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DVOŘÁK'S AMERICAN SCHUBERT

When we consider the historical moment of Dvořák's stay in the United States we confront an interesting phenomenon. The spirit of competition among an unusually gifted (and aggressive) corps of reporters and critics created a climate where, for perhaps the first time in modern history, great men and women were influenced, sometimes decisively, by the actions of journalists, and further, aspects of their personalities and opinions which had been previously buried were revealed. The story of how Dvořák came to write his article on Franz Schubert is simply one more of these stories of journalistic prodding, and can be viewed along with James Huneker's successful attempt to get the composer to write a kind of Negro symphony, and James Creelman's sensational interview which resulted in months of polemics in the popular press.¹ It is probably worth mentioning that at least some of these writers were actually being paid by Jeanette Thurber to publicize both her conservatory and her views on American music..

Though less notorious than some of the other journalistic adventures, the Schubert story is no less interesting, and sheds light both on the journalistic style of the times and on the composer himself. One critic who usually goes unmentioned in the story of Dvořák's American years in Henry Finck.² Though perhaps not quite of the stature of Huneker, or even Henry Krehbiel, he was nonetheless one of the most widely read and idiosyncratic forces on the musical

¹ In December of 1892, James Huneker brought Dvořák an article titled "Negro Music" which may be considered a primary impetus for the "New World" Symphony. See my "Two Who Made the New World," forthcoming in *Hudební věda*. Several months later, in May of 1893, the famous "yellow journalist" James Creelman had published an interview with Dvořák titled "On the Real Value of Negro Melodies," which led to a series of articles on the subject and an editorial by Dvořák. See "The Real Value of Yellow Journalism," in *The Musical Quarterly*, 1993.

² For a discussion of Finck and his influence see Mark N. Grant's *Maestros of the Pen* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998) and for specific details about Finck and Dvořák see Finck's *The Golden Age of Music*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1926).

scene. He may also be respected as one of the first people employed as a musicologist in an American institution of higher learning, since he lectured in music history at the National Conservatory in New York while Dvořák was director.³ Finck had been in the thick of things as a critic for many years. He was a friend of the great and near great, met Wagner during his stay in Germany, and by the 1890s had become the respected music critic of the *Evening Post*.

At some time before the article appeared in the *Century Magazine* Finck had written of Dvořák's admiration for Schubert. As a result he was asked to get an article from Dvořák as part of a remarkable series in that magazine, including a previous piece on Dvořák written by Henry Krehbiel in 1892, and articles on Liszt, by Camille Saint-Saens; Schumann, by Edvard Grieg, (January, 1894) and Grieg, by William Mason. March, 1894. Here is the saga in Finck's own words: "Dvořák's idol was Schubert. Whenever I visited him I found a volume of Schubert's piano pieces (which Rubinstein thought even more marvelous than the songs) lying on his Steinway. 'I have my children play them every day,' he said. He called my attention specially to some beauty spots in the sonatas which had escaped me. Richard Watson Gilder, reading what I had written about Dvořák's enthusiasm for Schubert, asked him to write an article about that composer for the *Century Magazine*."⁴

While it is always hard to gauge such things from the vantage point of more than a century, the passage suggests that Finck and Dvořák were, if not friends, at well known to each other. His "whenever I visited him" implies a certain familiarity. Despite Finck's request for an article, Dvořák, was not about to spend time writing a piece on his own, and refused the task, which, after some time, brought Finck back into the arena: "Dvořák refused point blank on the ground that he was no writer. Gilder then appealed to me for help, but Dvořák shook his head."⁵ Not one to let such a big fish get away so easily, Finck took matters into his own hands: "Afterwards I filled a few pages with questions about Schubert which I gave him to read and think over for a few weeks. I then called on him and jotted down his answers. With this material I composed an article, quite properly signed by Dvořák."⁶ From this it seems clear that Dvořák's article on Schubert was written entirely by Finck from answers which Dvořák provided to specific questions.

No notes or other documents have yet turned up, but in many cases it is possible to reconstruct the kinds of questions Finck must have asked. For example, let us look at the following passage, which occurs shortly after the opening of the article: "Rubinstein has, perhaps, gone farther than any one, not only in including Schubert in the list of those he considers the five greatest composers—Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Glinka—but in exclaiming, 'Once more,

³ The fact that both Huneker and Finck actually worked side by side with Dvořák made access to the composer remarkably easy.

⁴ *The Golden Age of Music*, p 281. Finck's earlier writing on Dvořák and Schubert has not yet been located, but almost certainly occurred in the pages of the *New York Evening Post*..

⁵ *ibid*.

⁵ *ibid*.

a thousand times more, Bach, Beethoven and Schubert are the highest summits in music' ("Die Musik und Ihre Meister," p. 50). I am asked whether I approve of this classification. Such questions are difficult to answer."⁷ We may understand, at this point, that when Dvořák says "I am asked whether I approve of this classification," he is not indulging in a rhetorical ploy. The question must have been something like, "Rubinstein has said...etc. Do you agree?" or "What do you think?" Dvořák responds that, "such questions are difficult to answer" but goes ahead anyway.

While it is not necessary, I believe, to break down the entire article in this way, those interested in separating Dvořák's opinion from Finck's will want to think carefully about just how to determine what the composer actually might or might not have said. There are many places where it is not clear who the author is, and more information may make things fuzzier rather than clearer. For example, in discussing Schubert's chamber works "Dvořák" says the following: "Schubert does not try to give his chamber music an orchestral character, yet he attains a marvelous variety of beautiful tonal effects. Here, as elsewhere, his flow of melody is spontaneous, incessant, and irrepressible, leading often to excessive *diffuseness*". [italics here and in the next sentence are mine]. Compare this with Finck's review of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, where he suggests that the composer shares "Schubert's melodic fertility and exquisite color-sense, but without his *diffuseness*."⁸ Perhaps Finck is simply adding one of his favorite words to the mix.

There is another possible example of Finck's voice intruding, in the discussion of Schubert's songs. Here we find the following observation: "To my taste the best songs written since Schubert are the 'Magelonen-Lieder' of Brahms; but I agree with the remark once made to me by the critic Ehlerth that Franz attained the highest perfection of all in making poetry and music equivalent in his songs." Dvořák may well have said something like this, but it is well-known that Finck was a passionate champion of Franz's music, and it is more likely that he could have slipped his own point of view into the discussion.

Certainly, the opening of the article, and perhaps as much as the first page, is by Finck, himself and there are many other commentaries buried within the article. This is particularly true in the various transitions where we can hear the musicologist speaking, telling us about the French reception of Schubert, or about the operas, or supplying details about the performance traditions of Schubert's songs. We may imagine that Finck placed such comments with all intended modesty in order to set the stage for the opinions of the Master, but for this very reason we can never be completely sure where Finck ends and Dvořák begins.

7 It is worth mentioning that Rubinstein enjoyed enormous stature in New York City at precisely this time. Finck was special fan of his.

8 Review in New York's *The Evening Post*, December 18, 1893. On the whole this excellent review has been ignored, with those from the *New York Herald*, probably by Alfred Steinberg, *The New York Times* by William James Henderson, the *New York Daily Tribune* by Henry Krehbiel, and the *Musical Courier* by James Huneker getting all the attention. Finck's is certainly worthy to stand with these.

One of the more surprising things in the article, especially when compared to others in the series, is the sheer amount of space spent on negative comments. Almost one entire page of this five-page article is devoted to criticizing both the operas and the religious works, and elsewhere Schubert is faulted for writing carelessly and diffusely. The writer says such things as: "if Schubert's symphonies have a serious fault, it is prolixity; he does not know where to stop;" About the piano sonatas he states, "I would not say Schubert is at his best in these sonatas as a whole," and comes to the conclusion that "Schubert's melodic fount flowed so freely that he sometimes squandered good music on a poor text." It is somewhat ironic that Dvořák took such a critical tone, for Finck was famously one of the great gentlemen of the critical community who, according to legend, once forbade a colleague to publish a negative evaluation lest it harm the health of the conductor.⁹ These critical comments from Dvořák, though, confirm what is well-known about his character and his teaching: he was hard on everyone, and hardest on himself.

Dvořák's view of Schubert is also somewhat clarified in this article. It has always been well known that he had a particular fascination with this composer. Certainly, many of his American friends and colleagues were aware of it. In her article "Dvořák as I Knew Him," Jeannette Thurber mentions that the composer "had a passion for Schubert," and Finck offered to write the present article when he saw Schubert's music so often on Dvořák's piano stand.¹⁰

The article makes it clear that although Dvořák adores a great deal of Schubert's music, there is a hierarchy. At the very top of the heap, as Dvořák makes clear, are the symphonic works: "Were all his compositions to be destroyed but two, I should say, save the last two symphonies." Indeed, he is a great champion not only of these two symphonies, but the earlier ones as well. Just below these are probably the songs, which Dvořák discusses at some length, and clearly considers them revolutionary works. Only just below this are the great chamber works and the piano character pieces, followed closely by the piano sonatas.

Dvořák believes that although Chopin and Bach are the two greatest idiomatic composers for the keyboard, Schubert is not far behind, and that as poetic creations the character pieces are without peer: "His 'Musical Moments' are unique, and it may be said that in the third 'Impromptu' (op.90) lie the germs of the whole of Mendelssohn's 'Songs Without Words.'"¹¹ Noteworthy is the fact

⁹ *Maestros of the Pen*, p.101.

¹⁰ "Dvořák as I Knew Him," by Jeannette Thurber. *The Etude*, November 1919, p.694.

¹¹ Dvořák's love for these pieces, and his essential understanding of their uniqueness is illustrated in the following story from Otakar Dvořák's memoirs:

"Once Father brought Schubert's 'Moment Musical' to his pupils and wanted them to select the right instruments for playing it. This work was written for the piano. One student suggested violins and cellos; another recommended clarinets and trombones. But Father did not like any of the answers. Nedbal, who had been up all night, was crouching in the back of the room, half asleep. But Father spotted him and asked, 'Well, Nedbalek, what is your opinion?'

'I would send it to hell,' Nedbal answered.

that Dvořák calls attention to Schubert's dance pieces, now mostly neglected saying that "they are charming as originally written, and Liszt has given some of them a brilliant setting for the concert hall. In this humble sphere, as in the more exalted ones we have discussed, historians have hardly given Schubert full credit for his originality and influence."

There are also several fascinating observations about Schubert in this article. Dvořák makes the point that Schubert's harmony is "prophetic" of Wagnerian writing and concludes that "in originality of harmony and modulation, and in his gift of orchestral coloring, Schubert has had no superior." Although Dvořák comments, like so many others, on the weakness of Schubert's operas, he nonetheless supports Liszt's notion that "Schubert influenced the progress of opera *indirectly*, by showing in his *songs* how closely poetry can be wedded to music, and that it can be emotionally intensified by its impassioned accents." Perhaps the most interesting observation about Schubert's career is Dvořák's idea that the famous counterpoint studies with Sechter were almost certainly unnecessary: "Schubert had no real need of contrapuntal study. In his chamber music, as in his symphonies, we often find beautiful specimens of polyphonic writing—see, for instance, the andantes of the C major Quintet and of the D minor Quartet,—and though his polyphony be different from Bach's or Beethoven's, it is none the less admirable."

As interesting as are the observations on Schubert, there are several related observations, which allow us some insight into Dvořák's thinking. Here is a passage about the issue of symphonic length:

Schubert's case, in fact, is not an exception to, but an illustration of, the general rule that symphonies are made too long. When Bruckner's eighth Symphony was produced in Vienna last winter, the Philharmonic Society had to devote a whole concert to it. The experiment has not been repeated anywhere, and there can be no doubt that this symphony would have a better chance of making its way in the world if it were shorter. This remark has a general application. We should return to the symphonic dimensions approved by Haydn and Mozart. In this respect Schumann is a model, especially his B flat major and D minor Symphonies; also in his chamber music. Modern taste calls for music that is concise, condensed, and pithy.

Even though such remarks would by now be regarded by many as conservative or even reactionary (if Bruckner's work is still subject to debate, we may look at the almost unanimous critical success of Mahler's gargantuan symphonies) Dvořák seemed to intuitively understand that "modern" music would return to smaller dimensions, though it is unlikely he would have had Webern's tiny orchestral pieces in mind.

Father screamed, 'Excellent! That is right! It is impossible to make any instrumentation for it.'"

Antonín Dvořák, My Father, p.90

Another area where we find some surprising notions is in Dvořák's assessment of religious music:

To my mind, the three composers who have been most successful in revealing the inmost spirit of religious music are Palestrina, in whom Roman Catholic music reaches its climax; Bach, who embodies the Protestant spirit; and Wagner, who has struck the true ecclesiastic chord in the Pilgrims' Chorus of "Tannhäuser," and especially in the first and third acts of "Parsifal." Compared with these three masters, other composers appear to have made too many concessions to worldly and purely musical factors.

While it is hardly surprising to find Palestrina and Bach listed, one is somewhat taken aback to find Wagner's name among them. This is, however, testimony to the fact that Dvořák was also a great admirer of Wagner's. Indeed, one could argue that Dvořák was at this very time of this article about to begin kind of final voyage, leaving the shores of Viennese classicism with his last chamber works in 1895 and sailing into Wagnerian waters, where he would spend the rest of his life writing operas and tone poems.

Since music is so elusive a substance we often seek to find aspects of it which belong to the material world. This is no truer than in the issue of "composer influence." Though artistic influence may be easy to imagine in the abstract, it is devilishly difficult to pin down, and is never quite what we think it is. Further, since the most profound influences take place over a great chronological distance, they may elude our attempts to discover them. Finally, the interface between influence and predisposition is impossible to unravel: we are usually attracted to things, which represent paths along which we are already traveling.

So it cannot be clear what aspects of Schubert's works, if any, set Dvořák on a new road. Clearly he knows well almost all of Schubert's major works, and has studied seriously chamber works, songs, and especially the symphonies. In the article Dvořák writes, "Brahms too, whose enthusiasm for Schubert is well known, has perhaps felt his influence; and as for myself, I cordially acknowledge my great obligations to him."

But what are those "obligations?" Many have found, and will continue to find, echoes of Schubert in many works by Dvořák, but we cannot say, on the basis of this article, what specific elements may be located. Yet there are some interesting moments in his commentary. One of the most curious of these is the discourse on Schubert and Slavic music, in which Dvořák argues that Schubert was the first to display the "Slavic" trait of alternating major and minor. Whether or not this is a purely Slavic trait, whatever that might mean, should be left to teams of ethnographers, but it could just as easily be considered a pan-European, Schubertian trait, which was absorbed by figures such as Dvořák and Chaikovskii.¹²

¹² This certainly would fit with my own view of the construct of "national music." In other words, I believe that such things as "national style," "Czech music," or the broader, "Slavic music," are fuzzy concepts, not ever analytically reducible to coherent style formulations. That Schubert was a great source of "Slavic music," is an irony in which to rejoice.

Finally, in this article on Schubert we invariably find Dvořák writing about himself, for Schubert is not only a model for the music, but for the attitude towards it. For example, it is easy to imagine Dvořák reflecting upon his own early career when he writes about Schubert that, "He was young, modest, and unknown, and musicians did not hesitate to slight a symphony which they would have felt bound to study, had it borne the name of Beethoven or Mozart." The issue of modesty seems important to Dvořák—a central trait—and it appears several times in the article as in this passage, "As for Schubert himself, although he was one of the most modest of men, he was thoroughly convinced of the truly devotional character of his church music."

In other places it seems as if, in delimiting Schubert, he is also circumscribing his own contribution to this history of music: "Schubert and Mozart have much in common; in both we find the same delicate sense of instrumental coloring, the same spontaneous and irrepressible flow of melody, the same instinctive command of the means of expression, and the same versatility in all the branches of their art."

Dvořák's concluding comments are among the most interesting. Here, for practically the only time in the article he mentions and discusses a single work, in this case the final song from *Winterreise*. This is an example of "Schubert's power of surrounding us with the poetic atmosphere of his subject with the very first bars of his *Lieder*." Dvořák reminds us of "the pathetic story of the poor hurdy-gurdy player whose plate is always empty, and for whose woes Schubert wins our sympathy by his sad music—by that plaintive, monotonous figure which pervades the accompaniment from beginning to end, bringing the whole scene vividly before our eyes and keeping it there to the end."

Perhaps it is taking too great a liberty at the end to find biographical resonance between Dvořák, on the one hand, and Schubert and the hurdy gurdy player on the other. But by concluding the article with this touching and tragic image of emptiness and monotony, Dvořák not only praises Schubert, but sheds light on himself as well. There were hundreds of images which Dvořák could have chosen from the songs, and it is unlikely that his essay ends this way by chance. This revealing moment precisely highlights Dvořák's belief—a Wagnerian belief—in the connection between music and profound, dramatic reality, and at the same time casts the composer as the hidden hurdy gurdy player, turning out strange and wonderful music for a world which may not always understand.

