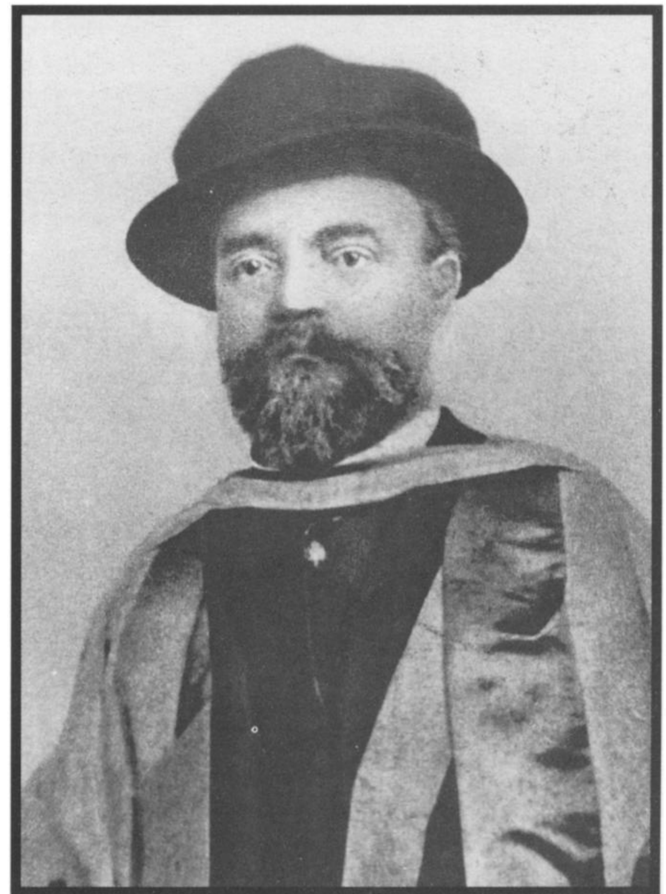
CULTURE CLASH

One hundred years after its premiere, James Hepokoski argues for a closer connection between Dvořák's 'New World' Symphony and Longfellow's Song of Hiawatha

A century has passed since Anton Seidl conducted the first public performances of Dvořák's 'New World' Symphony in Carnegie Hall on 15 and 16 December 1893. Works of such ready accessibility tend to be taken for granted by later generations. With some embarrassment all around, they often settle into the status of middlebrow *kitsch,* and it can come as something of a shock to be reminded of how little we have thought seriously about them. Such a shock was provided last year by Michael Beckerman in an article on the work's slow movement, in which he reawakened the question of the symphony's semi-programmatic relationship with Longfellow's poem from 1855, *The Song of Hiawatha.*[1] The basic issue was nothing new – it had been mentioned by Otakar Šourek and pursued by John Clapham – but several aspects of it had been muddled, and never before had the implications of the *Hiawatha* connection for the second movement's musical processes been taken so far.

At the time of the premiere Dvořák himself publicly linked the second and third movements with the poem. The earliest, most reliable evidence relates the *Largo* (as Henry Krehbiel reported at the time) to 'the mood . . . found in the story of Hiawatha's wooing [of Minnehaha]' (chapter 10) and the scherzo with the subsequent wedding feast and dances (chapter 11). A separate, perhaps significantly later tradition confused the matter, though, with the assertion – thereafter much repeated – that Dvořák had stated that he intended the *Largo* to evoke the funeral of Minnehaha after her death in the midst of famine (chapter 20). In short, through careful documentation Beckerman called our attention to the importance of the early claim for chapter 10 and then suggested an interpretation of the slow movement that juxtaposed images from both chapters 10 and 20: 'the beginning of a legend' (the opening chords); 'the pleasant journey homeward' with Minnehaha after the wooing (the D*b* main theme); C#-minor funeral music (especially the second theme of the middle section, bb. 54, 78), referring to chapter 20; and 'the singing of the birds,' from chapter 10 (C# major, b. 90).

My own view is that there is a more convincing reading of the *Largo*, restricted to material from chapter 10. The most crucial requirement for any proposed interpretation, though, is that rather than dealing with the *Largo* in isolation, it must be integrated into a vision of the entire symphony. The 'New World' features quasi-leitmotivic reappearances of themes throughout, and material from the *Largo*, in particular, plays a central role in the finale. In such cases, programmatic connotations cannot be switched on and off at will: if we are engaged with the middle movements as *Hiawatha* pieces – for which there is ample evidence – then we must also grapple with the whole work, on some level, as a *Hiawatha* symphony.



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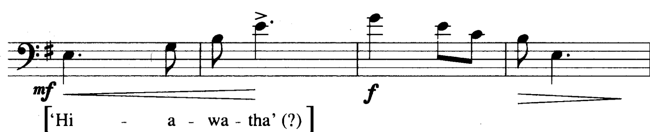
But the *Hiawatha* reading should not be used to delegitimise alternative options. Consider, for example, Dvořák's astonishing conclusion in 1893 that 'the music of the Negroes and of the Indians was practically identical.'[2] (Apparently he judged it all to be collapsible, for his purposes, into rudimentary pentatonic or 'modal' formulas that could be taken as emblematic of non-European, racial others.) Along with evidence from the symphony's later reception history, such remarks remind us how unwise it is to insist on a single, presumably 'correct' reading. It is in the nature of all complex musical utterances to refract into multiple, simultaneous meanings. In this case, four of the most obvious are: (1) scenes from Longfellow's *Hiawatha* pseudo-epic, assumed to be unproblematically 'available' and sufficiently representative of the Native-American other; (2) parallel evocations of the African-American heritage (to some extent, Dvořák seems to have considered this second reading to be metaphorically mappable onto the first); (3) impressions of the general 'spirit' of America, tinged with an intense nostalgia for things Bohemian and Austro-Germanic—whose 'superior' cultural status is accepted as a given; (4) a technical, intertextual dialogue with the materials and genres of the symphonic canon. My concern here is almost exclusively with the first.

When considering a 'Hiawatha's wooing' reading of the *Largo*, which Dvořák cast as a ternary form with interpolations, we should begin with the three special-effect passages toward the end. Emerging out of the C#-minor middle section, the first consists of six measures of C#-major birdsong (bb. 90-95); the second is the radiant, *fortissimo* breakthrough superimposing the incipits of two first-movement themes on that of the main *Largo* theme (on A major, bb. 96-100; cf. the first movement, no. 13); the third is the *pianissimo* return of the D*b* theme in the English horn and the muted, *divisi* passage – with poignant fermatas – for ever-further reduced strings (bb. 101–11). These would seem congruent with the end of chapter 10, in which a triple-blessing is conferred on the idealised pair as they journey homeward: that of the birds ('Happy are you, Hiawatha,/Having such a wife to love you!'); of the 'sun benignant' ('O my children,/Love is sunshine. . . . Rule by love, O Hiawatha!'); and of the moon whispering 'with mystic splendours' ('O my children,/Day is restless, night is quiet. . . . Rule by patience, Laughing Water!'). If the conclusions of the wooing-chapter and the *Largo* are accepted as parallel, this renders nonsensical any attempt to interpolate death-images from chapter 20 into the middle section.

a) Mvmt. 1, 1st Theme ['Hiawatha' : Horn-Call (?)]



b) Mvmt. 1, 3rd Theme ['Hiawatha' (?)]

c) Mvmt. 2, 1st Theme ['Minnehaha' (?)]

Moreover, when considered with related material from other movements, the last two 'blessings' – sun and moon – help to suggest connotative meanings for the themes themselves. Thus the A-major sun-blessing may seek to conjoin Hiawatha themes from the first movement (examples 1a and b) with the main theme from the second, which is probably a representation of Minnehaha (1c) – or, to follow Krehbiel's words more closely, of the 'mood' surrounding Hiawatha's love for her. Similarly, for the intimate moon-blessing, addressed in the poem to Minnehaha ('Laughing Water'), we find only 'her' theme (Example 1 a–c).

The Hiawatha connotations of the first-movement themes seem readily defensible, although the result may now strike us as, at best, only wryly amusing. (The breathtaking naiveté of the embedded incongruities would defy any attempt to present the implied content as something to be casually reaffirmed today.) First movements of 19th-century works, of course, often set forth the general character of the masculine-protagonist-as-hero. And in this first movement – following an *Oberon*-like forest-introduction – we are presented with something of a wide-eyed, American-Indian *Eroica*, in which the hero's main theme (example 1a), often associated with a horn-call, simultaneously seeks to conjure up the picture of an Ojibwe Siegfried. (Additional commentary may be superfluous: But could Dvořák have been so literal-minded as consciously to include the rhythm of Hiawatha's name at the opening of the first and third themes?)

As for what may be the Minnehaha theme – which Dvořák labelled in the sketches as 'Legend' – it is not difficult to recognise its reworking of a familiar semantic type often associated in the 19th-century tradition with the idealised feminine complement to the hero. This *topos* often features a gentle, pastoral melody for solo woodwind (the oboe and English horn, *dolce* or *flebile*, are especially favoured) and a gently undulating, quasi-circular melodic contour: this construction of the heroine's 'centeredness' is characteristically to be juxtaposed with the fretful, linear striving of the masculine hero. True, Minnehaha may not sound much like (for example) the Teutonic Senta here, but the reliance of both on accepted signifying conventions seems plausible enough.

For the opening, modulatory chord-frame of the *Largo,* Dvořák's sketch-remark, 'the beginning of a legend,' is certainly appropriate. (Its most immediate model, leading similarly to an extended wind-solo, is to be found in Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony from 1888.) One of its important functions is to set off what follows as a story 'in quotation marks'; the chords' reappearance in bb.22–26 provides an extra push, and, slightly altered, they emerge again at the end, bb.120–23, as a sign of narrative conclusion. As for the rest of the *Largo,* the first C#-minor theme (b.46) belongs to a multimovement complex of related 'modal' themes probably intended to invoke what Dvořák believed to be the spirit of American-Indian culture: each theme is a transformation of the others (examples 2a-e). Within a specifically 'chapter 10' reading of the *Largo,* exam-

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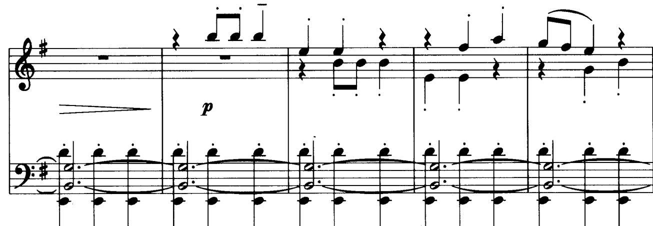
a) Mvmt. 1, 2nd Theme

b) Mvmt. 2, 2nd Theme

c) Mvmt. 3, 'Scherzo' Theme : Wedding - Feast Dances



d) Mvmt. 4, 1st Theme ['Famine' (?)]

e) Mvmt. 4, 2nd Theme ['Forth into the empty forest' (?)]

ple 2b may reflect the ritual lament of Minnehaha's father – the 'ancient Arrow-maker' – for the loss of his daughter. And notwithstanding its obvious paraphrase of a passage from the second movement of the *Eroica*, the second C#-minor theme (b.54) may suggest either a different inflection of the lament or, possibly, the journey homeward, leading eventually to the triple blessing.

Since the outer portions of the scherzo (example 2c) – though not its 'Bohemian' trio – may be easily construed as representative of the vigorous wedding dances from chapter 11, the above interpretation squares with the earliest reports on the program from Krehbiel and others. But what of the third *Hiawatha* tradition (whose connection with Dvořák is hazier), which associated the *Largo* with Minnehaha's funeral from chapter 20? There may well be a factual basis for this image, but one wonders whether it might have been inadvertently applied to the wrong movement. For once one (even provisionally) accepts the connotations of the 'Hiawatha' and 'Minnehaha' motives – which play prominent, dramatic roles in the last movement – it is a relatively simple matter to project a chapter-20 mood-narrative over the finale's sonata-events. But instead of being concerned only with the funeral, the fourth movement seems to evoke the entire chapter: the prolonged winter famine; Hiawatha's rush into the forest in a futile search for food to save her; his memories of the past with her; her crying out of his name at the moment of her death; his intuitive hearing of that cry; his coursing back 'over snowfields waste and pathless' only to find her dead; the mourning and burial.

Obviously, some details are open to divergent interpretations, but I might provide one possible outline. In the finale's exposition, the introduction and E-minor first theme (example 2d) could be understood as standing for the famine ('And the hungry stars in heaven/Like the eyes of wolves glared at them!'). The transition (b.44, example 2e) may suggest the lines beginning, 'Forth into the empty forest/Rushed the maddened Hiawatha.' The subordinate theme, G major (b.68, echoing a different portion of the second movement of the *Eroica*) is a stereotypical symphonic love theme, probably reflecting Hiawatha's memories of Minnehaha. The G-major expositional close (b.92) continues with ardent, Minnehaha-related (*Largo*-related) ideas. The development (bb.129-*c*.207) is given over to a representation of the worsening famine. It features an ever-intensifying collage of three image-fragments: the famine, Hiawatha in the forest, and the fever-stricken Minnehaha (her *Largo* theme, increasingly *in extremis*).

The recapitulation erupts with the crisis of the dying Minnehaha ('Ah! . . . the eyes of Pauguk/Glare upon me in the darkness,/I can feel his icy fingers'; bb.208-13, E minor). At this point 'chronological time' stops with a new transition (b.214) – a narrative-shift to Hiawatha in the forest, still unaware of what is happening: hence the secondary and closing themes are sounded in E major, the (potentially redemptive) tonic. But the closing idea, now a reverie reharmonised with *Tannhäuser*-tinted anxiety, is eventually invaded – dreamily at first – by her death-words, 'Hiawatha' (b.267, the appearance of his horn-motive – this recapitulatory anomaly is central to the narrative). Its unexpected presence rapidly dissolves the reverie and triggers a sober re-entry into 'chronological time'. With his head initially still spinning, he comes to his senses (horns, *stringendo*, b. 271) and after a burst of anguish ('Hiawatha') begins to rush homeward, his E-major hopes now shatterd to E minor (b.279, launching the coda). The fatalistic return of the 'narrator' chords from the end of the *Largo* (bb. 299-305, 'the end of a legend') suggests his arrival and discovery – at the E-minor cadence, b.305 – of 'his lovely Minnehaha/Lying dead and cold before him.' The symphony ends with mourning (Minnehaha's theme in E minor, b.313, with echoes of the wedding-dance scherzo now dropping like tears), a declamatory 'conclusion' to the narrative (bb.321-32), and a grief-swollen apotheosis (E major, b.333) that unclenches into a startlingly banal, formulaic finish (bb.340-48, touched off by presumably 'American' pentatonicism in the bass line).

From an only slightly broader perspective, the famine-narrative – involving the death of that which is loved – may be easily leveraged into a stark metaphor of the most destructive reality for Native Americans in both Longfellow's 1855 and Dvořák's 1893: the European-American 'civilising' presence that, pushing westward, was systematically erasing a culture and its heritage. (Even while coating the whole with a gloss of moralising self-satisfaction, Longfellow's poem makes this explicit in the two final chapters, 'The white man's foot,' and 'Hiawatha's departure'.) To keep some perspective, we might recall that swirling through the years

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between Longfellow's poem and Dvořák's symphony were such things as the wholesale slaughter of the great bison herds and the full federal extension of the reservation system in the 1870s; the mounting Native-American dismay with their 'new world', exploding in frequent, bloody clashes with white troops (the Red River War, 1874–75; Little Bighorn, 1876; Tres Castillos, 1880); the widespread vogue in 1890 of Indian Ghost Dances (a last-ditch effort mystically to exorcise the white presence from the continent), which led in the same year to the murder of Sitting Bull and the decisive carnage at Wounded Knee; and the final acknowledgment of the disappearance of the American frontier, noted 'officially' by the 1890 census and underscored emphatically by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in a controversial address of 1893.

It is not irrelevant to our centennial reflection to remember that while Longfellow and Dvořák were enthusiastically contemplating their conception of the American Indian as the noble-savage subject for a European-heroic or sentimentalised art, the actual historical reality of their chosen topic was quite different. To be sure, the Austro-Germanic and Bohemian stretches throughout the symphony – and especially its self-conscious dissolution into the generic at the end – may be understood in several ways, but among them is the claim of being able to absorb ('resolve') its ostensible content into the medium's own aesthetic processes. The symphony's very tone and apparatus reverberate with the implication that that which is being pushed aside in reality may, in a strange compensation, be appropriated, reconfigured, and perpetuated ('made immortal') in the high art of the culture responsible for the pushing. Such a belief, though, is historically fragile, and today it can seem uncomfortably short-sighted – or unintentionally ironic.

It is unlikely that Dvořák, the visiting European, could have foreseen such a reading. The composer doubtless took it for granted that such music could be produced and received, even in the 'new world', as the self-evident celebration and legitimation of a wide range of 'universal' feelings. But a century later nothing in the past seems so self-evident. The weight of formerly dismissed realities now presses heavily, and the once brave 'new world' is undergoing a long-delayed, but rather severe, mid-life crisis of multicultural identity. However we might have assessed this piece as an aesthetic 'work' in the past, its lasting value for us today may be as a disturbingly provocative cultural 'text'. It is doubtful that we will be able to hear Dvořák's Ninth with such innocent ears in its next century.

Notes

1. Michael Beckerman: 'Dvořák's "New World" Largo and *The song of Hiawatha*' in *19th-Century Music*, vol. 16 (1992), pp. 35-48. **2.** Quoted, for example, in John Clapham: 'The evolution of Dvořák's Symphony "From the New World" in *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 44 (1958), p. 169.

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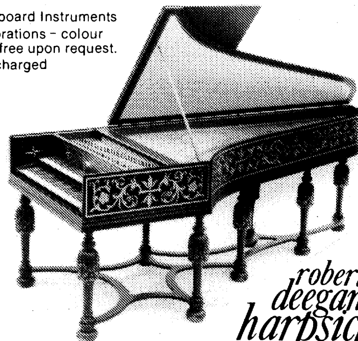

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