Antonín Dvořák
Born September 8, 1841, Mühlhausen, Bohemia (now Nelahozeves, Czech Republic).
Died May 1, 1904, Prague.

Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 104

Dvořák began his cello concerto in New York on November 8, 1894; he completed the score on February 9, 1895 (at 11:30 A.M.), revised the ending that June, and conducted the first performance, with Leo Stern as soloist, on March 19, 1896, in London. The orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Dvořák's Cello Concerto were given at the Auditorium Theatre on January 29 and 30, 1897, with Leo Stern as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting.

It was Victor Herbert, the composer of Babes in Toyland and Naughty Marietta, who inspired Dvořák to write the most beloved cello concerto in the repertory. We owe this historical curiosity, along with some of Dvořák's most popular music, to Jeannette M. Thurber, the wife of a New York wholesale grocer, who exhausted her husband's millions establishing an English-language opera company that folded and a National Conservatory of Music that flourished long enough to entice Dvořák to settle temporarily in the New World. The composer agreed to serve as director of her school for $15,000, and when he arrived in 1892, Victor Herbert was the head of the cello department. Herbert, who had come to the United States from Vienna only six years before, was highly regarded as a cellist, conductor, and composer, though he hadn't yet written the first of the forty operettas that would make him enormously popular.

In 1892, Dvořák was as famous as any composer alive. Taking on an administrative title and a heavy teaching schedule was probably an unfortunate waste of his time and talents, although the music Dvořák wrote in this country includes some of his best: a string quartet and a string quintet (both titled American) composed in Spillville, Iowa; the New World Symphony; and this cello concerto.

For several years Dvořák had been unmoved by a request from his friend Hanuš Wihan, the cellist of the Bohemian Quartet, to write a cello concerto. During his second year at the National Conservatory, Dvořák attended the premiere of Victor Herbert's Second Cello Concerto, given by the New York Philharmonic on March 9, 1894. It is difficult today to know why this long-forgotten score made such a deep impression on him, for Herbert was hardly an overwhelming or influential talent. But Dvořák enthusiastically applauded Herbert's concerto, and he heard something in it that made him think, for the first time, that there was important music to be written for solo cello and orchestra. This concerto would prove to be the last major symphonic work of his career.

On April 28, 1894, Dvořák signed a new two-year contract with the conservatory. After spending the summer holiday in Bohemia, he returned to New York on November 1; a week later he began this concerto. While he was writing the second movement, he received word that his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová (with whom he had once been in love), was seriously ill. As a tribute to her, he quoted at length one of her favorite melodies, "Kéž duch můj sám" (Leave me alone), the first of his Four Songs, op. 82. He completed the concerto on February 9 (his son Otakar's tenth birthday), at 11:30 in the morning.

After the premiere of the New World Symphony in 1893, Dvořák said, "I know that if I had not seen America I never would have written my new symphony." The cello concerto shows no such outward signs of the composer's American experience—it doesn't imitate the rhythms and melodies of the native music he heard in the United States—and has often been accepted as an early warning sign of his
homesickness. In fact, once Dvořák returned to Bohemia for the summer of 1895, with his new concerto in his bags, he realized that he couldn’t leave his homeland again; in August he wrote to Mrs. Thurber asking to be released from his contract. Since he had already contributed so much to American music, including a symphony as popular as any ever written, she could not refuse. The unveiling of the cello concerto, the last of Dvořák’s American products, belongs to the final chapter of his life: the premiere was given in London in March 1896, with the composer conducting. (The first American performance was not given until December.)

The literature for solo cello and orchestra isn’t extensive. At best, Dvořák can’t have known more than the single concertos by Haydn (a second was discovered in 1961) and Schumann, the first of Saint-Saëns’s two, and Tchaikovsky’s Rococo Variations for cello and orchestra. (He also knew the Triple Concerto by Beethoven and the Double Concerto by Brahms.) Dvořák had written one long-winded cello concerto in his youth and later said he thought little of the cello as a solo instrument (“High up it sounds nasal, and low down it growls”). Now, with little previous inclination and few useful models, Dvořák gave the form its finest example. Brahms is reported to have said, “Why on earth didn’t I know that one could write a cello concerto like this? Had I known, I would have written one long ago.”

The first movement of Dvořák’s Cello Concerto is as impressive as anything in the composer’s output. The music is long and expansive. The orchestral exposition commits the textbook sin of traveling to a foreign key for the second subject—a luxury traditionally saved for the soloist—but Dvořák’s theme is so magnificent (Donald Tovey called it “one of the most beautiful passages ever written for the horn”) that it can justify the risk. Dvořák later admitted the melody meant a great deal to him. Once the soloist enters, the music grows richer and more fanciful. The development section dissolves into simple lyricism. By the recapitulation, Dvořák is writing his own rules: he bypasses his first theme and goes straight for the big horn melody, as if he couldn’t wait to hear it again. The movement is all the stronger for its daring and unconventional architecture.

Dvořák’s progress on the slow movement was sidetracked by the memory of Josefina, and, as a result, the music he wrote is interrupted midway by the poignant song she loved. The depth of his feeling for her, often debated and sometimes denied, is painfully clear. Josefina died soon after Dvořák permanently returned to Bohemia, and, hearing the news, he took this jaunty rondo finale down from the shelf and added a long, contemplative coda as a memorial. The concerto still ends in high spirits, but it’s no longer the same piece Dvořák took home from the New World.

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