DVOŘÁK'S SONGS.

BY ALEC ROBERTSON [1]

DVOŘÁK's solo songs, fifty or so in number, show that not by melody alone can a composer enter into this kingdom. There is, indeed, much more than melody in the best of his songs, but not enough to put him in the category of great song-writers.

In earlier days such a man as he would surely have given spontaneous utterance to many a folksong and, as always in his music, it remains true that the closer he is to that spirit, and the farther he is away from his German or Austrian models, the more successful he is. He has the born song-writer's feeling for the vocal phrase, but only rarely the born lieder-writer's feeling for a song as a work of art; that is, something perfect as a whole and in all its parts.

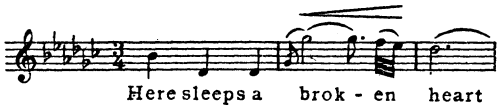
The earlier songs, when he found words intractable and could only, and often clumsily, deal out conventional formulas to serve as piano accompaniments, contain little over which we need go into detail.

Dvořák had a great and natural affection for his first essay in this field, the song-cycle—about eighteen numbers in all—to words by G. Pfleger-Moravsky, 'The Cypresses'. He composed this work in 1865, the year in which he met and fell in love with Anna Čermak. Four of these songs were revised and published in 1882 as Op. 2. Eight more of them, also revised, came out as 'Love-Songs', Op. 83, in 1888. The tenth was used as an aria in the opera 'King and Charcoal-Burner'; one found its way into the 'Silhouettes' for piano, and twelve were re-arranged for string quartet in 1887, under the title 'Evening Songs'.

By 1882 Dvořák had written one of his finest sets of songs, the 'Seven Gypsy Melodies', Op. 55 (to say nothing of big works such as the first Symphony and the violin Concerto), and had obviously passed his apprenticeship in song-writing. Either sentimental reasons or an insufficient degree of self-criticism must have caused him not to revise more drastically than he has done.

The first song of Op. 2, 'Go forth my song, delay not', opens with a phrase to delight every singer and hearer and then goes to pieces over too literal tonal representation of words—in this case "speed" and "haste"—which are each provided with what seems to the composer appropriate forms of accompaniment. The shape of the song is spoilt. Both the next two songs have rather clotted accompaniments but, as nearly always, Dvořák seizes and holds the general mood of the song, and conveys expressions of grief in major keys convincingly. The third song, 'Nought to my heart can bring relief' has a dimly national character and contains a really bold stroke which foreshadows the great soaring phrases in later songs:

Ex. 1

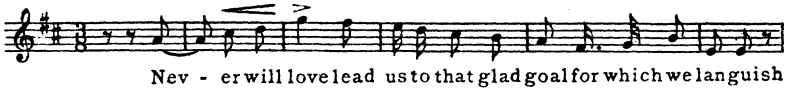


The last song is a charming exercise in the light Schubertian manner.

[1] From a book on Dvořák, comprising a biography and a critical study, to be published in the 'Master Musicians' series by Messrs. J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., by whose kind permission this chapter is reproduced here.

The revisions which resulted in the ' Love Songs ' of Op. 83 were evidently more thorough, and by this time Dvořák was able to insist on the printing of the Czech text along with the English and German translations. The first song of this set, ' Ne'er will love lead us ' is superb. It has a fine soaring tune which begins :

Ex. 2



and rises to a thrilling climax. The composer does not here move rigidly in the bonds of the words : he uses phrases of five and six bar-lengths with great freedom, and there is no easy acceptance of harmonic clichés, as in the earlier set. The promise of this song is not fulfilled elsewhere, except possibly in the fifth and the eighth songs, ' Nature is peaceful ' and ' Thou only dear one ', both of which deserve honourable mention. The other five, in spite of some good points, are disfigured by impurities of style, irritating (and time-saving) *tremolandi*, dominant-seventh fixation, and so on. But it is interesting to note a foreshadowing of the dumka in No. 7.

The next songs Dvořák composed were an answer to an appeal for national music, made in 1871, by Dr. Ludovic Prochazka. He chose words by Eliska Krasnohorská and Karel Jaromir Erben, but he did not, or was perhaps not yet able to, rise to the occasion ; if we may judge by two of the songs that were published nine years later by Schlesinger, with two numbers from a set of twelve ' Evening Songs ' to words by Viteslav Hálek. Of these Hofmeister published four in 1881 as Op. 3, and five more were published by Urbanek in 1883, as Op. 31. These ' Evening Songs ' all date from 1876.

None of these songs can be said to advance the national cause, but they do show the composer in an experimental frame of mind. The first Krasnokorska song, ' Darum ' (they have only German words), deliberately varies its phrase lengths, and the second song, ' Die Erwägung ', does so less obviously, more happily, and receives a much more independent accompaniment. The process is carried farther in the first of the ' Evening Songs '—' Es schweigt der Blätter Abendlied '—which has the look of one of Wolf's Italian Songs. The second of these, ' Der Frühling flog aus weitem her ', merely looks like what it is, bad Schumann. The five songs of Op. 31 show a steady growth in actual song-writing, even though the models are, with one exception, not out of sight and the national note is absent. The third of these songs, ' Like to a linden tree ' has great charm and a well-contrived climax, but the fourth, ' All ye that labout come to Me ', is the most original Dvořák had yet written. It has real and unsuspected power and can stand easily with the best of the ' Biblical Songs '.

The J. K. Erben song, ' The Orphan ', Op. 5, shows only that Dvořák could not deal with the ballad form without becoming dull. The song is unwieldy and fails to gain sympathy for the child's woes.

The four Serbian folk-poems which Simrock published as Op. 6 were composed in 1872, that is four years before the ' Evening Songs '. It may be true that Dvořák ceased here to copy foreign models and that he felt much more at ease with this peasant poetry, but the songs are almost the worst he wrote. The accompaniments are very lumpish and the composer is even deserted by his usual copious outpouring of melody. Interest lies only in the curious tonality of the opening phrase of the

first song and in the unconscious humour of the English translations, which quite unseat the Rev. Dr. Troutbeck. Here is a sample from the first song, ' The Maiden and the Grass ' :

> Wrangling full long and sore thus each did each implead ;
> Until the Judge deemed parting their only remede !

Poems from the famous Königinhof manuscripts " discovered " by Vaclav Hanka in 1817 and denounced as forgeries by Masaryk in 1886, provided Dvořák with the material for his next songs. He worried as little about the authenticity of the text as any Scottish nationalist, not a literary man, might be expected to worry about Macpherson's Ossian. He set six of the poems of which Stary published the whole set as Op. 17, and Simrock four as Op. 7, omitting, in his usual impolite manner, the Czech texts. There is little to choose between the English versions by Mrs. Natalia Macfarren (Simrock) and Dr. Troutbeck (Novello). Troutbeck rhymes ; Macfarren doesn't. The first song, ' The flowery message ', is dull, and both the German and English texts leave one in doubt as to what is supposed to be happening. ' The Rosebud ' starts with a charming idea but lapses into the commonplace, and the cry of the cuckoo, in the song of that name, is followed by a heavy bass chord as comic in its way as the volley on the drums each fourth bar of the *allegro* of Wagner's Overture in B♭ major. 'The Lark ', actually Dvořák's first published song, since it appeared in 1873 as a supplement to the musical periodical ' Dalibor ', has a pronounced flavour of folksong and a charm which lifts it above the rest of this set.

The history of the once famous ' Moravian Duets ', composed for the most part in 1875, will have to be related elsewhere. In the thirteen duets of Op. 32, for soprano and contralto, which contain the pick of the bunch, Dvořák at once finds his form. He is far from the crude experimentation of the ' Serbian Songs ', and his melodic inspiration flows freely and freshly throughout. He even manages to invent quite satisfactory piano accompaniments, though there is rather too much doubling of the voice parts. Paul Stefan[2] says that the melodies, though Dvořák's own, " betray the peculiarities typical of Moravian folk-poetry and song ; wide leaps in the melody, gliding of a motive in the interval of the major second, modulation in the minor second ". I do not pretend to understand this statement, particularly the latter half of it. There are a few quite ordinary leaps of an octave or a seventh in some of the duets, but nothing that seems in the least bit characteristic of Moravian folksong. No doubt Czech singers would present the duets most acceptably, but it would hardly be possible to listen to them unmoved, sung in English on the concert-platform, the contralto addressing the soprano thus :

> Rosemarine or lily, fairy queen is Nelly,

and the soprano replying :

> I'm no rosemarine love, I'm no fairy queen love.

With all due respect to I. Bernhof (sex unknown), such a translation could only be gravity-removing. Even, however, with a serviceable translation this particular kind of domestic music has become unfashionable and cannot be satisfactorily transplanted into the concert-hall. One may notice, in passing, an early example of one of Dvořák's odd harmonic clashes in the dance-like section of the sixth duet, ' Holub na Javore ' (The forsaken lassie).

Dvořák's next essays in song-writing were the ' Tri novrecke basne " (' Three Modern Greek Songs '), Op. 50, for baritone, composed for a

[2]. ' Anton [*sic*] Dvořák '. By Paul Stefan. Translated by Y. W. Vance (Greystone Press, New York, 1941).

concert of his works in the winter of 1878, at which he made his first appearance as a conductor. The poems, by Vaclav Nebesky, were in Czech on Greek themes. By this year Dvořák had sounded the national note loud and clear in the ' Three Slavonic Rhapsodies ', Op. 45, the first set of ' Slavonic Dances ', Op. 46, and the two dance movements, Dumka and Furiant, of the A major Sextet, Op. 48 ; so perhaps he was glad to try his hand at something different. In these three songs, ' Koljas ', ' Nereids ' and ' Lament for a City ', Dvořák returns to the ballad form he used for ' The Orphan ' and was to use once again towards the end of his life. The first song is a dramatic affair about the rebel Koljas, the second relates the efforts of some water-maidens to charm a shepherd, who is duly warned by his mother to resist, and the third is a lament for the city of Parga, betrayed by fifth-columnists to the Turks. The last song is the best and should prove moving in the hands of a good singer. The other two are restless and episodic, the accompaniments again too anxious to be illustrative. (These songs are published in English in the Hinrichsen edition as well as in German by Hainauer. The English translations by E. G .Porter are singable and the best that Dvořák's songs have so far received.)

With the ' Ciganske Pisne ' (' Gypsy Songs '), Op. 55, composed in January 1880 Dvořák reached his highest pinnacle as a song-writer. The words, by Heyduk, are based on folk sources and the open-air, freedom-loving spirit which fills them obviously made a deep appeal to the composer. Everything is in place here. In the first song, ' I chant my lay ', Dvořák is not led astray by such words as " My courser skims " (I quote the poor translation), but keeps a steady keel in the chosen figure of accompaniment. He uses his dance-like opening measure to bind the verses together and maintains a perfect balance between voice and accompaniment. The workmanship is unusually careful. In ' Hark how my triangle ' the two verses are not only connected by a dance measure, but that is also taken over by the voice in a charming little coda.

The third song, ' Silent Woods,' is the only one to owe a debt—to Brahms—but it is so very beautiful that one feels grateful to its foster-parent. Dvořák is so sensitive, in this song, to the changing mood of the words that though he keeps his accompaniment the same in the second verse, he takes care to give expression to the heightened emotion of the words by varying the voice-part. There is a cadence at the end of each verse, a rising ninth, of remarkable beauty.

The next song and, of course, the best known of any that he wrote, ' Songs my mother taught me ', is uniquely his own. It is truly inspired writing, a perfect little work of art and a most moving one. The marriage between voice and piano is of the happiest kind, and the accompaniment itself clashing delicately against the voice part (6–8. against 2–4) is beautifully devised. The song reaches its climax in the second verse, with a phrase of unforgettable beauty.

Of the remaining three songs, ' Tune thy strings, O gypsy ', ' Freer is the gypsy ' and ' The Cloudy Heights of Tatra ', the last deserves special mention as a bold and well-planned song. The accompaniment variation is dramatically right and the extended phrase in the voice-part of the last verse not only makes a fine climax to the cycle but lies most gratefully for the voice.

During one of his London visits, in 1885, Dvořák wrote two songs, ' A Lullaby ' and ' Disturbed Devotion ', which were published posthumously in 1921 by Hudebni Matice. Dr. Stefan says they are delightful songs. Dvořák alludes to the Lullaby in the last act of his opera ' Jacobin '. It was six years before he wrote a set of songs as considerable as the ' Gypsy

Songs', and then only in response to a request from Simrock. 'V Narodnin tonu' ('In Folksong Style'), Op. 73, are settings of one Czech and three Slovak dance rhythms and imitate, in the second song, folk melody with great success. 'Dobrou Noc' ('Good night') can at once take its place in the best serenades of the great lieder writers. It is tenderly passionate and eminently singable. 'Zalo Dievca' ('The Mower') is a charming idealization of folk melody, and then comes the gem of this collection, 'Ach neni tu' ('The Maiden's Lament'), which is one of the best songs Dvořák ever wrote. The two-part counterpoint for voice and treble piano part is beautifully contrived. As the girl laments her love the accompaniment carries the inner intensity of her emotion. In the second verse the accompaniment—and not as in 'Silent Woods' the voice-part—is subtly varied, and in the exquisite final verse Dvořák uses the thematic material of the opening bars of the song, kept over until then. The whole song is most moving, and it is extraordinary that it is not better known. The last song 'Ej mam ja kona faku' ('Loved and lost') makes use of a vigorous dance rhythm and is in no way remarkable.

The German poetess Ottilie Malybrok-Stieler, who provided the translations of Dvořák's Op. 73 under the title of 'Im Volkston', gave him the material for his next set of 'Four Songs', Op. 82. It comes from her book 'Lyric Poems and Translations based on Bohemian Literature and Folk-Poetry' and, owing to one of his periodic complications with his publisher, which it is of no interest to relate, Dvořák set the songs in German for Simrock without bothering to have translations made into Czech. These were added later. The songs are disappointing. The first, 'Kezduch muj sam' ('Leave me alone') drags its way through two long verses with the piano accompaniment, liberally sprinkled with thirds and sixths, chained remorselessly to the voice part. The next song, 'Pri vysivani' ('Over her embroidery'), opens enchantingly in E flat major, is conventional in its middle section, returns, in D major, to its opening strain and ends, surprisingly, in that key. 'Jaro' ('Spring-tide'), is a great improvement on the 'Spring Song' of Op. 31: it is more than that, a really lovely song with a lift of the melody in its second phrase which is ravishing. The last song, 'Il poloka' ('At the Brook'), might well be called, from the style of its accompaniment 'Margaret at the brook', an attractive echo, a sad one too, of a great song.

The 'Biblicke Pisne' ('Biblical Songs'), Op. 99, are usually spoken of as Dvořák's best songs, a claim which must be seriously examined. As a nation we are—or were—predisposed towards settings of words generally so well known and loved as these. Dvořák used, oddly enough for a Catholic, the traditional Czech Protestant Bible of Kralice, published in 1613, as the source of his texts.[3] The songs, issued in German, French and English translations, have become known and loved in their English dress, as is natural enough, but it is easy to see from the one volume—why only one the publishers alone can say—of the English edition which has the Czech vocal line printed below the English one, what harm has been done to the vocal line. (In the second volume of this unintelligent edition the *German* text is wedded to the English!) Note-values and phrasing suffer; but these blemishes apart, there are good reasons for not agreeing with the generally accepted verdict concerning the songs. In style they are—though this is speculation—influenced by the simplicity and inner urge of the negro spiritual. In some

[3] First: Psalm 97, verse 2–6. Second: Psalm 119, verse 114, 115, 117, 120. Third: Psalm 55, verse 2, 3, 5–9. Fourth: Psalm 23, verse 1–4. Fifth: Psalm 144, verse 9; Psalm 145, verse 2, 3, 5 and 6; Sixth: Psalm 63, verse 2; Psalm 61, verse 2, 4, 5; Psalm 63, verse 5, 6. Seventh: Psalm 137, verse 1–5; Eighth: Psalm 25, verse 16–18 and 20. Ninth: Psalm 121, verse 1–4. Tenth: Psalm 98, verse 1, 4, 7, 8; Psalm 96, verse 12.

cases, as we shall see, the melodic simplicity is marked. If these songs are to be compared with the finest things in this field of song-writing one has to come to the conclusion that the workmanship is often hasty and careless. Religious songs, of all types, should not take the easy way out of the dominant seventh or thirteenth or, in illustrating perturbation of the soul, of the diminished seventh unless these chords are felt to be absolutely in place. His attitude towards tonal illustration again leads Dvořák astray. The lightnings are childishly pictured in the first song, ' Clouds and darkness are round about him ', and no great phrase (and harmony) supports the greatness of God declared in the last line of the psalm.

The cadences of the second psalm are again obtrusively conventional and the treatment of the words is over-literal. And if this verdict of conventionality be thought harsh observe the start of the next psalm, ' Lord, Thou art my refuge '. ' Hear my prayer ' offers no reason for revision of this verdict, but rather for a grateful rememberance of Mendelssohn ; but No. 4, ' God is my Shepherd ', is a really charming piece of baroque decoration of the simpler kind—a little too sweet but most appealing.

No. 5, ' I will sing new songs of gladness ' with its characteristic repetitions, offers a fine bit of tune, differently harmonized on each of its four appearances and furnished with a good climax. No. 6, ' Hear my prayer O Lord ', is little better than a commercial ballad with its *arpeggio* concluding chords and poverty of invention, but the negro-spiritual-like ' By the Waters of Babylon ' is on a far higher level, though the composer forgets Jerusalem—and his right hand its cunning—and puts a stale chord of the thirteenth at the point of cadence.

' Turn thee to me ', No. 8, is not the work of a man who has felt real spiritual desolation and remorse—as, for example, Wolf felt it—but it is a moving song with beautiful and well-contrived modulations and a really lovely use of an upward major third after leaving the minor key (" for my hope is in Thee "). In No. 9, ' I will lift mine eyes ', Dvořák, as in the third of the ' Four Songs ', Op. 52, begins in one key and ends in another, quite evidently of set purpose and not merely because the music takes him there.

Negro-spiritual influence is again very strong in the tenth and last song, ' Sing ye a joyful song ', which illustrates the emotion of the words adequately. If the negro spirituals were indeed Dvořák's models, it can only be said that he comes nowhere near the profound feeling of things like ' Steal away ', or, supremely, ' Were you there '. Great religious songs these ' Biblical Songs ' are not—they are not even very good Dvořák.

His last song, written in 1901 but not published until after his death, was ' Lesetinsky Kovar ' (' The Smith of Lesetin '), the poem by Svatopluk Čech, for tenor and piano. It is of no great consequence, another essay in ballad form with a couple of tunes, one fast and vigorous, one lyrical, that would have served well for another Slavonic Dance.

The best of Dvořák's songs would make but a small volume—" few, but roses ". Grieg—the composer who is the obvious choice for comparison—wrote more than double the quantity and nearly always surpassed the quality of the Dvořák songs. He was a pianist, and his accompaniments are invariably effective. He was perhaps a more fervent nationalist than Dvořák, and one gains a more vivid picture of Norway, physically and spiritually, from his songs than of Czechoslovakia from Dvořák's (but it is only fair to remember that Norway has a seaboard and the fiords !).

One can say that a few of Grieg's songs equal the best of Schubert and that about half of the rest come not far after him. That is too large a claim for Dvořák, but music would certainly be poorer without his best songs. These few have a lyric beauty which Grieg would have been the first to acknowledge as being of very high quality.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF DVOŘÁK'S SONGS

The following list is based on Sourek's Catalogue of Dvořák's Works (1934) as it is given in Paul Stefan's book on the composer (1941). It pretends to no greater accuracy and cannot record, for example, exactly how many editions of the 'Evening Songs' there may be. Furthermore I have been able to see only the German editions of many of the songs issued by Simrock, so that it seemed best to catalogue all the songs in English, rather than in a mixture of Czech, German and English. I should like to acknowledge the kind help of Miss Astra Desmond in putting her chapter on Dvořák's songs, from a forthcoming symposium on the composer, at my disposal.

1865 (revised 1882), Op. 2. G. Pfleger-Moravsky (see also Op. 83)
1. Go forth my song, delay not
2. 'Twas wondrous sweet that dream of ours
3. Nought to my heart can bring relief
4. Rest in the valley

1871 Op. 5. K. J. Erben
The Orphan

1872 Op. 6. Serbian Folk Poems
1. Once fell a maid asleep
2. Warning
3. Flowery Omens
4. No escape

Op. 7. Königinhof Manuscripts[4]
1. The Nosegay
2. The Rose
3. The Cuckoo
4. The Lark
5. The Forsaken
6. The Strawberries

(only the first four appear in the Simrock edition—the whole set are found in 'Sixteen Songs' published by Novello, which, in addition to Op. 7, includes Op. 2, 5 and 31)

Op. 3. V. Hálek
1.
2. } No titles available
3.

1876 Op. 9.[4] E. Krasnohorská
1. Therefore
2. Consideration
V. Hálek
3. Quiet is the leaves' evening song
4. Spring flew hither from afar

Op. 31. V. Hálek
1. Visions of heaven I fondly paint
2. This would I ask each tiny bird
3. Like to a linden tree am I
4. All ye that labour come to me
5. All through the night a bird will sing

Some of these date from 1871, but which there is no available evidence to tell.

1878 Posthumous work, 'Hymnus ad Laudes in festo'. S.S. Trinitas (voice and organ)

Op. 50. Bebesky
1. Kolias
2. Naiads
3. Lament for a City

1880 Op. 55. Heyduk
1. I chant my lay
2. Hark how my triangle
3. Silent woods
4. Songs my mother taught me
5. Tune thy strings, O gypsy
6. Freer is the gypsy
7. The cloudy heights of Tatra

1885 Posthumous work. Czech Folk-Poems
1. Lullaby
2. Disturbed devotion

1886 Op. 73. Czech Folk-Poems
1. Goodnight
2. The Mower
3. The Maiden's Lament
4. Loved and Lost

1887 Op. 82. Malybrok-Stieler
1. Leave me alone
2. Over her embroidery
3. Springtide
4. At the brook

1888 Op. 83. Pfleger-Moravsky (revisions of 'Cypresses', 1865)
1. Never will love lead us
2. Death reigns in many a human breast
3. I wander oft past yonder house
4. I know that on my love to thee
5. Nature lies peaceful
6. In deepest forest glade I stand
7. When thy sweet glances on me fall
8. Thou only dear one

1894 Op. 99. Biblical Texts (for sources see p. 86)
1. Clouds and darkness
2. Lord, thou art my refuge and my shield
3. Hear my prayer
4. God is my shepherd
5. I will sing new songs of gladness
6. Hear my prayer
7. By the waters of Babylon
8. Turn thee to me
9. I will lift mine eyes up to the mountains
10. Sing ye a joyful song

1895 F. L. Jelinek
Lullaby

1901 Svatopluk Čech
The Smith of Lesetin