Celebrating Dvorák

AFFINITIES BETWEEN SCHUBERT AND DVORÁK

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In 1983, the 150th anniversary of Brahms's birth, reflecting on Schubert and Brahms Robert Pascall wrote:[1]

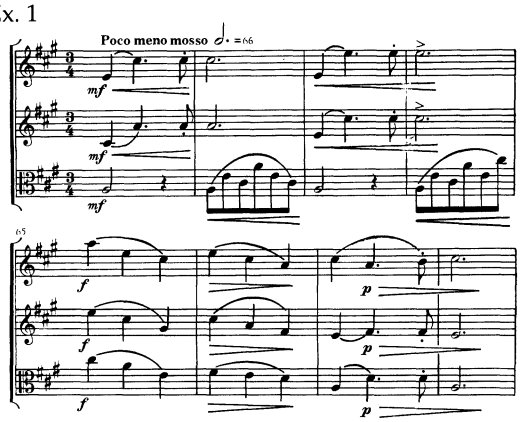
> '. . . during the mid-1850's . . . Brahms began to accord Schubert as great a place in his musical environment as Bach and Beethoven . . . in a real sense Brahms celebrated Schubert for the rest of his life.'

Dvořák, too, may be said to have 'celebrated Schubert',[2] and for the 150th anniversary of Dvořák's birth it seems appropriate to reassess the influence of Schubert on this composer. The chamber music is a rewarding area in which to concentrate this kind of enquiry, and so the examples discussed here will be taken from Dvořák's chamber works, though certainly not with the intention of implying that Schubert's influence was restricted to this area alone.

While other connections, including those between Dvořák and Brahms, and those implied in Dvořák's 'American' style, as well as the Slavonic roots of Dvořák's music, have been commented on to the point of becoming clichés, and while commentators have also certainly paid lip-service to the question of Schubert's influence, actually very little detailed attention seems to have been given to this question. Exploring the Schubertian qualities in Dvořák's chamber works can help enhance our appreciation of this music in its own right. There were distinctive qualities that the two composers shared, so that Dvořák responded to features in Schubert's writing which corresponded with his own compositional personality and brought it out all the more strongly. (Incidentally, for Dvořák as for Schubert, chamber music was established as an early interest which then continued throughout his career; also, like Schubert, he was a viola-player.)

The perception of affinities between Schubert and Dvořák belongs with the larger question of Austro-Bohemian connections, too large for consideration here[3] (but clearly there was musically a long and distinguished tradition of such connections): to put it simply, if Dvořák 'spoke Czech' in his instrumental music (in the same way that Mozart's instrumental melodies so often seem to 'speak Italian') then it seems that Schubert also 'spoke Czech' in some of his music. The opening of Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet finale sounds as though in another existence it might have been one of Dvořák's celebrated Slavonic Dances (or alternatively part of the peasant merry-making scene in Smetana's *Má Vlast: Vltava*). It is interesting to find that Dvořák himself perceived various of Schubert's characteristic style-traits as specifically 'Slavic'.[4] As a corollary we might note that Dvořák was capable of creating extremely felicitous examples of Viennese 'Ländler'-style waltz tunes from a Bohemian perspective, as in the trio to the scherzo of his *Terzetto* op. 74 (1887) for 2 violins and viola (Ex. 1):

Ex. 1



Perhaps if Schubert had had the opportunity of commenting on Dvořák's music he might have referred to this trio as possessing 'Austrian' traits.

The 'sounds like' response is only a superficial sign of the perceived affinities between the two composers (though it is a compelling one: to cite one instance, the A major scherzo of Dvořák's Piano Quintet op. 81 [1887] definitely sounds like some familiar Schubert pieces, including the similar movement in his piano duet Fantasy D.940 in F minor). On the subject of general affinities, it is again interesting to note Dvořák's comments on Schubert: what Dvořák described (with great clarity and sympathy) as characteristic features of Schubert included his tendency to 'excessive diffuseness', linked with his flow of melody, and his fine, individual polyphonic writing (giving as instances the D minor Quartet and the C major String Quintet).[5] These are among precisely the features that characterize Dvořák's own chamber works. Both Schubert and Dvořák liked to construct on a leisurely scale, with ideas that seem to need, and do in fact receive, leisurely treatment. (It is worth remembering that both composers could of course create miniature forms when it suited their purpose, as in their songs and shorter piano pieces.)

As Dvořák observed apropos of Schubert, this tendency to discursiveness goes together with a gift for

[1] 'Brahms and Schubert', *The Musical Times*, cxxiv (1983), 286.

[2] Although Dvořák's biographers have assumed that Schubert's works influenced Dvořák's early attempts at composition, there seems to be no direct evidence that he knew much Schubert before about the mid-1870s. Perhaps the more self-confident absorption of influences in a composer's mature style is aptly to be thought of as a 'celebratory', rather than a merely imitative feature.

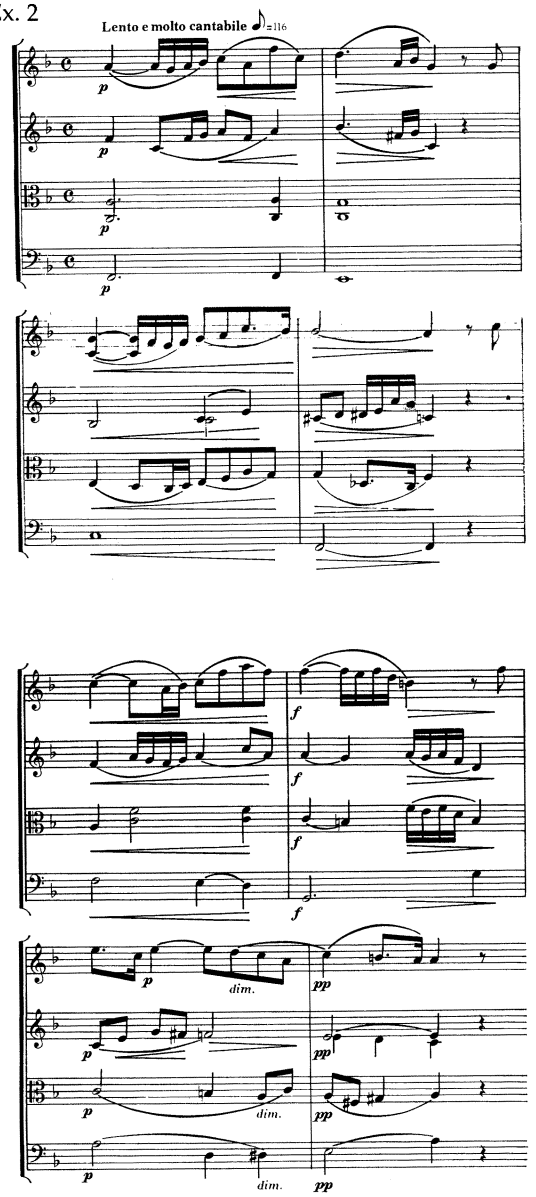
[3] It is appropriate here to recall that Bohemia was ruled by the Habsburgs until 1918; one happy aspect of this situation was that Dvořák was eligible for an Austrian state grant, awarded as a prize for compositions submitted to the judges, who included Hanslick and Brahms. (Dvořák was a regular prizewinner for several years.)

[4] Antonin Dvořák, 'Franz Schubert', *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, xlviii (1894), 345.

[5] Ibid, 343.

writing lyrical melody. Linked in turn with this is the question of excessive 'sweetness'; it has been suggested that it is perhaps 'this quality, present in smaller or larger quantities, that makes some people hostile to Dvořák's music'.[6] This quality of sweetness is found in Schubert, for example in the 'second subject' of the D minor Quartet, first movement, but it is controlled or counterbalanced by harmonic, rhythmic and textural acerbities. The kind of writing in Dvořák that may have attracted the charge of oversweetness could be such as we find in the slow (third) movement of the A flat Quartet, op. 105 (1895). It is interesting to note that both the Schubert melody cited and the Dvořák (op. 105 – iii) show the same urge to temper F major with a mediant A minor colouring (Schubert suggestively, Dvořák more firmly) and this move is effective in counteracting the potentially cloying effects of their sweetness (see Ex. 2):

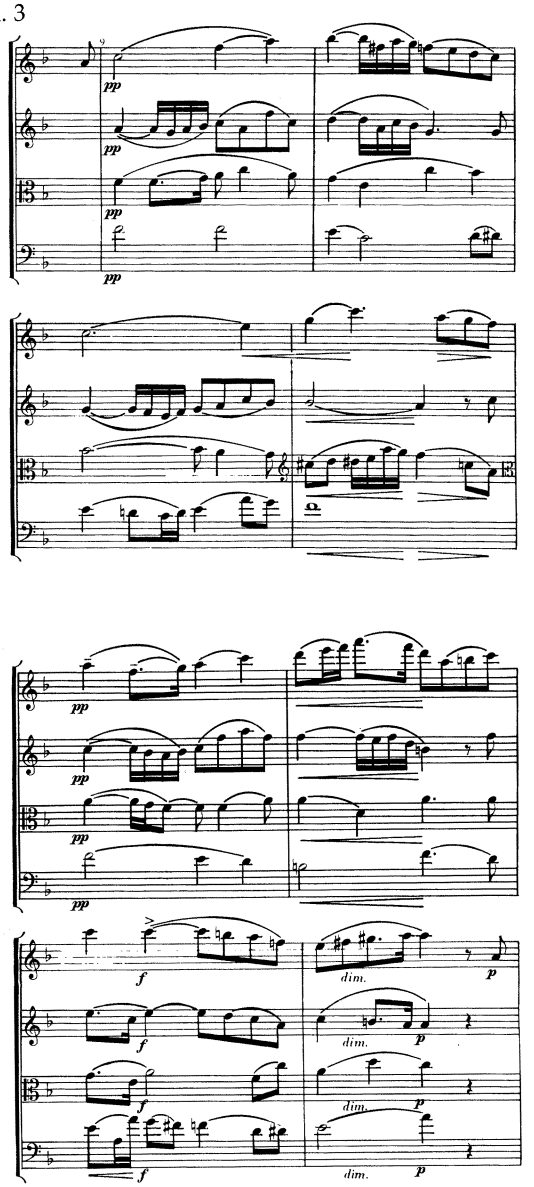
Ex. 2



[6]Alec Robertson, *Dvořák*, London, (rev. edn.) 1964, p.89.

Above all what lifts the music onto another level is a matter of texture: with both composers it is the way in which the melodies are set for the particular instrumental combination that provides subtleties quite apart from the intrinsic attractions of the melodies themselves. The two composers share the ability to create apparently spontaneous counterpoints springing from fully-expressed lyrical material, and both exploit this as a structural feature, using textural variation in different settings of a melody to articulate sections of the structure. (This is a feature which helps to alleviate the potentially repetitive effects of their longer movement-structures.) It is just such an effect of added textural elements that lends enchantment to Dvořák's repetition of his original idea in op. 105 – iii (see Ex. 3):

Ex. 3



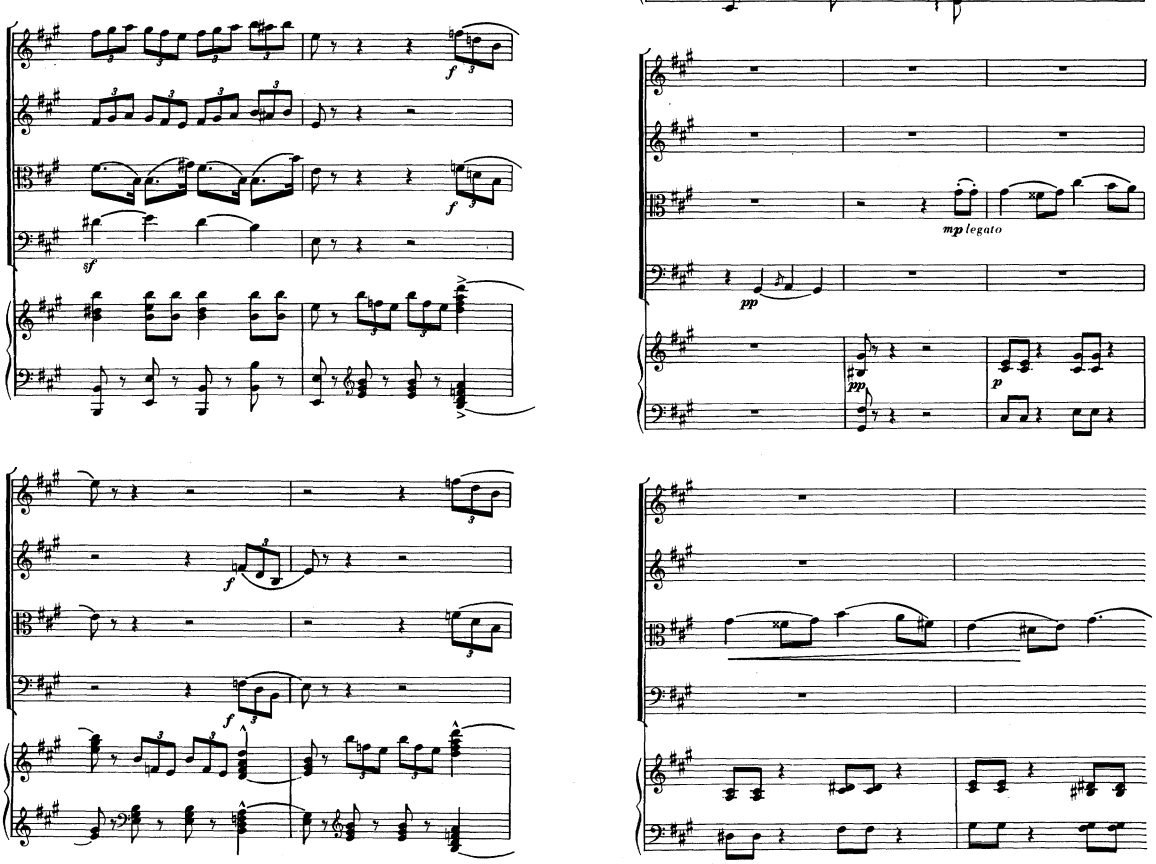
Many more examples could be cited from Dvořák or Schubert. This lyrical counterpoint – the use of lyrical melody in a contrapuntal setting – is the antithesis of

'academic' counterpoint: it appears as a 'fingerprint' of Schubert's and Dvořák's style.

Another of Schubert's 'fingerprints' is the deceptive use of structural devices, in particular the habit of setting up an apparent transition to a new key area, only to deflect the music either back to the original key or into an entirely different area from the one expected. (This is again a way of enhancing what would otherwise be a commonplace aspect of structure; the eventual arrival in the new key takes on a special, magical quality.) Again, many instances could be cited. An example showing the use of both types of structural play on key – deflection and deception, with build-up and denial of expectation – is the opening movement of Schubert's B flat Piano Trio D.898. (See bars 18-26 for the false move away from the tonic, only to return; and bars 51-59 for the false build-up to a new key that fails to materialize, then slipping into a quite different key from the one expected.) There are numerous ramifications of these proceedings, but suffice it to mention here simply that one of the characteristics of this sort of 'behaviour' is the noticeable amount of effort generated in building up at length to the 'wrong' key, while the 'right' key which the composer actually intends is then reached almost instantaneously without very much ado at all.

These are just the sorts of proceedings that are used in the first movement of Dvořák's Piano Quintet op. 81. An apparent build-up to the dominant is deflected back to A major for a repeat of the opening; then a second, lengthy dominant preparation is suddenly turned aside to the mediant, C sharp minor, for the second subject's appearance in the viola: see Ex. 4:

Ex. 4



The closeness of Dvořák's procedure here to Schubert's seems not to have been noticed specifically before; but the comparison can be taken further, to the point where it begins to approach the type of 'modelling' discussed by Charles Rosen (with special reference to Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin).[7] Space does not permit a detailed examination of both movements here: some selected examples will have to suffice to demonstrate the kinds of structural features they share. The double statement of the opening theme (mentioned above in connection with key-structure) is in both linked with a recapitulatory procedure whereby the original first statement is omitted and the recapitulation begins with the second statement. The first statements themselves have a number of similarities: both use a long-breathed melody (Schubert in violin and cello octaves, Dvořák in cello solo) incorporating at the beginning a long-short-long pattern of rhythms, with a song-like accompaniment in the piano, anchored on a tonic pedal at first, and featuring a repeated rhythmic pattern animating several bars of tonic harmony. There are differences, of course; but the affinities are striking. The parallels can be drawn further, for example encompassing their characterization of transitional material. Some observers might see more (others fewer) points of connection between the two movements.

As Rosen has put it,[8] such parallelism is 'unprovable without a signed affidavit from the composer'. Dvořák's movement (op. 81-i) is in no sense a mere copy of a Schubert prototype; it is full of Dvořák's own original inspiration, but Schubert's inspiration lies behind it too. In the absence of the 'signed affidavit', Dvořák's own account of Schubert[9] stands as evidence of his keen understanding and knowledge of Schubert's music. Many aspects of Dvořák's style in general recall Schubert – the rhythmic detail of his accompaniments, melodic shapes, tonal plans (the placing of the op. 81 Piano Quintet's first movement, second subject in C sharp minor recapitulated in F sharp minor bears some relation to Schubertian precedents) and harmonic colouring (including the often-noted major-minor effects in both composers' music). I would suggest that Dvořák's absorption of Schubert's ways of thinking, together with the two composers' naturally-shared qualities, led Dvořák to think often along similar lines (as in op. 81-i) without conscious imitation. Perhaps also, in retrospect, Dvořák's debt to Schubert throws light on our view of that composer, for, as John Reed has reminded us,[10] 'Schubert . . . was only a first generation Viennese'; his parents came from areas of what is now Czechoslovakia, and 'the poetry of Schubert's music . . . owes more to the home of his forefathers than it does to Vienna'. As for the process of modelling, Dvořák summed this up in his advice to would-be composers: 'Model your style upon all that is best . . . in the literature of music, but remain yourself'.[11]

[7] 'Influence: Plagiarism and Inspiration', *19th Century Music*, iv (1980), 87-100.
[8] Ibid, p.100.
[9] Op. cit.
[10] *Schubert* (Master Musicians), London, 1987, p.1.
[11] 'How Dvořák gives a Lesson', *New York Herald*, 14 January 1884, reprinted in John Clapham, *Dvořák*, Newton Abbot, 1979, p.203.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Lionel and Michael Wollenberg, Tim Jones, Jan Smaczny and Fred Sternfeld for their help and advice in connection with this article.

The idea for this article originated in a talk given by the author in conjunction with the Allegri Quartet at the Holywell Music Room, Oxford, on 13 May 1991.