořák confined his love of birds to the field and the forest. Wherever possible he liked to be surrounded by them, and not just by his beloved pigeons. When it comes to song, pigeons are easily upstaged. And at Dvořák's country home, as Fidler witnessed many times, they were seldom allowed to forget it.

FIDLER: At home and in the garden arbour at Vysoká he used to have a great many cages with songsters, mostly thrushes, and always when they sang he would say to me: 'Do you hear them? How they sing! They are the real

masters!’ One beautiful summer evening we were walking through the park behind the Count’s villa. We had gone beyond the pond into the woods. All the song-birds of the forest, as if at a word of command, started their evening concert. The Master, much affected, sat down on a bench and said: ‘Sit down, comrade, and listen: it is divinely beautiful!’ And with deep emotion added: ‘You know, before I die, I shall write a fine bird symphony and I shall put my very best into it!’

Well that, as it happens, remained an unfulfilled ambition. There was never time (though snippets of annotated birdsong did in fact find their way into the ‘New World’ Symphony). But he did find time, as Otakar noted, for less exalted activities.

OTAKAR: Something that was quite unknown to the general public is that my father was very keen on gymnastics, which at first consisted in taking a chair and doing arm exercises with it. Later he got himself dumb-bells and exercised with them early in the morning. He was also something of a sportsman. His favourite sport was skittles, at Vysoká. Almost every Sunday morning, and usually Thursday afternoon as well, was devoted to a game of skittles, in an alley situated at the foot of the garden. The set of skittles is still kept at Vysoká as a much-prized souvenir.

Within weeks of moving into the house at Vysoká, Dvořák received another summons to England, this time from the organisers of the Three Choirs Festival. That autumn, only a few months after returning from his first visit, he found himself in Worcester – or, as he spelled it in a letter, ‘Vorchester’. One of Dvořák’s great charms was the fact that as a humble man from a humble background he could never quite get used to celebrity. In Worcester, to no one’s surprise but his own, he found that he was something of a local hero.

DVOŘÁK: Everywhere I appear, whether it’s in the street, or at home, even when I go into a shop to buy something, people come crowding round me and ask me for my autograph. There are pictures of me at all the booksellers – and people actually *buy* them simply in order to have some memento of me.

The English also took pains to see that Dvořák, in his turn, would not forget them. Back in Vysoká he had to attend, in fairly short order, not to one, or even two, but three major English commissions. One of these was a symphony, written for his first British host, the Philharmonic Society of London. It was finished near the end of March, and in April, on his third visit to England in little more than a year, Dvořák arrived to conduct it. It turned out to be, by common consent, the greatest work he had produced to date.

16 Symphony No. 7 in D Minor, Op. 70 (mvt 1: Allegro maestoso)

Part of the Symphony No. 7 in D minor, written for the Philharmonic Society of London in 1885.

17 Throughout his tours to Britain and elsewhere, Dvořák regularly appeared in the dual capacity of composer and conductor. Where conducting is concerned, he'd learned his craft entirely by watching others, usually from his vantage point in the orchestra, during those ten years when he composed in secret. And from that point of view, his teachers, if we can call them that, included the best in the business, with Wagner at their head. Wagner the conductor was almost as much of a colossus as Wagner the composer, and the concerts he conducted in Prague electrified Dvořák. It was an experience he never forgot, though his own style of conducting was naturally very different from Wagner's. Wagner, along with Berlioz, was among the first conductors who devoted as much time to interpretation as they did to more general matters of ensemble and orchestral balance. He was perhaps the first of what might be called the 'choreographic' conductors, whose sometimes extravagant gestures were a visual counterpart to the sounds he wanted to draw from the orchestra; and his interpretations were of unparalleled intensity. Dvořák, for all his near-worship of Wagner, was a much less flamboyant conductor – something which the Czech critic Emanuel Chvála welcomed.

CHVÁLA: Dvořák is not one of those 'salon' conductors whose concern is that their pose at the desk should make an impression and that the baton in their hands may describe elegant lines; he conducts modestly, with those involuntary movements of the body which show that the spirit, in the process of reproduction, is living once more over the composition it created; yet he conducts with that concentrated musical devotion which fires the masses and communicates itself to the performing musicians, filling them with enthusiasm for their task, and making each one an indispensable part of the whole. If

Dvořák had not become a famous composer, he could have become a celebrated conductor – his musical talent is universal.

Another witness was Žižka.

ŽIŽKA: I saw Dvořák as a conductor at one of the Popular Concerts. But surprisingly enough, to me, he showed no hint of nervousness and his gestures derived entirely from the score, and were directed solely at the orchestra. It seemed to me that at the desk he had actually grown taller, but it was probably only an illusion, born of the excitement of the moment.

And the critic Ladislav Dolanský confirms that Dvořák the conductor, like Dvořák the man, was simple and direct and without a trace of vanity.

DOLANSKÝ: I remember, indelibly, that moment when Dvořák had finished conducting and turned to face the audience. The proud forehead with its almost hard expression, with its deep furrows and with that lovely spiritualised eye. That's always how I picture him in my mind's eye. So composed, so contemptuous of the daily bustle and tumult.

Well, one knows what he means, but still, the word 'contemptuous' sits uneasily in any description of Dvořák. Dvořák, to use a current phrase, didn't 'do' contempt. It was one of the things that made him so much loved by audiences as well as colleagues. And it's reflected in the warmth, generosity and gentle lyricism of much of his music.

18 Czech Suite, Op. 39 (Preludium: Pastorale)

Part of the Pastorale from the Czech Suite, Op. 39.

19 The unveiling of the Seventh Symphony in London in 1885, as I said earlier, marked Dvořák's third visit to England in less than two years. His pleasure at being in the country was as great as ever, but the novelty of the place, inevitably, was beginning to wear off and his thoughts turned increasingly to his newly established home at Vysoká. Once back there, he took a couple

of months off, relaxing, as before, in the congenial company of his family, his pigeons, and his neighbours.

In August, travelling for the first time on his own, he made his fourth visit to England – this time to conduct his choral ballad *The Spectre's Bride*, commissioned by and for the Birmingham Festival. Just prior to the grand affair he decided to do a little travelling for the fun of it, and discovered a side of English society that he hadn't met before. We first hear about it in a letter to his friend Antonín Rus, from the seaside resort of Brighton:

DVOŘÁK: 7 Victoria Mansions, West Brighton. August the 19th 1885.

So here I am! having arrived safely on Monday the 7th of August at 6 a.m. (alone this time). London was still asleep, everything quiet and not a soul in the streets. I was quite done up by the journey and the same afternoon I had to go to Birmingham where there was an open rehearsal in the evening of 'The Spectre's Bride'. It turned out splendidly, everything just as I would have liked it. The choir is 500-strong and had studied it to the last semiquaver. Before the rehearsal and after I was given a rousing welcome by both the choir and the audience. The next morning I returned to London and today I am writing to you again from somewhere else – the seaside town of Brighton, to which the wealthiest London class go in summertime. From my window I have a lovely view of the sea, and the sight of thousands of people swarming everywhere: the lovely English women bathing (and publicly) among the men and children. Then, too, there are a countless number of boats large and small, a band playing Scottish folksongs, and goodness knows what else besides. Everything is so enchantingly lovely that no one who has seen it can ever forget it. I am very content and often call you to mind. Tomorrow I'm off to London again, where I have a rehearsal with the orchestra (150 members), then on Friday it's back to Birmingham where I shall stay till the end of the Festival there.

By this time, Dvořák had become a household name in musical circles all over the country, and Birmingham was hungry for sight of him. Not that they were prepared to let him get away with just being seen. This much is clear from a letter written shortly after his arrival to his friend Alois Göbl.

DVOŘÁK: Well here I am in this immense industrial town where they make excellent knives, scissors-springs, files and I don't know what else, and besides these, music. And how well, too. It's terrible what the people here manage to do and to stand. There will be eight concerts in all and each, would you believe, will last from four to five hours! My day is Thursday the 27th at 8 p.m. Please think of me! I am looking forward to it immensely. The choir and orchestra are first-class. 100 sopranos, 100 contraltos, 100 tenors, 100 basses, 40 violins, 16 double basses, 16 cellos, and the wind instruments doubled. Just imagine what it will sound like when they start. The Birmingham papers gave me a very warm welcome and the London papers write, too, that my composition is likely to arouse the greatest interest and have the best reception. Maybe it will, and maybe it won't! We shall see! Anyhow, you'll read all about it! The aria number two (A flat major) for soprano and number sixteen (G flat major) evoked tremendous enthusiasm in London, both in the orchestra and among the audience. Albani sings so straight to the heart that it's a joy to listen to. I wish you could attend a performance of *The Spectre's Bride* here; I can't tell you what an impression it made on me. A thousand pities that you're not here! As for me, I already want to be home again, which I shall be around the 1st of September. This time I am travelling alone, as I wanted to see how it would be. Well, it was all right but the journey (48 hours) is terribly tiring. I must finish. I am going to bed. May all go well with you and don't forget Your good friend Dvořák.

20 As for Dvořák himself, there were things he couldn't forget just because he was away in England – much as he'd have liked to. One was the degree of anti-Czech prejudice in his publisher Simrock, who had written to him, making light of his demands to have his compositions printed with Czech as well as German titles, and mocking the Czechs in general. From Birmingham he penned a stinging (and a stung) reply.

DVOŘÁK: Do not laugh at my Czech brothers and do not be sorry for me either. What I asked of you was only a wish, and if you cannot fulfil it I am justified in seeing in it a lack of goodwill on your part, such as I have not found either among English or French publishers. It is evident that you have no idea of the circumstances in which I live.

But Simrock wouldn't take the point, or perhaps he took a perverse pleasure in taunting Dvořák. In any case, in late September Dvořák had to chide him again:

DVOŘÁK: Oh your last letter with its national-political comments was very entertaining. I only regret that you are so badly informed. That is how all our enemies or, more exactly, certain individuals, must write according to the tendency or intentions of this or that political paper. But what have we two to do with politics? Let us be glad that we can dedicate our services to art. And let us hope that nations which possess and represent art will never perish, no matter how small they are. Forgive me, but I only wanted to say to you that an artist has also his country in which he must have firm faith and for which he must have an ardent heart.

And Dvořák certainly had that. But, as his letters to Simrock make very plain, he lacked the tub-thumping, crusading zeal of the militant nationalist. His music – and by no means all of it either – was ‘national’ in feeling, atmosphere and style without quite being nationalistic. And some of it – some of the best of it – made no attempt to be overtly Czech. We get a very fair, rounded picture of Dvořák's particular brand of patriotism from the musician and university professor Dr Josef Zubatý.

ZUBATÝ: Dvořák was a Czech with every breath he breathed, though any kind of ‘huzzah patriotism’ was very much against the grain. Dvořák was born on Czech soil of Czech parents. He was, and remained, a Czech because, with his straightforward nature, utterly devoid of all deception, it was impossible for him to be otherwise. And even though he left Bohemia for a time, in the course of his profession, his heart remained in his country, to which he soon and gladly returned. Yet for a man who, in fact, achieved full recognition abroad sooner than at home, whose art gained him entry to all countries, whose art itself was international, nothing could have been easier than to grow lukewarm in his national consciousness. If this had happened, he would have been neither the first nor the last. But for Dvořák, no such thing was possible. Dvořák could not cease to be a Czech, just as he could not cease to be a human being or an artist. I remember accompanying him to London in 1885. On our arrival, he was

surprised to see placards announcing that ‘Herr Anton Dvořák’ was to conduct a new symphony on such-and-such a day. Dvořák insisted that the placards give the Czech designation of his name, not ‘Herr Anton’ but ‘Pan Antonín’ Dvořák. The club of German artists invited him at that time to an evening to be held in his honour, such as had been previously arranged for Bülow, Richter and others, but Dvořák declined, explaining politely that he was not a German artist.

Indeed he was not – a point he made many times over in his music, even in the most Brahmsian of his symphonies, No. 6 in D, whose thrilling third movement comes straight from the Czech folk tradition. The likelihood of a German composer writing this kind of thing would be very, very slight.

21 Symphony No. 6 in D, Op. 60 (mvt 3: Scherzo: Furiant)

Part of the third movement of the Sixth Symphony. And that brings us to the end of CD 2.

CD 3

1 Until he wrote the famous ‘New World’ Symphony (which was to be his last), the D major symphony, No. 6, was probably the most popular of all Dvořák’s large-scale works. Yet Simrock kept discouraging him from writing big works, claiming that they didn’t sell. What he most wanted, or so it seems, was an endless stream of ‘Slavonic Dances’, piano pieces, songs and chamber works, preferably miniatures. This did nothing to improve the increasingly strained relationship between publisher and composer, and when the English publisher Novello expressed an interest in bringing out some of his larger works, and offered him £2,000 for a new oratorio, Dvořák was more than interested. Violating the terms of his long-term contract with Simrock, he accepted the offer and, what’s more, sold his next symphony to Novello as well. To say that Simrock was not pleased would be putting it gently. With the publication, by Novello, of the oratorio *St Ludmilla* in 1886, Dvořák received a letter from Simrock which clearly stung him. He shouldn’t have been in the least surprised, but to judge from his reply, he was. This we must take with a fairly large pinch of salt – but it’s easy to understand his point of view.

DVOŘÁK: 16th April, 1886. Dear Simrock, I was very much surprised that you should permit yourself such a tone towards me. If you are so against me then I do not know if I shall be able to create with joy and enthusiasm. Of what great importance is it if once I publish, years later, a single work, and in England, too? Is it perhaps a crime and are you damaged by it? Besides, on my word of honour, I should not have done so if I had been able to remember any such written contract, but I swear I know nothing of it. My dear friend, you are now always casting it up against me that I ask too high fees, but how am I to provide for my wife and five children, whose needs are always growing in connection with their education etc.? How, as an artist, am I to exist if I am to be dependent on what I earn from you? As a father I have to care for a large family, for I must not only feed and clothe them but also make provision for their future, that is I must save for my children in order to ensure them a proper livelihood, and where am I to get it from? I pray you, consider all this. I know that you have always meant well by me, that you have a good and magnanimous heart – there is no need for me to trouble you with any long explanation, but you will, I am sure, share my point of view. Let me, I beg you, live too, and believe me that it has always been, and is also for the future, my fervent wish that there should be complete harmony between us.

With kind regards, Yours, Antonín Dvořák

In his letters to Simrock Dvořák writes like an efficient, level-headed businessman, and repeatedly takes Simrock to task for understanding neither the true nature of a composer's art nor the states of mind required to keep the creative engines running. In response to Simrock's persistent demands for lightweight fare, and specifically a second set of Slavonic dances, Dvořák wrote:

DVOŘÁK: You will forgive me but I have not the slightest inclination to think of such light music now. I must tell you that it will not be by any means so simple a matter with the second set of Slavonic Dances as it was with the first. To do the same thing twice is hellishly difficult. I'm sorry, but as long as I'm not in the right mood for it, I can do nothing. This is something that simply cannot be forced.

But Simrock seems to have been determined not to take the point. The badgering continued, and Dvořák's responses were equally stubborn.

DVOŘÁK: Dear Friend Simrock, We arranged in Carlsbad that I would send you the Slavonic Dances in the summer, not before, and so I cannot understand why you are so indignant now... You imagine composing as altogether too easy a matter; it is only possible to start when we feel enthusiasm. But it is difficult to talk about such matters.

Happily, things had changed a lot by the middle of June, and the tone of Dvořák's next bulletin on the subject was a far cry from these earlier exchanges.

DVOŘÁK: My Dear Friend,

I have been here at Vysoká for six weeks, and, as the weather is lovely and the country so beautiful, I'm better off than a pearl in an oyster, yet at the same time I'm far from being idle. I spend most of the day in my garden, which I keep in beautiful order and love as I do the 'divine art' of music, and I go for marvellous long rambles through the woods. There isn't much time for composing but now at least it's going ahead briskly. I'm enjoying doing the Slavonic Dances immensely and am sure that this second series will be quite different (no joking, no irony!). I think you will be pleased.

And pleased he was. As was the musical world in general. Not least the legions of amateur pianists hungering for new duets to play. Once again, Dvořák had hit the jackpot.

2 Slavonic Dance in A for piano duet, Op. 72 No. 15

3 One of Dvořák's second set of Slavonic Dances.

Simrock, of course, was delighted with the whole set, but typically, he saved his compliments to the composer until after publication.

SIMROCK: Now that your Slavonic Op. 72 has just come out, I must tell you again how very delighted I am with these splendid pieces! But – there's nothing

for it: they must be orchestrated! They simply cry out for it! And, dunderhead – if you don't do it soon yourself I shall have to ask somebody else to!

Well, unsurprisingly, Dvořák obliged, and conductors, like concert-goers, have been grateful to him ever since.

4 Slavonic Dance in B, Op. 72 No. 1

5 It was characteristic of Simrock's relations with Dvořák that even in delivering a compliment he had to put a sting in the tail. At the end of the same delighted letter we heard some of a moment ago, he wrote:

SIMROCK: And don't you go promising England any more works! If you do so – I shall confiscate them!!!

It was a hollow threat, and Dvořák knew it. Four years later, Simrock's posture was even more extreme, this time over Dvořák's latest large-scale work, but still Dvořák shrugged it off. As he wrote to his friend Göbl:

DVOŘÁK: The Requiem for England is now finished, thank goodness, but if I give it to Novello, Simrock swears that he'll take the matter to court. He plans to sue me, so he says, but I am not afraid. More on this later.

Simrock didn't sue him. When all was said and done, and however much he liked to growl, he knew very well on which side his bread was buttered, and his threats to Dvořák were never followed through.

In the same year that saw the publication of the second set of Slavonic Dances, Dvořák made his fifth trip to England, to conduct his oratorio *St Ludmilla* for the Leeds Festival, which had commissioned it. As with all his other English visits, it was a spectacular success. In a letter to a friend, and for all his much-remarked modesty and humility, he positively bubbled over with delight.

DVOŘÁK: At last everything is over. My victory was tremendous and I hasten to give you more details. *Saint Ludmilla* made in general a great impression and

was the high point of the whole festival as all the London newspapers write and as you will also read in our papers over the next few days. Such a choir and orchestra I had not yet heard in England. It was magnificent. But all words are vain. The welcome I got from the audience, the choir and the orchestra was so hearty and sincere that I was almost carried off my feet. During the performance, nearly every number was received with storms of applause and at the end of Part 1 the audience, choir and orchestra broke out into such cheers that I came over quite giddy. After Albani's singing of the aria 'O grant that I may kiss the dust from off thy feet', there was a death-like silence and I was later told that the audience had been moved to tears. In short it was most impressive. The choir numbered 350, the orchestra 120, and the best voices and artists. After it ended (it lasted from 11.30 in the morning till 3.00 in the afternoon), the calls for me seemed to go on forever and I had to bow again and again, while the whole choir and orchestra waved their handkerchiefs, and finally I said a few words to the audience in English, thanking them for their warm welcome and the excellent performance of my work, and this again called forth new storms of applause. In short it was a great day, on which I shall always look back with joy. The weather here, however, is really wretched, continual fog and rain – believe me I should love to be away from here, but it's no use: duty calls, so I must stay on till the 6th November, but then, with all good haste – to Prague!

On this fifth visit, plagued with the vagaries of English weather, Dvořák found the charms of travel beginning to wear thin. He therefore resolved to spend the next few years at home. In the year following his return, reunited with his family and dividing his time between Prague and Vysoká, he composed the lovely Terzetto for 2 violins and viola, the substantial Mass in D, and what was to prove the most popular of all his chamber works, the ever fresh Quintet in A major for piano and strings.

6 Piano Quintet in A, Op. 81 (mvt 3: ??)

Part of the third movement of the Piano Quintet in A major, Op. 81.

7 As Dvořák approached his fiftieth year, he began to be laden with honours. In June 1889 he was awarded the Austrian Order of the Iron Crown, leading to a trip to Vienna where he and his wife were received by the Emperor himself. In February 1890 the Prague Artistic Society held a banquet in his honour, the Czech University of Prague conferred an honorary doctorate on him, and shortly thereafter he was elected to the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts. But among all the happenings of this period none gave him greater pleasure than the blossoming of a new friendship. In 1888 Tchaikovsky conducted several concerts in Prague and the two men took to each other at once, as they also took to each other's music. The first surviving token of their friendship is a letter from Tchaikovsky written in Vienna in March 1888.

TCHAIKOVSKY: My dear, good and highly esteemed Friend,
Although it is terribly difficult for me to write in German, I must make use of this Panslav language to tell you that I have often thought of you and that I shall never forget how well and kindly you received me in Prague. I stayed for three weeks in Paris (where my concerts were very successful), then in London where everything went off equally well, and now I am returning to Russia and am only passing through Vienna. Dear Friend, give my kindest regards to your wife, and allow me to say once more that I am very glad and happy to have won your valued friendship. I hope we may see each other again in November. With a hearty hand-shake,
I remain your true friend, Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

They did indeed meet again in November, when Tchaikovsky returned to Prague to conduct another concert of his own works and the Czech premiere of his greatest opera, *Eugene Onegin*. Dvořák expressed his enthusiasm to Tchaikovsky at the time, of course, but neither of the two could talk with each other in their own languages, and Dvořák felt more secure in writing to Tchaikovsky than conversing with him – on this subject at least.

DVOŘÁK: Dear Friend, When you were last here in Prague I promised to write to you about your opera *Onegin*. Now not only your request compels me to do so but my inward desire to tell you all that I felt on hearing your work. I confess with pleasure that your opera made a very deep impression upon me – an impression such as I expect from a true work of art, and I do not hesitate to say that none of your compositions has given me such pleasure as *Onegin*. It is a

splendid work, full of warm feeling and poetry, and, at the same time, worked out to the last detail; in short, this music speaks to us and penetrates so deep into our soul that it is unforgettable. Whenever I go to the theatre I feel as if I were in another world. I congratulate you on this work and pray God you may be spared to give the world many more such compositions.

8 Tchaikovsky: Eugene Onegin (Act III: Polonaise)

Part of the Polonaise from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*.

9 Unsurprisingly, Tchaikovsky was more than pleased by Dvořák's enthusiasm.

TCHAIKOVSKY: Dear, beloved and esteemed Friend,

You cannot imagine how delighted I was with your letter. I value very highly your opinion of my opera, not only because you are a great artist but also because you are a man who is frank and sincere. I am exceedingly proud and happy that I have been able to deserve a sincere word of commendation from you, my dear Friend. I thank you once more from the bottom of my heart.

Forgive me for not answering your letter immediately. In spite of all my efforts to read your letter I could not understand it, although I guessed that its content was agreeable. The letter had to be sent to Moscow, for translation, and has reached me only today.

More far-reaching in importance than the translation of a letter, though, is the next subject in Tchaikovsky's reply.

TCHAIKOVSKY: About ten days ago I sent a letter to A.O. Patera requesting him to discuss with you in detail your journey to Moscow. I have not, however, so far received an answer. But I beg of you, dear Friend, to give your consent and come. It is the great wish of all of us here.

And the wish was granted. Dvořák agreed to come to Moscow and conduct a concert of his own music. Tchaikovsky was delighted, but at the same time a little anxious.

TCHAIKOVSKY: Oh thank you, dear Friend. You are doing our Moscow Musical Society a very great honour, and I am sure that Moscow will know how to express our great gratitude. Such an outstanding artist as yourself should be paid for his trouble with heaps of gold. As it is, alas, the resources of our Society are not so ample as to be able to give you a fee such as the greatness of your name would call for.

He goes on to explain the financial arrangements, but as long as he broke even Dvořák was more than happy to oblige. As it turned out, he conducted concerts in both Moscow and St Petersburg. In addition to the D major symphony, he conducted the first Slavonic Rhapsody, the *Scherzo capriccioso*, the Symphonic Variations and the *Adagio* from the Serenade for wind instruments. When it was all over, Dvořák wrote to his friend Gustav Eim, from St Petersburg.

DVOŘÁK: Dear Friend,

I promised that I would write to you and am now doing so. Before you get this letter you will perhaps know from the papers how it all worked out in Moscow – in my view well, but not so well as I had expected. That doesn't matter, however, for I still won a great moral victory in Moscow, at least so I was told in musical circles, and the orchestra was greatly taken with my compositions and played with real enthusiasm.

'Not so well as I had expected', 'a moral victory', 'or so I was told' – these weren't the sort of phrases Dvořák used when reporting on his European successes. Clearly the trip was not the kind of unalloyed triumphal march that Dvořák was now used to. But the reasons had nothing to do either with his music or his personality. They were political. As Slavs, the Czechs were blood brothers, or at any rate cousins, of the Russians. On the other hand, their long association with German culture, albeit as a subject nation in a Germanic empire, made them deeply suspect to the Russians. That such things could extend to their experience and reception of music in the concert hall may seem almost ridiculous to us in the twenty-first century, especially since the Russians had never themselves been subjected to German domination, but in the cauldron of international politics at the end of the nineteenth century, it was almost to be expected – 'almost' being the operative word, since the great Russian cities harboured a number of specifically German, or Germanic, organisations which functioned without any outside interference. As Dvořák reported to Eim in the same letter, one of these paid him very particular honour.

DVOŘÁK: The German Musical Society is giving my *Stabat mater* today in Moscow, and at the church they showed me great attention. I attended the rehearsal and everybody was deeply affected and at the end presented me with a laurel wreath. The director of the Society is called Bartz, one of my most ardent admirers, it seems. At a banquet at the 'Slav Bazaar', he made a moving speech, singing my praises. In St Petersburg my concert turned out splendidly. The public and the orchestra gave me a very hearty reception. After each movement of the Symphony – the D major – there was great applause, and after the Capriccio I was called back again and again.

10 Scherzo capriccioso, Op. 66

Part of the *Scherzo capriccioso*, one of Dvořák's most popular orchestral works, which he conducted on his Russian tour in 1890.

11 Some months after his return from Russia, Dvořák wrote to his friend Alois Göbl with an unexpected bit of news:

DVOŘÁK: Dear Friend, I have a lot to tell you. In the meantime, however, only the most interesting items, so listen! I have accepted the professorship at the Conservatoire (composition and instrumentation) and received a flattering letter from Prince Ferdinand of Lobkowitz in which he informed me that my appointment was agreed unanimously and with the greatest enthusiasm all round.

This was surprising news to many of Dvořák's friends, because he'd gone on for years about being unfit to teach, ill-equipped to teach, not interested in teaching. Ladislav Dolanský was one witness among many.

DOLANSKÝ: I remember one lively scene at Urbánek's shop when the question came up of Dvořák becoming a teacher at the Conservatoire. 'Me a teacher? Get away with you! My duty is to write, do you understand, not to

teach. I am too much of an old bear, and nobody – nobody, I tell you – will get me into doing that!’

True, he’d never been an academic and had learned far more, on the whole, from practical musicians than from professors. But from this point onwards, teaching was to play an important part in his life, and have a fundamental effect on his experiences and outlook as a composer.

Having turned down the position when it had been offered to him only a year earlier, Dvořák now gave it his most concentrated attention. This was a new world to him, and he was acutely conscious that he had few of the normal qualifications for entering it. The way he approached it makes for fascinating reading in the reminiscences of his pupils, several of whom, like Vítězslav Novák, became highly respected and influential composer-teachers in their own right.

NOVÁK: What kind of a teacher was Dvořák? The answer can be given in two words: he was a teacher-artist. He was a teacher only for the talented. Pupils who got to him through inadvertence or out of curiosity he managed to get rid of very quickly. He was remarkably practical, submitting each work to a detailed examination, drawing attention to our awkward places and mistakes in very apt comments. ‘Sometimes I could scream, but we learn a lot from it,’ Josef Suk once sighed. And he was absolutely right. Dvořák’s school was strict, but as salutary as a cold shower. He was never pedantic, however, and frequently praised an original idea with unstinting pleasure.

Josef Suk was already on his way to becoming one of the most prominent Czech composers of his generation. He was also to become Dvořák’s son-in-law. And from day one, he knew he was in the presence of an extraordinary musician.

SUK: Dvořák’s knowledge of musical works was absolutely astounding. Bach, Handel, Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Berlioz, Brahms, Wagner, Liszt – he knew the works of all these masters in the finest detail. He did not dislike Italian music nor did he share the then prevailing view that it was ‘hurdy-gurdy’. And, in general, there was no musical school or movement of which he did not take notice; he studied Bruckner, was interested in the young Richard Strauss, and was pleased when he saw among his students a

striving after new and independent expression. I brought to one of our first lessons a trio, a little composition from my boyhood days. On going through the second movement, which had a Dvořák colouring, he gave me a friendly look and remarked: 'I have heard something like it; seek and seek again, young man, as we had to seek'. He was interested in everything, nothing in our lives escaped his attention. He liked to read the papers and critical notices, both home and foreign, and read regularly Czech provincial papers, for he took a lively concern in the cultural activities of the countryside.

Among the earliest of Dvořák's pupils was Josef Michl, who sensed that for all his brilliance, his knowledge, his lively interest in most things, Dvořák too was on a 'learning curve'. As a teacher, he was finding his feet, and he could be a hard man to read.

MICHL: Only slowly, and often at the cost of bitter experience, did we get to know the Master and grasp his principles and requirements. Unfortunately, not even then did we succeed in satisfying our strict Master in every respect. Dvořák had his moods and, like every great spirit, he, too, suffered from so-called 'Divine discontent'. So, for instance, he would like certain parts in our compositions and on first seeing them he might be even positively enthusiastic; later, however, he no longer liked the self-same parts and required us to change them, improve them or even replace them, with better passages. As a result, many compositions or little pieces which were thought to be definitely finished had to be gone over again and sometimes practically recomposed. It can easily be imagined that such work was not as a rule easy, the less so as the Master did not usually indicate how the correction was to be carried out – and he himself only very rarely made the correction. And here we strike on the most typical feature of his method: if he found something (and that happened very often) with which he did not agree and which he wanted to have differently or better written, he forced us to think about it and did not give in till we had found a better way. It caused us not a few very unpleasant moments and a lot of difficulty, but to be quite sincere, it was for us a real blessing: 'What good would it be to you,' he would often say, 'if I were to write it the way it *should* be! It wouldn't be yours then and every musician worth his salt would know

that somebody had put it right for you. Anybody who wants to compose must get accustomed to thinking, and working, independently!’

His methods, however, could sometimes be confusing, and his moods unpredictable.

MICHL: One time he surprised us with the question: ‘who among us knows, really knows, what Mozart is?’ This mysterious question caused much cudgelling of brains and many views were put forward about Mozart’s significance. They were, however, only the usual commonplace phrases such as ‘Mozart is a classic – a composer of opera – of symphonies – Haydn’s successor – Beethoven’s antipode – a precursor of Romanticism’ and similar more or less senseless sentences. To all the answers the Master shook his head and the enigma remained unsolved. ‘Now that just shows how little sense and feeling you have for music. Do you really mean to say that not one of you can guess?!’ he asked, raising his voice. Nobody replied... Dvořák’s temperament boiled over: seizing the nearest pupil by the shoulder, he dragged him to the window and here – pointing with one hand to the sky and with the other shaking the pupil by the sleeve – asked him once more: ‘Now do you know? Do you see it?’ The pupil was in obvious embarrassment: now throwing an inquiring look at the Master, now gazing at the sky, he finally stuttered: ‘Excuse me, sir, I don’t see anything’. ‘What!? Do you not see the sun?’ ‘Yes, sir. I see it.’ ‘Well, then, why do you not tell us what Mozart is?’ And turning away from the window, seriously, loftily, but with tremendous enthusiasm, Dvořák pronounced this significant sentence: ‘Remember only this: Mozart... is sunshine!’

12 Mozart: Symphony No. 29 in A, K. 201 (Mvt 4: Allegro con spirito)

Part of the finale from Mozart’s Symphony No. 29 in A – sunshine indeed.

13 Whether Dvořák was a great teacher is open to doubt. But what did Dvořák know of great teaching? He was largely self-taught. He had no role models. And it was some time before he felt comfortable in his new professorial capacity. To begin with, he felt extremely uneasy, and often

somewhat intimidated by academics in general – all the more so if they were eminent scholars. So it was with mixed feelings that he reported to Göbl:

DVOŘÁK: I have just got a letter from England saying that the University of Cambridge wishes to honour me by conferring upon me the degree of Doctor ‘honoris causa’. Now what do you say about that? It seems that I must go there, however, and receive the degree in person. There’ll be quite an elaborate ceremony, apparently, after which I must conduct the *Stabat mater* and one of my symphonies. I am given to understand that this is a rare distinction and that the only foreign artist who has been similarly honoured is Joachim... Of course it goes without saying that I shall accept it.

And so he did. On 16 June 1891, the year of his fiftieth birthday, he could hardly conceal his excitement.

DVOŘÁK: Today, at 12 o’clock, I... shall become a Doctor!!! Can you imagine?! Besides me, there’ll be about six others, including a Russian zoologist. The lovely cap and gown which I’ll wear were given to me by the university choral society. The rest I’ll tell you about when it’s all over.

But when it was all over, the honorary doctor felt something less than undiluted pleasure.

DVOŘÁK: Oh, I was so nervous, I shall never forget how I felt. You know, I really don’t like such celebrations. Everywhere formalities and deans, and all the faces so terribly grave. It seemed that nobody there could speak anything but Latin; and when I finally figured out that they were actually talking to me I wished myself to be almost anywhere else, and I felt ashamed for a moment that I didn’t know Latin. But now that I think about it I have to smile and reflect that perhaps to have composed the *Stabat mater* is rather better, after all, than to understand Latin.

And, not only the *Stabat mater*, either. Four months after his linguistic embarrassment at Cambridge, Dvořák returned to England to unveil another work, the Requiem Mass, composed for the 1891 Birmingham Festival.

14 Dvořák's fame had by then spread across the Atlantic to America. At about the same time as he put the finishing touches to the Requiem, Dvořák got a cable from a Mrs Jeanette Thurber, an immensely rich patroness of music in New York. This determined lady, having sunk more than one and a half million dollars in an unsuccessful opera company, had recently turned instead to education and had founded a 'National Conservatory of Music'. Uniquely in those days, it was open to all races, and except for those who could afford to pay there were no tuition fees. The cable which Mrs Thurber sent to Dvořák was blunt and yet to the point: 'Would you accept,' it read, 'Directorship National Conservatory of Music October 1892, also lead six concerts your works.' Well, the first answer was a flat no; but American matrons aren't lightly deterred, and the richer they are the more persuasive they can be. In the end Dvořák accepted the offer, at a quite staggering annual salary (remember, this was 1892) of fifteen thousand dollars. So, on 15 September Dvořák took two of his children and his wife with him, left the other four children in the care of their grandmother, and embarked on his first transatlantic crossing.

DVOŘÁK: Our journey was lovely, and so we arrived safe and sound in 'the promised land'. The first view one gets of New York is quite amazing – especially the magnificent Statue of Liberty (in whose head alone there's room for sixty people and where banquets and the like are often held). Then too there is a tremendous amount of shipping, from every part of the globe. It's all extraordinarily impressive.

Hardly less impressive was Manhattan, then as now the centre of New York.

DVOŘÁK: The city itself is magnificent. Lovely buildings, beautiful streets, and everywhere the greatest cleanliness.

Well, times change. Nowadays it would be difficult to imagine the country-loving, pigeon-fancying Dvořák feeling quite at home in New York, but he did, at the beginning. Endearingly, and, I suppose, predictably, one of his first acts was to seek out the railway stations. He found the engines harder to study than at home, and the station-masters uncooperative, but Dvořák was not a man easily discouraged. If there was a chance of seeing, say, the Chicago express go whizzing by at 155th Street, he thought nothing of taking an hour's drive for that purpose alone. In New York he discovered a new passion: the harbour; and, being a methodical man, he made time for it

as he made time for everything else. Just as he reserved two days a week for visiting railway stations, and another two for walking in Central Park, so twice a week, as regular as clockwork, he went down to the docks. He knew to the day, even to the hour, which ships were arriving and departing, and he prided himself on being able to address his letters home stating exactly on which ship they'd be carried. New York, of course, provided him with pigeons too. All in all, though with a few reservations, Dvořák was enjoying himself.

DVOŘÁK: I am happy to report that I am as fit as a fiddle; in good heart, and, except for a few trifles, very well off. I must admit, however, that some things do annoy me: the noise and the policemen here – not to mention the drunken Irish women in the street – but one quickly gets accustomed to everything. As regards my work, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from nine to eleven I have composition classes; twice a week orchestra practice from four to six – and the rest of the time is my own. And it looks like I'll need it too. The Americans expect great things of me. They claim to see in me the saviour of music. You must forgive me for lacking a little in modesty but I'm only reporting what the newspapers are constantly writing. The main thing, apparently, is that I'm to show the Americans to the promised land – to the kingdom of a new and independent art. They expect me, in short, to create for them a national music. If the small Czech nation can have such musicians, they reason, why shouldn't they when their country and people is so immense. It's both a great and a splendid task, and I hope that with God's help I shall accomplish it.

He didn't, but it certainly wasn't for want of trying. Nor should anyone infer from all this that New York at that time (or Boston or Chicago or San Francisco) was still some kind of musical backwater. Far from it. It was one of the great musical, one of the great cultural, capitals of the world. The New York Philharmonic was the equal of any European orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera featured the greatest singers then living, the city was fairly awash with the top vocalists and instrumentalists of the time. Many great and historically significant works received their first performances there, indeed music was the very heart of the city's intellectual culture at large. For more than a decade, the most important and influential figure in the city's musical life was the great Hungarian-born conductor Anton Seidl, one of the leading conductors of the late nineteenth century, and a passionate Wagnerian. It was he, not Dvořák, who conducted the premiere of the 'New World' Symphony. And it was he, even more than Mrs Thurber, who first pioneered the

search for a truly ‘American’ music. It was also he who rekindled Dvořák’s early passion for Wagner and sought to weaken the influence of Brahms – which he did, though the process was already underway before Dvořák’s arrival in America.

In his search for the roots of a truly ‘American’ music, Dvořák steeped himself, insofar as he could, in the music of the American Indians (not so easy), and, more importantly, in the ‘plantation’ songs and spirituals of the African-American community, whose status as an oppressed minority struck deep chords in him. Many of these were sung to him, repeatedly, by Henry Thacker Burleigh, a young black musician at the Conservatory, whose grandfather had been a slave.

Dvořák the teacher, no less than Dvořák the composer, put a high value on the styles, and, far more importantly, on the spirit of folk music, and he encouraged his American pupils, especially those who were black, to draw on their own rich musical heritage. Nor was he one of those teachers who content themselves with professing. He believed in teaching, too, by example.

15 String Quartet in F, Op. 96 (‘American’ – mvt 1: Allegro ma non troppo)

Part of Dvořák’s String Quartet in F, the so-called ‘American’ Quartet, composed during a summer visit to Spillville, Iowa, deep in the flatlands of the American mid-West. And that brings us to the end of CD 3.

CD 4

1 Neither in the 1890s nor today are you likely to find Spillville even mentioned in the tales of other travellers. So what is it? And more to the point, what was Dvořák doing there?

DVOŘÁK: Spillville, right in the middle of America, is a purely Czech settlement, founded by a certain Spielmann, who died four years ago. In the morning, when I go to church, my way takes me past his grave, and strange thoughts always fill my mind at the sight of it, as of the graves of many other Czech countrymen who sleep their last here. These people came to this place about forty years ago. All of them were the poorest of the poor, but now, after great hardship and struggle, they’re very well off here. I like them – and they

too seem fond of me; especially the grandmas and granddads, who love it when I play to them in church.

When Dvořák played to them, which he did regularly at seven o' clock in the morning, he'd already been up and around, as was his habit, for a good three hours. He got up each day at four, went for a solitary walk (generally to a nearby stream or river) and at five settled down to a couple of hours' work at composition. At seven it was off to church, and a series of leisurely chats after the service – then once more back to work. He spent many of his afternoons in conversation with the older settlers, and sought out the company too of other compatriots who were further afield.

DVOŘÁK: We often go to visit Czech farmers, four or five miles away. You know, it's really very strange here. There are very few people and a vast amount of empty space. A farmer's nearest neighbour is often four miles off, and in the prairies there are only endless acres of flat field and meadow, and that's all you see. You don't meet a soul, other than the huge herds of cattle which, summer and winter, are out at pasture in the broad fields where the men go out to milk them. You see, it's really very 'wild' here, and sometimes very sad – sad even to despair.

Maybe. But one looks in vain for any such feelings in the music that Dvořák wrote in Spillville. All in all it was a good summer, as Dvořák acknowledged towards the end of his visit.

DVOŘÁK: The three months spent here in Spillville will remain a pleasant memory for the rest of our lives. We enjoyed being here; indeed we were very happy, though I must admit we found the three months of heat rather trying. It was made up to us, though, by being among our own people, our Czech countrymen. That gave us real joy.

During much of that strangely incongruous and happy summer, half Bohemian and half American, Dvořák was able to indulge his love of nature to the hilt. And he saw two things that fairly took his breath away. One was the Minehaha Falls, whose beauty moved him so much that, on the spot, he wrote down on his shirt cuff a tune which later surfaced in his Sonatina for violin and piano.

2 Sonatina in G for violin and piano, Op. 100 (Larghetto)

3 An even deeper impression, though, was made by the Niagara Falls, which he saw on his way back to New York. Before these he stood silent for a full five minutes, and when at last he spoke, he's reported to have exclaimed:

DVOŘÁK: Ah my Goodness, what a Symphony in B minor that will be!

The symphony by which his American years are still remembered, though, the one in which he sought to create a fusion of American themes and the great symphonic tradition of the Old World, was not in B minor but in E.

4 Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 ('From the New World' – mvt 1: Adagio – Allegro molto)

5 The impact made by the 'New World' Symphony, under the masterful guidance of Anton Seidl, was overwhelming. Not only to the audience but to the composer.

DVOŘÁK: The response was tremendous! Indeed the papers write that no composer ever had such a success! During the performance I sat in a box; the hall was full to overflowing with the best New York audience, and the people clapped so much that I had to thank them from the box, like a king!

This kind of reception, as we know, wasn't new to him. Far from it. But the almost childishly proud and joyous letters that he wrote to friends and family concealed feelings very far from joyous. The simple peasant with the world at his feet was not so simple. He had discovered, like very many others before and since, that the price of celebrity was a sense, in his case an almost overpowering sense, of responsibility. The expectations of the public, and particularly the American public, who had welcomed him as a new Messiah, weighed heavily on Dvořák's shoulders. And there were times when it all but crippled him. His American-born assistant Josef Kovařík was witness to this, repeatedly.

KOVAŘÍK: Before each concert, Dvořák felt sick. The day before the last rehearsal was the most difficult, not only for him, but for everyone in the

household. He could not work or read, and he became incurably restless. To relieve the tension we would go for walks together, but when he had made two or three trips around the park, he would suddenly be in a great hurry to go home.

During such episodes, those who knew him well had learned to keep a low a profile. But this kind of situation was typical long before Dvořák ever set foot in America. In the mid-to-late 1880s, he'd become prey to increasingly severe mood swings, and aspects of his personality emerged that were diametrically opposed to his popular image.

KOVAŘÍK: He could become irritable, bad-tempered, distraught; and in these moods, there was no making anything of him. Sometimes the most trifling question would put him into a blazing fury. At times like these, I had to be with him all day long.

And why? Because Dvořák had developed an obsessive fear of going out alone. He had always to be accompanied. In fact this was part of a wider pattern of phobias. He also developed a compulsive fear of fire, electricity and thieves – and his terror of hail and thunderstorms could be more than a little unsettling to his pupils, of whom Harry Hopkins was one.

HOPKINS: If there were an electrical storm in the offing, there could be no thought of a lesson till it passed. These storms, not uncommon in New York, were the bane of his existence. Indeed they could make him quite frantic – on some occasions banging on the piano as loud as he could to try and drown out the sound of the thunder.

Today we would say that he suffered from panic attacks, brought on by deep-seated anxieties. Against this backdrop it should come as no great surprise that Dvořák became a heavy drinker – not an alcoholic, exactly, but the weekly bills for beer during the Dvořáks' time in New York amounted to a quarter of the sum they were paying in rent. His genuine suffering during these attacks should not be underestimated, but it could be pretty hard, too, on even the most loving and understanding of his friends and family. Kovařík recalls one such time on the train out to Spillville. At that time it was illegal for the railway companies to serve liquor of any kind while passing through so-called 'dry' states like Pennsylvania. Dvořák's nerves were already on edge

because of a relatively mild but unexpected thunderstorm, and this transitory prohibition tipped him over the edge. ‘So this is America?!!’ he screamed:

DVOŘÁK: America?!! The land of the free?!! FREE?!! And a man can’t even get a glass of beer?!!! What is this?!!!

KOVAŘÍK: The situation in our carriage became really terrible! He was ranting and raving and running back and forth like an angry lion, and as soon as his eye lit on me he shouted:

DVOŘÁK: You! Go away! I don’t want to see you!... you... you Indian!

KOVAŘÍK: He called me an Indian because of my American origin.

And all this without benefit of alcohol. But it would pass – it always did – and the home-loving family man would return. Interestingly, there seem to have been no spells of this kind for the duration of that magical, dreamlike summer in Spillville. There Dvořák could walk alone. There, in some of the most wide-open spaces anywhere in the world, he could wander undistressed. The return to New York, though, brought back its attendant anxieties. They seldom got the upper hand, as he’d long since learned how to handle his celebrity, at least in public, and he was genuinely, deeply touched by the great affection – I think one could say the love – shown him by the American public. But, especially after Spillville, New York had lost much of its original appeal, and even with his family around him he grew more homesick almost by the hour. In May, at long last, the great day came and he sailed home with his family. If his feelings were mixed it was only because he’d recently signed another contract with Mrs Thurber obliging him to return to America in the autumn for a period of six months. This he did, now accompanied only by his wife and their youngest son, but the experience, predictably, was not altogether a happy one.

DVOŘÁK: We are well, God be praised, but this time we don’t feel nearly so at ease as last year. We were used to the children, and being without them saddens us. They write to us twice a week and we always await the ships coming from Europe with feverish expectancy in the hope that they may have brought us something. I’m composing now a new concerto, and if I could work as free from care here as when I’m at Vysoká it would probably have been

finished long ago. But here it's impossible. On Monday I have work at school – on Tuesday I am free, but then the other days are more or less taken up. In short I simply can't give enough time to my work – and when I do find time I'm too often not in the mood. The truth is, the best thing for me is to sit at home in Vysoká. There I have the best recreation, the best refreshments. There I am happy. And I wish to God I were there again!

Well, before very long, of course, he was. And he brought home with him from America the completed score of the Cello Concerto in B minor. It received its first performance, in London, on the ninth, and the last, of Dvořák's English visits just under a year later. The audience greeted both the work and its composer with the same generosity and enthusiasm as always, but Dvořák this time doesn't seem to have returned the compliment.

DVOŘÁK: The English do not love music. They merely respect it.

A far cry indeed from his earlier impressions. Perhaps he'd become too used to the more unbuttoned behaviour of the Americans, who knows. Or maybe, at fifty-five, he was just beginning to tire a little.

In any case, this was the last of his extensive travels, and he crowned it, crowned them all, with a masterpiece. To this day, his Cello Concerto in B minor, written almost entirely in America, is regarded by many people, and probably most musicians, as the greatest ever written.

6 Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104 (mvt 3: Finale: Allegro moderato – Andante – Allegro vivo)

7 Dvořák returned to his homeland in a state of near-exhaustion. He had deliberately told few people of his impending arrival so was able to slip back unannounced and unobserved. He headed straight for Vysoká, put the manuscript of an unfinished string quartet on a high shelf, where it wouldn't nag him, and settled back into the house and countryside which he loved above all others. Surrounded by his family, he put all cares behind him and resumed the regular rhythms of his country life. Among the many friends and acquaintances who welcomed him back was the head gamekeeper Yan Hertan, who left us a lovely picture of Dvořák as country squire.

HERTAN: During his summer stay at Vysoká, Dvořák used to go for a walk in the park and woods early every morning and often he would wake us up at 5 o'clock and be surprised that we could sleep when the thrushes were holding their morning concert above our heads... He was very fond of walking in the fields, being often accompanied on his rambles by one of the local teachers, Draian, of whom he was very fond. In the evening he used to go to the inn, which was frequented by miners, and here he would tell them about his sojourn in America which greatly interested them. He was also fond of going to the neighbouring village of Střebsko, to the parish church, where he liked to play the organ he had given the church in thanksgiving for his safe return and that of his family from America. In the winter all was quiet at Vysoká and work went on in the woods, but when spring passed into summer, and the Dvořáks returned, things became very lively. The Dvořáks were always having visitors, so that it was very gay and noisy, and then Dvořák usually disappeared into the woods for peace and quiet. He liked, too, to sit in the courtyard where he would watch a flock of lovely pigeons – his pride and delight – for hours on end. Quite often, in the morning, he would bring over some of his works to play through to us.

Come September, he returned to his teaching at the Conservatory in Prague, renewed and refreshed by his recent experiences in America. He also resumed his daily communions with the locomotives at the Franz Josef Railway Station. The coming of autumn, the return to Prague, and the resumption of his activities at the Conservatory seem also to have revived his creative impulse. In fairly short order he finished the A flat String Quartet he'd begun in America and wrote a new one in G major, little guessing that it was to be his last.

In February 1896, the 'New World' Symphony had its Viennese premiere, conducted by the ever-faithful Hans Richter.

DVOŘÁK: And I have to say, it was a brilliant success. I sat with Brahms in the Director's box, and the audience gave me a tremendous reception. The applause was so great that after the Largo I had to bow from the box three times, and again three times after the Scherzo – and after the Finale I had to go down into the hall, and show myself to the appreciative audience from the

platform. I have never known such a success in Vienna – and I thank God for it!

8 Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 ('From the New World' – mvt 4: Allegro con fuoco)

More from the 'New World' Symphony.

9 A month or so after that triumphant premiere, Dvořák and his wife were in Vienna once more, and again they visited Brahms, this time accompanied by Josef Suk. Even at this time, twenty years after their first meeting, Brahms returned to an old theme. It was a visit Suk never forgot.

SUK: Brahms tried to persuade Dvořák, hardly for the first time, to move to Vienna, and because he knew that he had a big family, he said: 'Look here, Dvořák, you have a lot of children and I have almost nobody. If you need anything, anything at all, my fortune is entirely at your disposal.' At this, the tears came into Mrs Dvořák's eyes, and Dvořák, also deeply touched, seized the Master's hand.

But the result was the same as ever. Despite Brahms's huge generosity, Dvořák gently and tactfully declined the offer. Home was home, and even if he'd wanted to move to Vienna, what would it look like to his compatriots and the world if the greatest Czech composer were to abandon his motherland in favour of the governing imperial city? Or could that have been, at least in part, precisely what Brahms, with his basically anti-Czech stance, was angling for? Who knows. Some say so. It's also been suggested that another ulterior motive could have been the discomfiture of Bruckner, whose anti-Brahmsian star had never shone more brightly. But to anyone really familiar with Brahms's life and character, these suspicions just don't add up. He wasn't that kind of man.

A little over a year after that last attempt to recruit Dvořák for Vienna, Brahms died of cancer at the age of sixty-four. The impact on Dvořák was immediate. In addition to his grief, the wells of his creativity dried up completely. For six months he was unable to compose at all. Grief could be the explanation, but it's just possible that mixed up in his emotions, consciously or unconsciously, was a nagging sense of guilt. In the final months of Brahms's life, Dvořák, his erstwhile protégé, had turned away from the Brahmsian path of 'pure', 'absolute' music, to explore the illustrative, programmatic world of the 'symphonic poems' developed by Liszt and

his followers. In his youth, Brahms, with Joachim and a few others, had published a withering ‘manifesto’ attacking virtually everything Liszt stood for. In many ways, he and Liszt were polar opposites (though each showed the other a grudging respect). Yet here was Dvořák, or so it might have seemed to Brahms, faithlessly signing on with the enemy camp. In the last year of Brahms’s life, Dvořák wrote his five symphonic poems, all but one depicting events and characters in ballads by the Czech poet K.J. Erben. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of them tells the story of a wild dove – closely related, of course, to a pigeon. But it was the last one, entitled *Hero’s Song*, that scored the biggest hit, both with the public and with conductors – most notably the great Arthur Nikisch, who was to become one of the major figures in the story of twentieth-century conducting, and another man, who modestly introduced himself to the composer in a letter from Vienna.

MAHLER: October the third, 1898

Most highly honoured Master,

As you may possibly know, I have taken over the direction of the Philharmonic Concerts here, and, as I have been told that you have just finished a new work, I am taking the liberty of asking whether you would entrust the Philharmonic with its first performance. I should be very greatly indebted to you for a favourable answer.

Your most devoted

Gustav Mahler

And it was Mahler who conducted the first performance, in Vienna in 1898. Others who took it up included Richter, of course, but also, and perhaps more significantly, Dvořák’s pupil Oskar Nedbal, who became the most single-mindedly dedicated conductor of Dvořák’s works and who had the unique authority of having worked on most if not all of them with the composer himself. Another to join the Dvořák movement, as it were, was a rising young Italian star in the conducting firmament, one Arturo Toscanini. With champions like these, Dvořák himself no longer had any need to conduct, certainly not in the capacity of exalted travelling salesman. His works were topping the charts all over the place, and on both sides of the Atlantic, north and south. But Dvořák loved conducting and was not about to give it up. Shortly after that Viennese premiere under Mahler, he conducted the *Hero’s Song* in Budapest at a concert consisting entirely of his own works.

10 A Hero's Song, Op. 111

Part of the *Hero's Song*, which Dvořák introduced to Hungarian audiences in 1899.

11 Interestingly, he had appeared as a pianist the night before in a concert of his own chamber music – something he hardly ever did.

Dvořák was never a fire-breathing virtuoso like Liszt or a titanic keyboard lion like Brahms, but, like Schubert, who also was neither of those things, his piano playing had a special quality that inspired great admiration, particularly amongst musicians. His pupil, Josef Michl, for instance:

MICHL: Dvořák was certainly not a virtuoso but he had a very fair command of the piano along with an intense musicality that was particularly his own. At least as regards playing from score I can boldly affirm that the accuracy with which he played orchestral scores at sight might be the envy of many a virtuoso. I do not know, however, how he acquired this confidence in playing from score but I think he achieved it not so much from the study of scores by other composers, as in his own compositional work and his remarkable genius for combination. Later he himself made an interesting comment on this. 'When I play from score,' he said, 'I follow the top part and the bass, and from that I can generally imagine what is in between.'

Another frequent witness was his pupil and son-in-law Josef Suk.

SUK: He did lack the technique to be a true virtuoso, but his piano playing was very sound, full of feeling and unfailingly manly. He never 'thumped' (as is usual with untrained players), and he had a remarkable feeling for the finest gradations of touch, and a very subtle grasp of pedal technique. Moreover, he had a very exact notion of how a thing should be played; he was severe in his demands on pianists and also had very decided ideas about how to compose for the piano. He loved the instrument and used to say 'Good music must always sound well on the piano'. He could play with great fire! Often, when playing vigorous *forte* passages, his spectacles would fly off his nose onto the keyboard, only to be roundly abused as he thundered on regardless.

If that happened at the first of those Budapest concerts, the critics were kind enough not to mention it.

As his fame steadily expanded, Dvořák's shoulders, figuratively speaking, were ever more laden with decorations. In 1897 the Viennese Society of the Friends of Music elected him an honorary member, while the Viennese Ministry of Education increased its grant to the Prague Conservatory, stipulating that Dvořák, who was virtually without paper qualifications (degrees and so on), should receive the same salary as the highest-paid professors. But for all the grants and decorations heaped on him, the development that meant most to him was his appointment to the Austrian State Commission, which had helped him three times over in his early career, and brought him into contact with Brahms, whose successor he now became. This was not simply an honour – it was a chance to offer material support to gifted but poor young composers, such as he himself had been. No cause was closer to his heart. Perhaps the grandest of all his honours was his appointment, along with the great Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlický, to the Austrian House of Lords. On hand at his installation was the Prague journalist Josef Penížek:

PENÍŽEK: It was a truly strange coincidence that the raising of the greatest contemporary poet and the greatest contemporary composer of the Czech nation to the peerage should become part of a political action whereby Dr Körber wanted in some measure to placate the dissatisfaction of the Czech people. Dvořák and the great poet entered the Viennese Senate together. They were first presented in accordance with custom, to the President, Prince Alfred Windischgatz, then led to their seats by Mr Wohanka. All eyes were turned on them. They were in morning dress; each had round his neck the large medal of honour, *Litteris and Artibus*. The two full-bearded brothers-in-art were a truly rare sight among the company that filled the Austrian Senate. They had nothing, save for the glory of their names, famed throughout the world. They weren't indebted to any of their forefathers – only to themselves, their genius and their work. On all sides there was keen curiosity as to how this musician and this poet, this writer of symphonies and this writer of lyrics, would acquit themselves in the field of legislative activity. At that time they took the oath in Czech, for then it was a matter of course.

As to how Dvořák in particular would acquit himself in the field of legislative activity,

that became clear almost at once.

PENÍŽEK: Each member of the Austrian Senate had in front of him a writing-desk, an inkpot, a sand-sprinkler, blotting-paper, several pens and several pencils (Hardtmut no. 2, soft and yet not brittle, the best product of its kind). Dvořák was greatly delighted with these pencils. He took them all and put them in his pocket. Having left the Senate House, he showed his booty to his wife who was waiting for him and said: ‘Look, that will make for grand composing now!’ And when she asked him what he and the great poet had done on their debut in the Parliamentary lists, he replied triumphantly: ‘We cut them all to ribbons!’ That day Dvořák voted in the Senate for the first and last time. He never appeared there again. His seat remained deserted.

Well what did they really expect? Dvořák and the world of politics were light years apart. But he was glad of the honour.

More to his taste, though, than his investiture was the reception he got at a concert in Prague on the following night. Our reporter is Josef Boleška.

BOLEŠKA: Dvořák received the congratulations of the public (on his appointment as a member of the Austrian Senate) by a happy coincidence of circumstances in a way which will scarcely present itself again to the Prague musical community of both nations – on the occasion of a concert given on April 15th by the Berlin Philharmonic. After the Symphonic Poem *The Wild Dove*, the conductor, Arthur Nikisch, deflected the thunderous applause from his own person and, with a gesture of his hands, transferred it to the composer present in the box of the Czech Academy’s President, Josef Hlávka. All in the Philharmonic Orchestra rose to their feet and applauded when Dvořák came forward to the balustrade to thank the audience and the artists for the honour shown him, but there was still no end to the unanimous jubilation till the Master appeared on the platform where he was welcomed with stormy ovations and was recalled again and again.

Dvořák by now was both a renowned citizen of the world and a national institution, but his life-style remained as modest and simple as ever. At around the same time as his elevation to the peerage, he granted an interview at his home to the journalist Egon Šamberk.

ŠAMBERK: The friendly dwelling of our celebrated Master as yet untouched by any modern refinements of comfort is in Žitná ulice, in an old house to the right across the courtyard, and two stairs up. A latticed door, which opens easily to those familiar with it, shuts off the composer's family sanctuary from the outside world. A longish passage leads to the glass door of the flat itself. I enter the well-known drawing-room, the friendly room which, devoid of all superfluous luxury, evokes a truly agreeable feeling in the visitor. At the right is an open piano, then a laurel wreath (the only souvenir of his celebrity), and at the window a writing desk. On the left is a drawing-room table-and-chairs. An ordinary carpet is surrounded by not very expensive mats. This, then, is the 'best room', the 'Prunkstube', of the Czech Master whose fame fills the world.

Though his fame was indeed worldwide, the Czech Master retained one major frustration: the fulfilment of his greatest dream still eluded him. As we've seen, he wasn't a very ambitious man, in a worldly sense, but he very badly wanted to compose an opera which would enjoy the same popularity and fame, the same resonance, both nationally and internationally, as Smetana's one absolute runaway hit *The Bartered Bride*. Of his seven operas to date, several had aroused considerable enthusiasm in his homeland but none had achieved fame in the greater world outside. After completing his sequence of symphonic poems in the year of Brahms's death, Dvořák, with only a few, tiny exceptions, now confined his compositional attentions to the operatic stage. As he told an interviewer in 1905:

DVOŘÁK: I want to devote all my powers, as long as God gives me the health, to the creation of opera. Not out of any vain desire for glory but because I consider opera the most suitable form for the nation. This music is listened to by the broad masses, whereas when I compose a symphony I might have to wait years for it to be performed. I get repeated requests for chamber works, which I keep refusing. These genres no longer attract me. My publishers know by now that I shall no longer write anything just for them. Yet they keep bombarding me with questions: why don't I compose this or that? They persist

in regarding me as a composer of symphonies. But surely I proved to them many years ago that my main bias is towards dramatic creation.

First came a comedy, *The Devil and Kate*, which took him a year and a half and boded well for the future. It was well received both at home and abroad, but few authorities today regard it as anything like his best. His next opera, though, the tragedy *Rusalka*, was generally regarded, still is, as the best of them all. And the most popular aria in it is the love song in which the heroine Rusalka, a water sprite, confides to the moon the secret of her love for a human prince.

12 Rusalka (Act I: Song to the Moon)

13 *Rusalka* too was a relatively local, not a global, hit and left Dvořák dissatisfied and disappointed. Worse than that it left him high and dry. He suffered a massive creative block. In a letter to his friend Emil Kozánek, he confessed to a very troubling state of mind:

DVOŘÁK: The truth is, my dear friend, that I have been unable to work for more than fourteen months. I cannot make up my mind to anything and I have no idea how long my present state will last.

During this uncomfortable episode, there were at least distractions, in the form of his continued teaching at the Prague Conservatory, his appointment as its Director in 1901, and the not-altogether-welcome festivities surrounding his sixtieth birthday. Dvořák never liked being made a fuss of, nor, probably, was he thrilled at the fact of turning sixty, but he couldn't conceal how moved he was by the outpouring of love and admiration that enveloped him from all sides, and many countries, in celebration of it. The most spectacular tribute came from the Czech National Theatre, which put on the complete cycle of Dvořák's operas.

Apart from that letter to Kozánek Dvořák himself doesn't seem to have spoken much about his state of mind, but there are indications from friends and colleagues that he was, at the very least, preoccupied. Certainly there were times when his behaviour was something more than merely eccentric. The tenor Otakar Mařák recalls one of them.

MAŘÁK: Our master Dvořák was very fond of Meyerbeer. 'That's real music for you,' he would say. One day we were studying *Les Huguenots* and after a piano rehearsal, when I was leaving the theatre, Dvořák stopped me: 'I heard

some strains of Meyerbeer, I am looking forward to it.' During the first performance, Kovařovic came to me in the interval and said that Dvořák was looking for me, that he was enthusiastic about the production and was determined to tell me so. At that moment I heard Dvořák's voice in the passage: 'Mařák, Mařák, where is Mařák?' I ran out and called: 'I am here, Master.' Dvořák, quite red in the face with excitement, looked at me but said nothing, and so I asked him: 'Is there anything you wish, Master?' Dvořák stared at me a little while longer and then said, very brusquely: 'No. No. Nothing,' and very suddenly he went away, without another word.

Another curious story comes from Ladislav Dolanský.

DOLANSKÝ: Once on a Sunday morning Dvořák invited me to go to a wine-shop. I was not accustomed at that time to drink anything in the morning and was not very willing to comply. But Dvořák insisted: 'Please do me the favour, I should not go alone.' So I said I would and we sat down in Masaryk's little Moravian wine-shop. I began a conversation several times but Dvořák did not reply. I recalled his recent visit to Pfsek. And still Dvořák remained silent. So I fell silent, too, and we sat opposite each other without a word. When Dvořák had finished his glass, we paid and went out. In the street he shook me warmly by the hand and said: 'You don't know how grateful I am that you went with me; you have done me a great service,' and we parted.

Only a little over a month after his letter to Kozánek, Dvořák's creative block lifted, after almost a year and a half. Having finally resolved the search for a good libretto, he started work on his next opera, *Armide* – a story already set by Lully, Handel, Gluck and Rossini, among others. For seventeen months he laboured over it, and when he attended its first performance on 25 March 1903, he had high hopes that it would surpass even the success of *Rusalka*. It didn't. Well before the end, Dvořák realised that the work was a failure, hardly helped by an undistinguished production. During the evening he suffered a severe pain in his side and was forced to leave the theatre before the performance was over. He took to his bed but rallied quickly. After five days his doctor pronounced him fit to go out again. He dressed and made straight for the Franz Josef Station to commune with the trains. There he caught a chill, which led to a return of his earlier symptoms, and another spell in bed. But it didn't look too serious, and when Kozánek and the

conductor Ferdinand Vlach called on him in early April, they found him up and dressed and feeling quite cheerful.

VLACH: On hearing the name of Dr Kozánek, Dvořák gladly admitted us to his presence. We went in. The Master was lying on a sofa and received us with the greatest friendliness. He informed us that he was somewhat ailing but that it wasn't so bad, and he was looking forward to an early and complete recovery. He got up and joined us at the table where we were sitting and began talking about many things of everyday interest; as regards musical matters, he spoke of his latest composition and his plans for the future. During this conversation, he showed great mental alertness and mentioned several times how he was looking forward to seeing Kozánek soon again at his home. Then we took our leave of him. He had been cheerful, yet we left the Master's house in a depressed mood. We gave the house one more glance and looked at each other with foreboding in our eyes. The eyes of both of us were bright with tears. But why? Dvořák was clearly not dangerously ill. After some time, Kozánek said 'If only we don't lose him!' – it was a deeply affecting moment.

But they did lose him. Only two days after their visit, his condition dramatically worsened. His doctor, Professor Hnátek, brought in a colleague for a second opinion. A fortnight later Dvořák's condition had deteriorated badly. The doctors were agreed on their diagnosis: he was suffering from an organic disease, uraemia, and progressive arteriosclerosis. But they withheld this information from the patient, and assured him that he'd be well enough to conduct his choral ballad *The Spectre's Bride* in May, when his daughter Magda would be taking the soprano solo. They were mistaken. On 1 May, a brilliant, sunny, traditionally festive day, the family was in excellent spirits, Dvořák himself very much included. By early afternoon he was dead. An account of his last hours was published in the musical journal *Dalibor* on the following day.

REPORTER: A month ago Master Dvořák lay down not to rise again. The celebrations of the Festival, which were opened as a mark of honour with his noble oratorio *Saint Ludmilla*, he was unable to attend. His strong, healthy body was struck down by a heart stroke when bladder trouble and influenza had already confined him to his bed. As the Master felt easier yesterday, after ten days in which he had not left his bed, the doctor allowed him to get up to his

dinner. His wife and son Otakar dressed him and with their help he sat down in his chair and ate a plate of soup with unusual zest. Scarcely had he finished when he said: 'I'm feeling a little dizzy. I think I'd better go and lie down.' These were the Master's last words, for at that instant he turned pale and then dark red and fell back in his chair. He wanted to say something but only unintelligible sounds came from his throat. His pulse was still to be felt and then was very weak and finally stopped altogether, and the doctor, who had been sent for in haste, could only certify the Master's death.

He left behind him a grieving family, a grieving nation, a grieving world. On May the 5th he was given a full state funeral, huge crowds lining the route of the cortège. He was buried in the cemetery of Vyšehrad, alongside many of the greatest men in the history of the Czech nation. Two days later, there was a memorial service at the Tyn church at which Mozart's Requiem was sung. The funeral oration was given by Karel Knittl, the administrative head of the Conservatory, but I'd like to leave the last word to Karel Hoffman, the leader of the Bohemian String Quartet, whose identity, whose entire career was very largely shaped by Dvořák, both the man and his music. Written in 1936, more than three decades after the composer's death, his words are as relevant and immediate today as they were then. It was a very special man who inspired them.

HOFFMAN: Dvořák it was, who became, with the great number of his chamber works, the principal source of our programmes, so that we still play Dvořák today; his work has not lost for us any of its freshness, we play it with the same emotion and love as we did for the first time, and we feel that our relation to him has finally matured to one of lasting admiration and gratitude. And we feel the same attitude to him among the audiences of all nations; everywhere the same enthusiasm and still unabated interest when his free movements sing forth the divine spirit of great genius, everywhere the same delight in movement and rhythm, everywhere the same admiration and respect for his amazing craftsmanship and invention. In his works, the originality of his Slav soul exults, in other places weeps, everywhere exacting from the audience a tribute of unfeigned admiration. And so with Dvořák we achieve success after success, in growing measure, and are consummately happy in the conviction that though the present time is seeking a new music and new trends for its

expression, Antonín Dvořák remains for us and for the world one of the Immortals.

14 Symphony No. 6 in D, Op. 60 (mvt 4: Finale: Allegro con spirito)