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THE DVOŘÁK CENTENARY

By Edward Lockspeiser

The celebration of centenaries is often, let us be frank, a matter more of pecuniary than of artistic interest to the celebrators. And possibly there are those who may figure that since Antonin Dvořák, the Czech composer, was born at a little village near Prague a hundred years ago on September 8th, this would be the moment to get out of him—a cheque. But, these sinister jokes aside, it is pertinent and important for us to remember at this critical hour in the history of the great Czech people that it was to a very large extent the encouragement, discernment and generosity Dvořák found in England, and later in the United States, which brought him to the realization of his individual and national ideals in music —ideals which have persisted down to this day and must surely reach new heights when a way is seen through the present bitterness and strife in Dvořák's tragic land.

First of all, Dvořák had to decide upon and be quite sure in his mind of his attitude to the overpowering force of German and Austrian music in the nineteenth century. Taking a long view of his place in nineteenth-century music, I think it is most remarkable that this son of a country butcher in Bohemia should have been able to resist, as he did, the full force of the Wagnerian tidal wave, and to establish an individual and national mode of expression, so unmistakably exemplified in such works as the 'Dumky' Trio, the Slavonic Dances and the cello Concerto. It is perhaps a little difficult for us to realize, at this distance of time, what an effort was necessary to disengage the old cultural aspirations in what was then Bohemia (as well as in Hungary, Poland and the Baltic States) from the dynamic force of the German masters. Even great France

herself was at one time well-nigh throttled by the paralysing influence of Wagner, and it was not until well into the 'eighties that, in Paris, the turning-point came. If I were asked to define this turning-point, I should say it came when, after years of perseverance, the young Debussy suddenly saw clearly. " Here ", he said to his Wagnerian friend Catulle Mendès, who had written for him the libretto of ' Rodrigue et Chimène ', " keep your glory and keep your libretto ! " And Debussy's Wagnerian essays were promptly destroyed.

Dvořák's conflict with the Germans was resolved more easily, perhaps more happily, for although he was always a great admirer of Brahms, he was aware, too, of a *bête noire* in him, and it is not an exaggeration to say that from the time that Brahms took up cudgels for Dvořák and sponsored the publication of his music by Simrock,[1] the Czech musician never ceased to ponder the extent to which their paths should run parallel, intertwine or diverge. Here, indeed, was the heart of Dvořák's artistic problem : to what extent could he honestly call himself a Germanic musician, and where did the distinctively national ideals, first formulated by Smetana, lie ? The answer is in the ' New World ' Symphony, but even more convincingly in the D minor Symphony (No. 2), with its altogether unusual combination of grace and exuberance, of joy delicately tinged with tragedy, the whole being the work of a tremendously sincere artist not without a certain grandeur.

This was the time when efforts were being made to wean Dvořák from Prague and to induce him to settle in Vienna. No, he decided to come to England for a concert tour, and found here a wildly enthusiastic audience at the Albert Hall and a sympathetic publisher in Novello. One may wonder what sort of impression the burly-looking Dvořák must have made on the staid Victorians who flocked to his concerts. Little could they have realized how, in their spontaneous enthusiasm, they were bringing to a most critical issue the whole question of Czech artistic independence. For Dvořák's music does breathe an entirely new spirit in the romantic period, a spirit which is both robust and graceful, dramatic yet humorous, typified indeed by the characteristic Czech physiognomy, with its broad, squat features, presenting at first sight a certain fury and fierceness, but which hides a sweet and charming nature, friendly and engaging.

These were the qualities recognized by Brahms. No doubt there was no Dvořák celebration in Nazi Germany, nor, most

[1] With German title-pages from which our programmes take foreign translations to this day.—ED.

decidedly, in the composer's oppressed land. And for that very reason it is incumbent upon us to proclaim the debt which Brahms, Dvořák's great German contemporary and friend, owes to the musician who was gloriously striving to express the ideals of a minority living within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The relationship between the two artists is one that must go down into history as a model of what such inter-national relationships should be. From Brahms Dvořák learnt the sense of humility before the greatness of a task undertaken, a fitting severity of mood, a sense of classical dignity and proportion—the great D minor Symphony bears witness to all this. From Dvořák, on the other hand, Brahms had more than a hint that the lyrical element in romantic music should not be ousted by too austere and pompous a sense of one's own importance ; for, manifestly, Brahms's music was relieved of its heaviness through his knowledge of the Bohemian master whom he had rightly encouraged.

And so we may seek and hope to come to a clearer realization of Dvořák's place in the romantic gamut of composers which, as we are now beginning to see, did not end with the nineteenth century, nor with the last war, but which has extended in spirit right down to the present day. He was not, to be sure, the Mussorgsky of the Czechs. Such a composer was rather Smetana. On the other hand, he was not a Tchaikovsky, morbid and introspective, sick in imagination. There is usually something positive, sunny, hopeful and confident in Dvořák, not deeply philosophical, perhaps not even profound, but usually amiable and whole-hearted, something to which one can trustfully return as one might return to the hospitable inns of his native land. He talks amusingly and light-heartedly, but he is not garrulous. He is earnest, but he does not frown. He can be severe, too, as in the beautiful ' Biblical Songs ', but he is never forbidding. And underlying this unmistalably Czech music is a delightful *bonhomie*, which only the vileness of Nazism can fail to perceive.

Above all, he was one of those rare natural musicians—there is no more precise word—like Haydn and like Schubert, who produced music continuously, spontaneously and abundantly, for the long list of his works includes as many as nine symphonies, several operas, a great quantity of chamber music, most of it of very high standing, besides numerous songs and religious music. He wrote in all forms, adapted new ones to his own needs, such as the " furiant ", and worked out his problems not so much in his mind, but on the paper in front of him, as he went along. In common parlance, he wrote with his heart.

To say that he was a natural musician implies that he was child-like, which is true, but it might also imply, and this is equally true, that he was a musician of nature. Numerous are his works which reflect an intimate communion with nature, and an honest sense of the goodness of humanity. Here, finally, must be Dvořák's lesson on the occasion of his centenary. He may not be supreme among the inner circle of the elect, but he had the moral courage and perseverance to become himself. Like Rousseau, he would have said : " Si je ne vaux pas mieux, au moins je suis autre ". And Rousseau continues :

> This is what I have done, what I have thought, what I was. I have told the good and the bad with equal frankness. I have neither omitted anything bad, nor interpolated anything good. If I have occasionally made use of some immaterial embellishments, this has only been in order to fill a gap caused by lack of memory. I may have assumed the truth of that which I knew might have been true, never of that which I knew to be false. I have shown myself as I was : mean and contemptible, good, high-minded and sublime, according as I was one or the other. I have unveiled my inmost self even as Thou hast seen it, O Eternal Being. Gather round me the countless host of my fellow-men ; let them hear my confessions, lament for my unworthiness, and blush for my imperfections. Then let each of them in turn reveal, with the same frankness, the secrets of his heart at the foot of Thy Throne, and say, if he dare, " I was better than that man ! " [2]

That, too, was the unpretentious sincerity of Dvořák, a truthfulness and an honesty of purpose which not the blackest Nazi vileness can conceal.

[2] John Grant's translation.