DVOŘÁK THE CZECH

By H. Hollander

If it may really be said that there is such a thing as "national music", Antonín Dvořák performs its functions in the most original and fascinating way imaginable. But what is national music? Is it produced by saturating oneself in the primeval stuff of folklore, by identifying oneself with a people's motives and impulses, by musically reviving what is called the national spirit, national history or nationalist ideals? Or is it the crystallization of something fundamentally musical, the release through a given national temperament of some primary musical concept detached from all outward associations? National music, as it has been conceived ever since its revival by the romantics, has never ceased to shape itself within the confines of either of these two perceptions, tending sometimes more strongly towards the one, sometimes towards the other. In Dvořák's work too we find such inductive and deductive tendencies reflected, and they are significant in his case because they furnish us, so to speak, with a key to his artistic development—to his hesitations between adherence to absolute music and to the new romantic programme-music that tempted him ever and again.

One thing is certain: Dvořák was very purely and simply a man of the people, and a people's musician. The soil from which he sprang as an artist was that of the folksong and folk-dances of that robust and unadulterated kind still found in Bohemian villages —and his home had been a village inn, we must remember. He was early imbued with a traditional spirit of musical handiwork by his first teachers, who combined the functions of choirmaster and of conductor of the local orchestra. The expansive and idyllic Bohemian landscape, the patriarchally simple and dignified life of the Czech people, the winged rhythms, gushing melodiousness and sensuous, effusive sound of Bohemian music: these were the things that formed Dvořák's artistic soul.

He was a viola-player and as such entered Komzák's famous dance-band in Prague at an early age, only to be merged with it soon afterwards in the orchestra of the newly-founded National

Theatre. At the same time he concluded his studies at the Conservatory satisfactorily, but by no means brilliantly, his marks having suffered somewhat from his disinclination to take theoretical subjects seriously. The next stages in his career—his posts as organist at the church of St. Adalbert in Prague and as professor at the Conservatory—already appear in counterpoint with his first successes as a composer. Such a beginning, characteristic as it is of a Bohemian musician, could lead Dvořák to only one line of artistic pursuit, which was that of a simple and home-loving musician near to nature and to God, and from this there was to be no escaping. True, he diverged at times, yielding to such temptations as the musical tendencies of his time offered and occasionally to some experiment or other ; but his personality was healthy enough at the core to keep overpowering influences at bay as soon as they threatened to injure, if not to wreck his work.

In order to understand Dvořák's position as a national musician we must keep in mind the fact that at the same time Smetana, who was seventeen years older, was the first to give conscious artistic expression to Czech music. What Smetana did was not essentially different from what the then new Czech national emancipation was endeavouring to achieve in cultural and political matters : recognition of national independence, particularly of the patronizing German and Austrian elements. Smetana's work thus included a fair share of deliberate protest. He was in many ways a " conscious " artist of that inductive type referred to above. He worked with his mind turned towards the West, with the result that his music quite noticeably took colour from the ideas of the Lizst-Wagner circle. In Dvořák's early years he was already the acknowledged pioneer of the young Czech music, for his work had aroused the spirit of the contemporary Czech musicians like a clarion-call.

Dvořák, though perhaps a stronger personality, was intellectually much less independent than Smetana. He found his way with the instinctive certainty of a child of nature. As a Czech artist he felt called upon to deal with national subjects, and his great ambition was to write operas, if possible on such subjects. Wagner fascinated him irresistibly in the years of his youth, and although his infatuation abated during his middle period, it returned in the end in a clarified form.

It was a decisive juncture in Dvořák's development, this turning away from Wagner as the inevitable consequence of his discovery of himself as a pure, elemental, unliterary musician. At this critical moment it was Smetana above all who became at once a model

and a stay for him. True, Smetana meant for him at first the ideal of a great national musician (who was later to become a sort of justification for his programme-musical works), an ideal to which he endeavoured to live up particularly in his operas. Here, however, a fundamental defect showed itself: Dvořák was not a composer for the stage. He lacked the gift of dramatic gesture and the power of organizing scenic action in such a way as to give it musical atmosphere and climax. His operatic failures began in his youth, when, anxious to conquer the stage, he even set a German libretto (Theodor Körner's 'Alfred'). Nevertheless, there is much true inspiration and live music in the whole series of his operas: the Wagnerish 'King and Collier', the ballad-opera-like 'Pigheaded Peasants', the Smetana-inspired 'Peasant a Rogue', the pathetic 'Dimitrij', the classicist 'The Jacobins' with its Mozartian concerted pieces, the characteristically Bohemian-romantic (in spite of Wagnerian echoes) 'The Devil and Kate' and the lyrical fairy-tale of 'Rusalka', which is unquestionably Dvořák's best and most inspired opera. All these had Slavonic, most of them Czech subjects, and the mediocre quality of the libretti alone does not explain Dvořák's failure. What stood in his way was the irreconcilable antagonism between his naïve and natural genius and the true dramatic composer's intellectual gift for plastic modelling, of which he never had a sufficient share. Only in absolute music was he able to adjust that conflict.

That Dvořák contrived to make his way in spite of the influences and temptations that beset him, side by side with Smetana and unembarrassed by the latter's genius, was undoubtedly the great triumph of his creative individuality. He became a national artist without the aid of the stage and would have done so without the literary programmes of his symphonic poems. Once he had clarified his mastery he took Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms for his models. An inexhaustible melodist, who in so many ways reminds us of Schubert, he needed and sought the objectivity of the framework of classical forms. At the same time the romantics' sensuous pleasure in beauty of sound and iridescent harmonic colours were inherited by his maturity as a positive gain made during his youth. At the time of his astonishing chamber-music production, his symphonic output and his great choral works, due not least to the English musical festivals, the natural musicianship that was in his Bohemian blood burst forth with irresistible force, taking possession of all the musical forms and giving them new life. No doubt he was always fully aware of his national mission, but he had no need to emphasize it or to draw attention to it by the choice of special programmatic

subjects. He was a " national " composer thanks to his elemental creative energy, which brought forth national Czech or Slavonic music quite spontaneously. Scherzos, minuets and finales became nationally coloured dances (*Skočna*, *Furiant*), slow movements turned into elegiac *Dumky* (string Sextet in A major, string Quartet in E♭ major, Symphony in D major, &c.). It is an attested fact, by the way, that Dvořák, after having composed quite a number of *Dumka*-like movements already, asked some of his friends what a *Dumka* really was !

His melody often shows a fervent, visionary, almost mystically solemn tendency. Rhythmic peculiarities of Czech and Slav folk-music turn up, and in the famous ' Slavonic Dances ' they are not only Czech types of dance-music, but also those belonging to other Slavonic nations (Slovaks, Poles, Yugoslavs and Ukrainians), which he shapes to his own designs. He composed ' Slavonic Rhapsodies ', set Serbian texts, in ' Dimitrij ' he gave life to an episode in Russian history, and another half-forgotten opera named ' Vanda ' has a Polish setting : in short the spiritual horizon of his creative work widens from a Czech to a pan-Slavonic aspect. If Smetana was a Czech and a Westernized European, Dvořák was a Slav in the wider sense of the term, gifted with all the metaphysical depth of his race. The emotional pendulum of the Slav in him swings between the extremes of a healthy sensuality and joy in life and a sublime tenderness and understanding of the most secret things in creation, often coupled with profound melancholy. These were Dvořák's salient characteristics.

The mysterious and dominating focus of his vision lay in regions that are dark, chaotic and instinctive. Only rarely did he, as in the last years of his life, give shape to a programme and produce music for the sake of a given idea. But he was sufficiently sure of himself as an artist to try the experiment Brahms and Hanslick had passionately warned him to leave alone. His trilogy of overtures, ' Amid Nature ', ' Carnival ' and ' Othello ', which are a kind of programme music of the mind, were surpassed after the return from America by the symphonic poems, ' The Watersprite ', ' The Noon-Witch ', ' The Golden Spinning-Wheel ' and ' The Woodland Dove '. Before that, in the ' New World ' Symphony, he had musically embodied the vision of a Red-Indian funeral ritual. No wonder that a musician of such universal creative potency as Dvořák neither could nor would pass by so controversial and enticing a species as that of programme music, and these works show that, so far from capitulating before the symphonic poem, he gained sovereign freedom in his disputations with it. He himself wrote to Hans

Richter that these pieces were kept " in a more popular tone ", which meant that they showed fewer programme-musical subtleties than those by various contemporary composers. His naïvely descriptive tone-painting, his forceful melodic invention, his retention of the forms of absolute music, all this shows that he remained true to himself as a master who took up his subject impulsively and simply swept aside the intellectual conception of programme music. Even in his symphonic poems what remains the decisive factor is pure music or—let it be put boldly—the absolutely musical element.

There were times at which his nationalist temperament became vocal in stronger, even in aggressive, accents, as for instance in the hymn of ' The Heirs of the White Mountain ' or the ' Husitská ' overture. But these were only passing stirrings-up of his artistic temperament. His thought and feeling reached beyond national boundaries, however much he underlined the necessarily strong ties that link the artist to his " fatherland ". In a letter to his publisher Simrock he once expressed this conviction with characteristic candour :

> But what have we two to do with politics ? Let us be glad that we are privileged to serve our beautiful art alone ! And nations which possess art and represent it, let us hope, will never vanish, however small they may be . . . but I merely wanted to say that an artist too has a fatherland for which after all he must hold to a firm faith and keep a warm heart.