DVOŘÁK THE CRAFTSMAN

By Victor Hely-Hutchinson

To most people, whether they admit it or not, Dvořák's music makes a strong appeal : there is something in it for every kind of listener. For the naïve listener—who is, in the last resort, the final judge—there is a perpetual fountain of melody and a general air of vitality and gusto that never fails to attract ; for the craftsman there is a brilliant and imaginative style of orchestration (which was at once hailed as masterly, and has never lost its power), direct and individual harmony and a sense of form which, though one may occasionally quarrel with its details, seldom fails to be thoroughly convincing, whether on a large or small scale. It is with these aspects of Dvořák's craftsmanship that this study attempts to deal, in so far as the systems of a notoriously unsystematic composer can be summarized.

To begin with, Dvořák was not a miniaturist, nor an epigrammatist, but a composer in the true sense of the word : he had from the outset that sense of musical construction and development on a big scale which distinguishes the great masters. This is not a claim that he himself was one of the very greatest—as he grew older his self-expression tended to become more and more short-winded—but that he had the root of the matter in him. He could of course write with charm and vigour in the simpler and more sectional forms (it was through works of this kind that he first became famous), but his first three symphonies, whose continuity and staying-power he sometimes recaptured in later works, show the true quality and possibilities of his constructive genius.

In date, as by natural inclination, he was a romantic, and like nearly all facile composers, whether they possess a strong individuality or not, he was highly imitative. It was either through this last faculty, or because of good teaching and patient application, or simply by extensive and alert practical experience, that he acquired a mastery of classical procedures. He is a master of the terse expository style, and equally of discursive development ; and he can also on occasion perorate at the end of a movement with real oratorical power. All these qualities are essential components

of the styles of the great classical symphonists ; but Dvořák, like the pig in Belloc's Moral Alphabet who liked to have several courses to his meals,

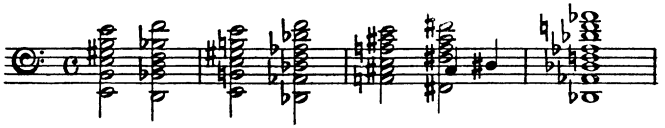
> Wrongly thinks it does not matter whether
> He takes them one by one or all together.

In his larger works he often seems to be unaware which style he is using at any given moment, or why ; and while the best of them " come off " just because of their freedom from convention, with others it is hard to escape the feeling that they only just hang together, and a very few movements are flat failures. One such is the first movement of the violin Concerto, which is but an amorphous and unsatisfactory prelude to the admirable slow movement and finale. The ' Carnival ' Overture, too, makes a series of " positively last appearances " entirely unworthy of its previous career ; though a similar procedure of " one coda after another " makes a perfectly suitable conclusion to the splendid ' Symphonic Variations '. Dvořák, as has been mentioned, first earned fame as a " naïve " composer in the shorter and more sectional forms ; and in some of his later works, such as the fourth Symphony, a feeling that he must keep up this reputation seems to obscure his sense of artistic fitness. An individual composer imitating another's style will usually emphasize his own individuality, as with Grieg in the ' Holberg Suite ' ; but a composer imitating himself—as Grieg does in the later ' Lyric Pieces '—invariably produces a result not wholly worthy either of his present or of his past self. If discerning self-criticism had been added to Dvořák's other great qualities, there is no saying to what heights he might not have attained.

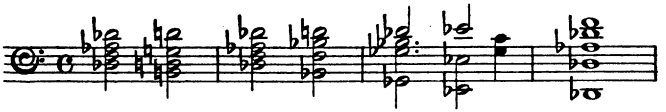
Like some other composers, Dvořák owes his wider popularity to a very few works, a double misfortune when the merits of other and equally fine works in the same genre tend to be overlooked, while the really fine points in the popular works are taken for granted. Among the symphonies the ' New World ' is obviously the most popular, while the tragic and impassioned second Symphony in D minor has, at any rate until recent years, been comparatively seldom performed.[1] It is clearly impossible to compare two such different works, but he would be a bold man who would assert that either is *better* than the other. Both, in their different ways, display admirable invention and craftsmanship, and both are *echt Dvořák*.

[1] It may be mentioned that the numeration of Dvořák's symphonies is confusing : there were at least two early unpublished symphonies, while the first three published ones were not issued in order of composition.

The second Symphony perhaps shows Dvořák's power of sustained invention to better advantage. The trio of the scherzo opens with a paragraph of unhurried but convincing discursiveness, and of a length comparable with that of the opening paragraph of the slow movement of the Brahms D major. Nor must one overlook the way in which the coda of this same movement shows up for the first time the romantic mystery that underlies its apparent cheerfulness. In the slow movement, too, an extraordinary and indeed unique feat of construction is achieved : the pastoral main theme occurs only at the beginning and the end of the movement, yet completely dominates the wealth of new material on which the movement as a whole is built up. As against these features of the second Symphony—and there are many more—one can set in the 'New World' the really subtle effects of recapitulation (which is not necessarily the same thing as repetition). The opening of the slow movement, in which a change of key is explained in a manner far more mysterious and romantic than the change is in itself



is a stroke of genius ; and it was no less an inspiration to end the movement with a modification of the phrase so contrived as finally to consolidate the key :

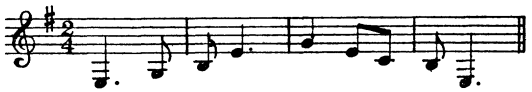


This is an effect of recapitulation as subtle and as true as that achieved by Mozart in the first movement of his D minor Quartet, where the outline of the second subject is quite different in the recapitulation and yet reflects the exposition with perfect faithfulness.

The key system of the first movement, too, is unorthodox in that the second subject in the recapitulation never approaches the home tonic at all. In the exposition (the home tonic being E minor) its keys are G minor—G major ; in the recapitulation they are G♯ minor (=A♭ minor)—A♭ major. It is left for the bold and passionate coda to re-establish the original tonic. Curiously enough, this procedure is very like that adopted by Brahms in the first movement of his F major Symphony. Here the second subject is in

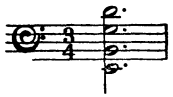
A major—A minor in the exposition and in D major—D minor in the recapitulation, and the coda clinches F major in just the same way. Was Dvořák aware of this similarity, or did he even consciously imitate Brahms here? There is no means of knowing, and it does not in the least matter. A device like this is brand-new every time it is used convincingly, and the success of Dvořák's treatment of it is proved by the fact that the uninstructed listener does not notice it; he is aware only of the continuity and cohesion of the movement as a whole.

Unobtrusive also, but masterly, is the combination of themes throughout the symphony. The " motto theme " :



is most subtly foreshadowed in the introduction before it is first stated in the *Allegro*, and it later appears in countless different guises—sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background, sometimes literally repeated and sometimes varied, but always recognizable and apt. Nor is this theme the only one so treated; it is possible to hear the last movement several times without fully realizing that material from *all* the previous movements is interwoven into the development and coda. The device of incorporating previously-heard themes in the finale is essentially a romantic one, and it has been used—and abused—by most nineteenth-century composers. The classical composers scarcely employed it at all, and then only—as in Beethoven's fifth Symphony—as a means of very special effect. But it needs in any case to be used with a classical sense of fitness, and that is what Dvořák does here. The immediate effect on the listener is to make him feel that what is being said is absolutely right; it will probably be later that he notices that it has been said before in a slightly different way. How much more successful is this example than, let us say, the uninvited irruption of the theme from the second movement of Franck's Symphony into the entirely uncongenial surroundings of its finale!

Dvořák's harmony has been referred to above as " direct and individual "; to these epithets should be added " satisfactory ". Although the harmonic scheme is always clear and convincing—if frequently opulent—one now and then comes across a chord or progression which cannot be " explained " in words, but which is none the less obviously right. The chord which accompanies the main theme of the ' New World ' scherzo



is a case in point. (It does not *explain* the chord to say that it is a secondary seventh ; one might as well claim to explain a man's being suspended in mid-air with no visible means of support by saying that he was standing on air.) Even in more modern systems of harmony a seventh is never a point of harmonic repose. Dvořák, however, treats it as such in this instance and does not trouble to explain it musically by resolution, any more than Humpty Dumpty bothered to explain the " hard words " in the later verses of ' Jabberwocky '. Nor in either case is there any need for explanation : they may defy analysis, but there is no difficulty in comprehending them. The fact of the matter is that in the last resort music is untranslatable into words, however much the text-books may labour to expound it ; and where the result is convincing there is—for the listener—no need of exposition. Dvořák was a musician, first, last and all the time ; and at his best he neither thought, nor reasoned, nor wondered, but *knew*.

This supremely self-confident inspiration—one might almost say vision—enables Dvořák to do all kinds of apparently impossible things with success. Reference has been made already to his power of " bringing off " a large instrumental work in spite of a chronic habit of confusing the expository and developmental styles ; this same power, differently directed, is no less evident in some of his choral works. The setting of a poem for chorus inevitably suggests the repetition of some of the words, if only to give the chorus a proper chance to " deploy " ; and in such a work as the noble ' Stabat Mater '—in which an almost Handelian power and breadth are achieved—such a device is clearly appropriate. But in ' The Spectre's Bride ', a violently dramatic legend of that peculiarly gruesome type which seemed to tempt Dvořák to musical illustration, it is for the most part out of place. Dvořák, however, is out to enjoy himself. He is not writing an opera, but a cantata, and if the dramatic significance of the work has to wait on its musical development—well, that can't be helped. This attitude leads to some procedures which are on the face of them manifestly absurd. The legend is the story of a maiden being (almost) dragged to the grave by the ghost of her dead lover ; and soon after they began their accursed journey

All that heard them said, in fear,
" There is a spectre somewhere near."

Allowing for the matter-of-factness of the English translation, this should be a moment of terror so intense as to be incapable of repetition. But Dvořák's spectre, having apparently emerged from one of the more discursively melodious oratorios, is repeatedly announced over no less than nine pages of vocal score, during which the chorus and bass soloist echo each other in a manner entirely consistent with that of the Savoy operas. This is not the only point in the work in which the musical treatment flies squarely in the face of all canons of dramatic common sense.

Now the amazing thing about this work is that in performance its dramatic illogicality does not matter. Dvořák holds his audience in a musical enchantment as secure in its way as Mozart's in ' The Magic Flute '—and Mozart's treatment of that astonishing farrago of Masonic mysteries and theatrical effects without any causes persuaded Goethe to write a serious sequel to it. Here again, Dvořák sees and knows, and uplifts us into a higher and more ethereal atmosphere than that of fact or legend.

One particular aspect of Dvořák's treatment of form should be mentioned here. At the end of his life he wrote five symphonic poems, four of which were based on Czech legends of as gruesome a character as ' The Spectre's Bride ' ; and in each of these four his music follows strictly the chronology of the story. Most people would agree that he was here attempting the impossible. Musical form depends on repetition of ideas and statements ; narrative form does not. A literal reflection of the form of a narrative in music almost always produces a musically unconvincing result. (Two possible exceptions to this generalization are Strauss's ' Till Eulenspiegel ' and Elgar's ' Falstaff '.) Dvořák's treatment of the problem is most adroit and is based on a principle akin to the Wagnerian *Leitmotiv* ; the musical material moreover is excellent, as (of course) is the orchestration. In spite of this, these works survive only as interesting curiosities, except perhaps for the fifth and last of them (' Heroic Song ') which is not based on a narrative programme, but proceeds on purely musical lines.

Turning now to Dvořák's orchestration, one finds still greater difficulty in summarizing it with anything approaching succinctness. There is no definable system here ; simply an unerring sense, born of a combination of imagination and experience, of apt and arresting tone-quality. The only generalizations which can be made about it are, first, that it is of infinite variety and, second, that Dvořák generally displays in his *tutti* a liking for shrill and brilliant tone. It is by no means an easy style for a conductor to make the best of, for it does not " play itself " as Elgar often does, but presents constant

problems of balance which have to be very carefully sorted out at rehearsal. But even in those passages which present the greatest difficulty there is always something immensely worth while bringing out, and the excellence and individuality of Dvořák's scoring is probably the one aspect of his work about which there has never been any disagreement. From the learned and conservative (but broad-minded) Prout onwards, theorists as well as audiences have agreed on Dvořák's absolute mastery of the orchestra ; but because of its empirical nature he did not leave a " school " of followers in his style.

Any one of his scores will provide examples of effects quite peculiar to him ; for instance, who but Dvořák would have thought of giving this unassuming little phrase from one of the Slavonic Dances

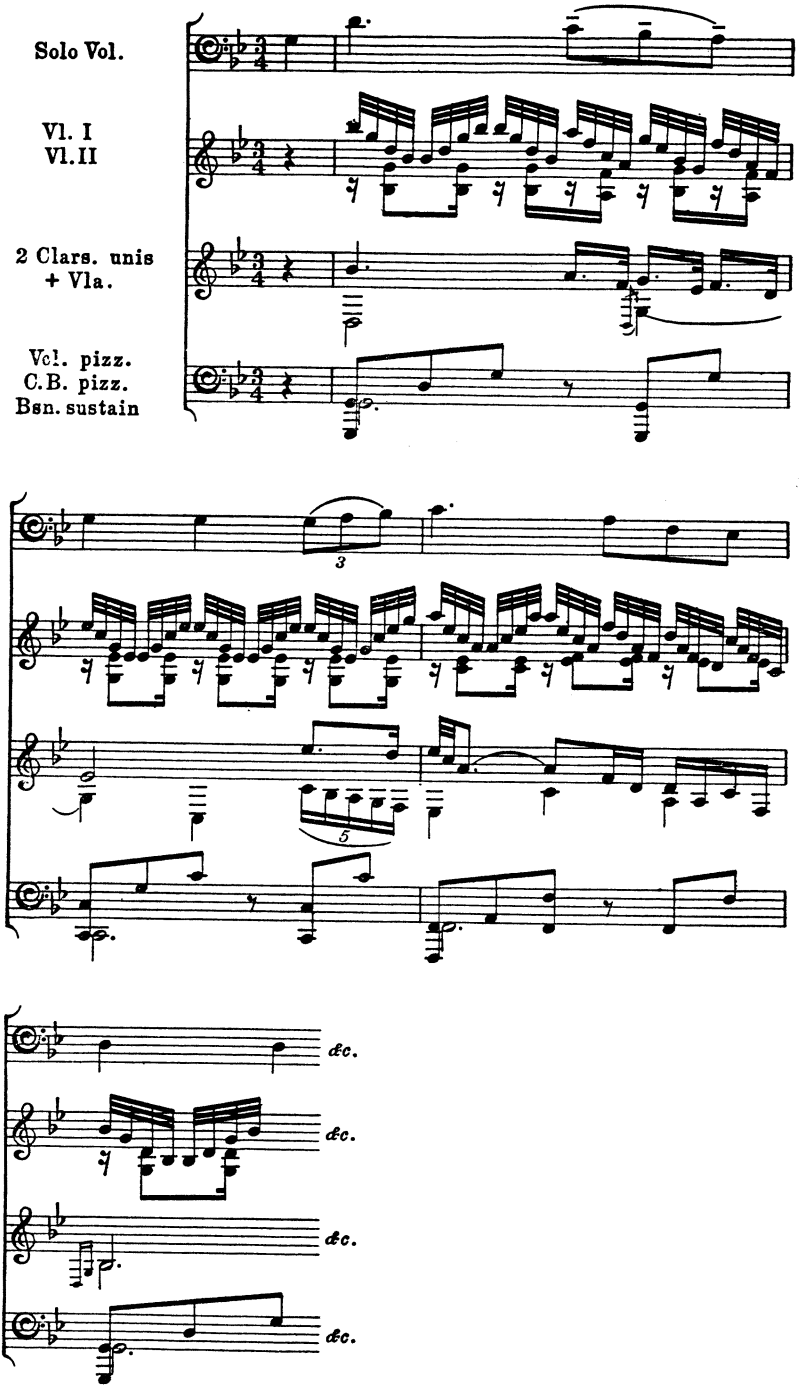
to the trumpets ? The ' New World ', too, and particularly its slow movement, bristles with points of unobtrusive mastery. The placing of the clarinets at the *bottom* of their compass at the opening of the slow movement (Ex. 1) ; the introduction of a tuba (for this phrase and Ex. 2 *only* in the whole Symphony) to strengthen the bass ; the doubling of the cor anglais, in the course of the celebrated melody which follows, by clarinets a *tenth* below ; the spacing of a thick string chord immediately afterwards with the basses a fifth *above* the cellos—all these touches, simple as they are (and used to them as we have become), display the individuality of his outlook. No less remarkable is the way in which at the return of the main theme a *diminuendo* is enforced by the progressive reduction of the number of strings to three solo instruments in the penultimate phrase, after which the whole body of strings surges in to sum up the statement in a gorgeous wave of sound. Again, the movement ends with what is probably the softest chord in all orchestral music—and who but Dvořák would have thought of scoring it for basses divided into four parts, without even cellos to help them ?

There is no instrument or combination of instruments which Dvořák does not at one time or another treat, not merely with sympathy, but with inspiration. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely ; here are just a few more which " tell " immensely in performance : the statement of the G minor theme in the second subject of the ' New World ' on flute and oboe in unison—a combination of which Dvořák was very fond ; the reinforcement by a

muted horn of the *alto* part of four-part string harmony in the fourteenth of the 'Symphonic Variations', while the flute echoes the treble part in syncopation; the allotting of the opening melody of the second subject of the 'New World' last movement to the clarinet, and the reinforcement of the texture in the succeeding passage by two trumpets playing in unison, not on the tonic and dominant, but on the mediants of these two keys (in the recapitulation, which is scored very quietly, this reinforcement is carried out quite differently by an unobtrusively chuckling bassoon); the profoundly poetical treatment of the three horns, both individually and collectively, in the slow movement of the cello Concerto; the brilliant use of percussion in the *quiet* sections of the 'Carnival' Overture; the real nobility and fire of the trombones in the 'New World', whether treated harmonically or melodically. In all these examples, and many others, Dvořák seems to identify himself with the instruments in question as truly as Mozart.

Most of these examples are of a simple style of texture; but the naïve Dvořák was equally a master of complexity when he wished, and an effortless one at that; nor is his texture ever "muddy". The example from the cello Concerto shown on the opposite page is by no means out of the way for Dvořák in its elaborateness, and its actual continuation is still more polyphonic; yet even here it looks at first sight as if the solo cello simply could not come through. The melody does not lie in the cello's most resonant register, and the accompanying texture is all round it and even crosses it more than once. Yet in performance the soloist is not obscured, and the general effect is perfectly clear. Dvořák's sense of what would or would not "come off" in texture is unerring, and he can slide into and out of complexity with the same effortless clarity and aptness as Mozart when he introduces a passage of eight-part counterpoint into the 'Impresario' overture.

It is as good as certain that Dvořák will always remain an isolated phenomenon in music. Broadly speaking, composers who matter can be divided into two classes: the schematic and the non-schematic. In the first category come, for instance, Bach and Mozart, whose procedures can be to some extent classified and analysed, and can therefore contribute to the formation of new styles among their successors. Against these two one may set Handel and Haydn in the second category, whose procedures—at any rate in their maturest and most characteristic works—cannot be classified and are therefore inimitable. (It need scarcely be added that neither class of composer is as such finer than the other; some composers arrive at vital self-expression through a system illuminated



by their own genius, others through natural genius tempered and fortified by experience, the ultimate outcome being equally valuable in either case.)

Dvořák obviously belongs to the non-schematic category : his art is experimental and empirical, and any composer who wishes to follow in his footsteps with results profitable to music will have to be another and better Dvořák—which is as impossible as that someone else should be born with the same finger-prints and have the same environment. But the vitality and value of his work receive their finest testimony from the fact that he was first brought to international recognition by the greatest contemporary figure in the schematic camp—Brahms ; and that a generation afterwards Brahms, on seeing the score of the cello Concerto, said : " Why didn't I know that it was possible to write a cello concerto like this ? I would have written one long ago if I had ! " Brahms's cello concerto would not have been " like this ", nor in spite of the crying need for more and better and bigger cello concertos has the medium become generally popularized among composers ; but the generous and sustained admiration of the most thoughtful composer of his time for one who approached music from the point of view opposite to his own, coupled with the impact and vigour of Dvořák's music itself, are proof enough (if any were needed) that the immediate appeal of his works is allied with a lasting value.