DR. DVORAK'S LATEST WORK

HIS FIFTH SYMPHONY PRODUCED BY THE PHILHARMONIC.

"From the New World" a Study in National Music — How a Famous Composer Has Utilized the Material Found in America—A Vigorous and Beautiful Work Founded on Characteristic Themes — A Lesson for the American Composer.

The attempt to describe a new musical composition may not be quite so futile as an effort to photograph the perfume of a flower, yet it is an experiment of similar nature. Only an imperfect and perhaps misleading idea of the character of so complex a work of art as a symphony can be conveyed through the medium of cold type; yet, when there is no other way, even that must be tried. Accepting, then, the doubtful premise that music can be treated intelligently in words, no one need look for a more fruitful topic at present than the new symphony made known by the Philharmonic Society at Music Hall on Friday afternoon and repeated last night, to the evident delight of a large audience. This work is entitled "Z Novecho Sveta," which is, being translated, "From the New World." It is dated 1893, and is Opus 95 of Antonin Dvorak, the famous Bohemian master, now a resident of this city.

The significance of the title "From the New World" may be briefly explained. Dr. Dvorak came to America avowedly as a teacher. He must have known before he came that we possessed no distinctively national school of composition, and that there were difficulties in the way of the growth of such a school. First and foremost, was the cosmopolitan and heterogeneous character of the people, which precluded the possibility of any treasure house of folk music from which directly to draw material. Folk music is and must be a growth to this soil is the Indian. Folk music is the only music which spontaneously and organically embodies racial characteristics, racial temperament, racial tendencies. In an imported population, composed of elements gathered from the entire Eastern Hemisphere, and not yet molded into a perfectly composite existence, there could be no folk music, except that brought hither. Therefore, there could be no national school of music. The American-born composer, unable to overcome this difficulty, had contented himself with writing music after the German, French, or Italian manner, except when he infrequently took up our so-called national airs, or the plantation melodies of the negroes, or the patriotic ballads of the civil war, and made of them more or lesss artistic medleys.

Dr. Dvorak within the last year attracted to himself the attention of musicians the world over by a declaration of his belief that there was folk music in America—if not that of the whole people, yet expresssive of certain distinct phases of American life, climate and domestic conditions, and historical events. From that folk music he believed that the American school of music must draw its inspiration. He announced his intention of trying an experiment himself. He would write an American symphony. And then the American composers and many critics who should have known better than to make rash conclusions smiled and said the thing could not be done successfully. The composers, the critics, and the musical public all labored under the delusion that Dr. Dvorak was going to take a pinch of "Bell da Ring," "Marching Through Georgia," and "Way Down Upon the Suanee Ribber" and try to make a symphony with unsymphonic and inflexible melodies. The American composer had tried such tunes and—if we may be pardoned the word—they would not symphonize. The gentlemen might have known that they were dealing with a man to the symphonic manner born. They should have remembered what he had already done with the folk tunes of his own people. Rubinstein and Brahms and Hanslick and a few other Europeans made no silly predictions, but said they would await the result of Dr. Dvorak's experiment with much interest.

This experiment has issued into the light, and it now becomes our duty as well as our privilege to endeavor to perceive the spirit in which Dr. Dvorak has conceived and executed his task. In what manner has he used negro or Indian music? Has he really built a symphony out of it? And was the work worth doing?

In the first place, Dr. Dvorak has shown his thorough mastership of symphonic writing by avoiding the pitfall which has invariably entrapped the American composer. He has not made any use whatever—except in one instance—of extant melodies. What he has done is to saturate himself with the spirit of negro music and then to invent his own themes. He has made himself completely the master of the fundamental melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic peculiarities of negro tunes. He has had the musical skill to perceive the essence of these melodies. Adaptations of a rhythm familiarly known as the "Scotch snap," but by no means the exclusive property of the Scotch, and modifications of the pentatonic scale which the child of Scotia and the Chinaman enjoy in common—modifications undoubtedly caused by contact with the richer scale of a superior musical system—have forced themselves upon Dr. Dvorak's attention. A still deeper secret which he has penetrated is the wave-motion of many of the negro tunes which constantly ascend in melodic pitch and increase in loudness only to drop back to lower registers and diminished intensity. It may not be altogether fanciful to trace this peculiarity to the ceaseless upward surging of emotions that had to be crushed down again lest their voicing should make the sorrows of slavery harder to bear. We cannot undertake to trace all the ramifications through which Dr. Dvorak has followed the nature of negro music. Our processes would be slow and analytical, whereas his were undoubtedly swift and in a measure intuitive. A gifted composer would not be slow to perceive the constructive peculiarities of music.

Having thus learned how negro music is made, Dr. Dvorak built symphonic themes. He made melodies perfectly adapted to the processes of symphonic development. After that his task became one of comparative simplicity for a great musician. He had to keep before his mind the necessity of handling his material in such a way that its character would be preserved in every phase of its musical treatment, no matter what processes of subtraction, augmentation, or inversion might be employed. It may be as well to say right here that in this Dr. Dvorak has had unqualified success. His new symphony is a triumphant demonstration of his mastery of all the problems of symphonic construction. The intellectual purposes of the work are never for a moment obscured; its expressions of emotion and character are never doubtful.

The work opens with a slow, solemn, mysterious introduction, which may be accepted as beautifully indicative of the strangeness and vastness of the New World. This leads us into the allegro of the first movement. The first subject, announced by the horn, proclaims at once the fountain of the composer's inspiration by melodic and rythmical peculiarities already referred to. It has the so-called Scotch snap, as used by the negro, and it is pentatonic. A subsidiary melody is intoned in the lowest register of the flute, and here again the rythm is one familiar to many an old-time "walk-around," and the melodic characteristic is the F natural in the scale of G minor—the flat seventh. This is a peculiarity of many kinds of folk song, and is beyond question a result of the influence of the old Greek scales. The second principal theme of the movement is also introduced by the flute, and is one of the most delightfully African melodies in the whole work. In it one hears plainly the voice of the sunny-hearted American negro, who is ever ready for a dance, but with his one note of sadness that is never absent revealed in the first four notes—a pentatonic phrase. In the development of these themes, if any picture is conjured up in the mind it must be one of ebony hue. The whole movement throbs with activity, flexibility of emotion, and energy. The energetic spirit is rather that of the American people at large than of the Ethiopian. No doubt Dr. Dvorak has conceived the movement as one who should say: "Here is the music that grows from your soil, that delights your ears, and finds an abiding place in your hearts. I announce these melodies gently, perhaps even timidly, as they came from their makers. But afterward you may hear yourselves singing them with your overwhelming energy."

We are authoritatively informed that the second and third movements of the symphony were written as the expression of certain moods found in American literature and definitely embodied in Longfellow's "Hiawatha." Dr. Dvorak's appreciation of our national spirit is demonstrated by his appeal to this poem. He could not have gone to anything more purely and poetically American or more thoroughly saturated with the spirit of native folk-lore. In the adagio of his symphony he has embodied a great sadness, tinged with desolation. The subdued murmur of muted strings accompanies a marvelously pathetic melody uttered by the plaintive voice of the English horn. The melody is original, but it has the pathetic spirit and some of the characteristic sequences of negro music. It is an idealized slave song, made to fit the impressive quiet of night on the prairie. When the star of empire took its way over those mighty Western plains blood and sweat and agony and bleaching human bones marked its course. Something of this awful buried sorrow of the prairie must have forced itself upon Dr. Dvorak's mind when he saw the plains after reading "The Famine." It is a picture of the peace and beauty of to-day colored by a memory of sorrows gone that the composer has given us at the beginning and end of his second movement. In the middle there is a curious melody which seems to be an idealization of an Indian chant. It is beautiful and strange. There is also a most effective recurrence of the first-movement themes. Again, there is a passage built on a little staccato theme and worked up in such a way with trills and contrasts of the wind and strings that it may be said to represent the animal life of the prairie.

There may have been a temptation to write a negro dance for a scherzo, but Dr. Dvorak was not to be diverted from his purpose. He has written a scherzo in the classic style, but by the employment of intervallic relations and rhythmical figures of a characteristic nature he prevents any departure from the general feeling of the work. The final allegro is magnificent in its breadth and vigor. Its principal melody is pealed out by the brass, accompanied by the stirring shock of staccato chords by the rest of the orchestra. An advance analysis of the work published on Friday called attention to a peculiar development of this splendid theme by the violas into a tune much like "Yankee Doodle." Dr. Dvorak has declared that this was not intentional. If it was not it ought to have been, for it is humorous, ingenious, and charming. All through this final movement the composer makes use of the material already set forth in the other movements. He has displayed in this use the skill of a master musician and an artistic purpose of the finest kind. The method has not only given character and unity to the symphony, but, we take it, is employed with convincing logic to give triumphant expression to Dr. Dvorak's conviction that we Americans will eventually absorb the negro and Indian music and voice our national characteristics through it. Certainly no American need feel anything but pride in the dignity, the power, the resolution, the victorious achievement which ring through the finale of this notable symphony.

The questions asked at the outset have nearly been answered. An attempt has been made to show how Dr. Dvorak has used the music of the soil and to demonstrate that he has made a genuine symphony in the classic style. That he might not obscure his purpose by too much enrichment of gesture, Dr. Dvorak has abstained from employing the contemporaneous orchestra. His orchestra is the classical symphonic orchestra of Beethoven, with the addition of the English horn. The instrumentation, however, is modern. Such processes as the subdivision of each department of the string quartet into several parts is wholly of the post-Beethovian period. The last chord of the slow movement, for instance, is played by the double basses alone, but in four parts. These devices of instrumentation are used with Dr. Dvorak's unfailing judgment, and heighten the expressiveness of the music. To sum up, the fundamental melodies of the symphony are beautiful, as well as full of character; the development is clear and logical, and the symphony, as a whole, is symmetrical, powerful, and intensely interesting. We are inclined to regard it as the best of Dr. Dvorak's works in this form, which is equivalent to saying that it is a great symphony and must take its place among the finest works in this form produced since the death of Beethoven.

Finally, is it American? The answer to this question depends wholly upon the attitude which the American public decides to take in regard to the sources of Dr. Dvorak's inspiration. That both Indian and negro music share some of their peculiarities with the folk-music of the Old World need not be accounted to the discredit of the composer's attempt. In spite of all assertions to the contrary, the plantation songs of the American negro possess a striking individuality. No matter whence their germs came, they have in their growth been subjected to local influences which have made of them a new species. That species is the direct result of causes climatic and political, but never anything else than American. Our South is ours. Its twin does not exist. Our system of slavery, with all its domestic and racial conditions, was ours, and its twin never existed. Out of the heart of this slavery, environed by this sweet and languorous South, from the canebrake and the cotton field, arose the spontaneous musical utterance of a people. That folk-music struck an answering note in the American heart. The most popular of all American composers was he who came nearest to a reproduction of it—Stephen Foster. The American people—or the majority of them—learned to love the songs of the negro slave and to find in them something that belonged to America. If those songs are not national, then there is no such thing as national music. It is a fallacy to suppose that a national song must be one which gives direct and intentional expression to patriotic sentiment. A national song is one that is of the people, for the people, by the people. The negroes gave us their music and we accepted it, not with proclamations from the housetops, but with our voices and our hearts in the household. Dr. Dvorak has penetrated the spirit of this music, and with themes suitable for symphonic treatment, he has written a beautiful symphony, which throbs with American feeling, which voices the melancholy of our Western wastes, and predicts their final subjection to the tremendous activity of the most energetic of all peoples. We Americans should thank and honor the Bohemian master who has shown us how to build our national school of music.