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## Genesis of a CD: Dvorak Day Concert

**Steven Richman**

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**Dvorak Day Concert**  
**Josef Suk, violin**  
**Lincoln Mayorga, piano**  
**Dvorak Festival Orchestra of New York**  
**Steven Richman, Conductor & Music Director**  
**(Music & Arts CD-1078)**

On Saturday afternoon, September 13, 1997, a statue of the great Czech composer Antonín Dvorak was dedicated at 17th Street near 2nd Avenue, in Stuyvesant Square Park, New York City. In honor of the occasion, the City Council had officially designated, (at my suggestion) the date as “Dvorak Day.” Following unveiling ceremonies attended by hundreds of people, including the Lord Mayor of Prague, the Czech Ambassador, New York City’s First Lady Donna Hanover, and film director Milos Forman, a gala concert under my direction took place in St George’s Church across the park. The installation of the statue, the ceremonies, and the concert were the happy result of a massive undertaking by many individuals.

The genesis for the Dvorak Day CD actually dates back over a decade. In 1991 I became involved in the efforts to save Dvorak’s historic New York City home from destruction by a local hospital that then owned the property. The famous Czech composer lived in an 1850’s row house at 327 E. 17th St., between 1st and 2nd Avenues in Manhattan from 1892-95. Dvorak had been brought to the U.S. by arts patroness Jeanette Thurber to be director of the National Conservatory of Music of America, for the purpose of developing an American school of composition, as well as to conduct his own works, and compose. At the school, located within walking distance of his home (on E. 17th St. and Irving Place, where Washington Irving High School now stands) Dvorak taught the future teachers of Aaron Copland, George Gershwin and Duke Ellington, and also encouraged the admission of women and blacks to the conservatory, a bold step for its time.

Dvorak would invite Harry T. Burleigh, a poor black student at the school, to his 17th St. home to sing traditional “plantation songs” (the term “spirituals” was adopted much later; in fact Dvorak called “Go Down, Moses” “as great as a Beethoven theme.”) Dvorak urged his composition students and our symphonic composers to cultivate this great black folk music as a resource. Indeed, spirituals had an important influence on Dvorak’s Symphony No. 9, “From the new world,” composed on East 17th Street in New York. Thus it could actually be said that Dvorak studied with Burleigh, not vice versa! The “New World,” premiered in Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893 by the New York Philharmonic under Anton Seidl, with the composer in attendance, stands as the most often played symphony in the orchestra’s 150-plus year history.

In New York City, Dvorak also composed such masterpieces as the Cello Concerto, Biblical Songs, and the Sonatina for Violin and Piano; and while vacationing in Spillville, Iowa (then and even today a haven for Czech-Americans) in summer, 1893, he wrote the celebrated “American” String Quartet and the E-flat String Quintet, the latter echoing music that he encountered there in a performance by Kickapoo Indians. I visited Spillville in 1991, and was fortunate enough to see Dvorak’s house, which is maintained as a museum which draws 25,000 visitors a year, as well as the organ Dvorak played at church, and the Turkey River, where he received inspiration for the “American” Quartet.

Dvorak’s works are imbued with the spirit of nature and the outdoors, and Spillville resembles the beautiful hills and green countryside which are reminiscent of his Czech homeland. That same summer of 1893, Dvorak travelled from Spillville to Chicago, where he conducted at the Czech Day celebration at the World’s Fair. He continued on to Omaha and Niagara Falls, where, deeply impressed by its majesty, he planned to write a work based on Hiawatha, which unfortunately never materialized.

In 1941, on the 100th anniversary of the composer’s birth, a plaque was

placed on the facade of the Dvorak House by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. Among those who attended the dedication were violinist Fritz Kreisler, conductor Bruno Walter, Czechoslovak Foreign Minister-in-Exile Jan Masaryk, soprano Jarmila Novotná, Dvorak's secretary J.J. Kovarik, and the aforementioned Harry T. Burleigh, who, since his youthful association with Dvorak, had achieved eminence as a composer, pioneering arranger of spirituals (his versions were sung by Enrico Caruso, John McCormack, and Marian Anderson), a noted church and concert baritone (he was soloist at the very same St George's Church, not missing a performance for 52 years!), founding member of ASCAP, and an editor for Ricordi.

Half a century later, in February 1991, the facade was designated a landmark on cultural grounds by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Yet, unfortunately, according to the new city charter, the City Council could overturn the landmarking, and did so under pressure from the hospital in June, 1991, ignoring thousands of letters from around the world from such musicians and music lovers as violinist Josef Suk (Dvorak's great-grandson), Kurt Masur, Yo-Yo Ma, Rudolf Firkusny, Rafael Kubelik, myself, arts patroness Alice Tully, film director Milos Forman, President of Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel, Mercer Ellington, critic Harold Schonberg, the Archbishop of Prague, the Czechoslovak Minister of Culture, Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, and AIDS activists, all to no avail. The hospital was intransigent, resisting efforts to save even the facade, and the house was summarily destroyed for an AIDS facility in late August-early September, 1991, within days of Dvorak's 150th Birthday. Fortunately, I myself was out of the country, and was spared the awful reality of its demise. (However, a cellist friend had the foresight to preserve a brick from the site, which he has saved as a keepsake.) A newly elected City Council later renamed the street Dvorak Place, but it was small recompense.

Curiously, *The New York Times* wrote two editorials against saving the historic building, and two world-famous violinists wrote letters *in support* of its destruction. Real estate interests had cynically won out over culture. (A connection between the hospital, *The Times* and Carnegie Hall was rumored.) Of course, in Europe, such houses are preserved as shrines, as were the residences of Chopin, Beethoven and Mozart.

However, a strange serpentine turn of events occurred. It was discovered that a statue of the composer, presented to the N.Y. Philharmonic by the Czechoslovak Council of America in 1963, had been sitting on the roof of Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center for over thirty years! The work of Yugoslav-American sculptor Ivan Mestrovic, it had been donated to the Philharmonic by the Czechoslovak Council of America, but was rejected for not being modern enough for Lincoln Center's decor. The orchestra agreed to give the statue to the Dvorak American Heritage Association for placement in Stuyvesant Square Park, across from where the Dvorak House had once stood.

Over the next four years, I organized and conducted several benefit concerts to restore, move, insure, and endow an interest-generating fund for the statue. (According to yet another new law, a gift of a statue to the City of New York had to include this fund to provide 70 years of maintenance.) And a handsome new pedestal was designed for the statue by Czech-American architect Jan Pokorny. Among the prestigious artists who donated their services in support of the statue fund were the Guarneri String Quartet, violinist Arnold Steinhardt, pianist Lincoln Mayorga, legendary bass-baritone William Warfield, Czech Met Opera soprano Eva Urbanová, the Eroica Trio, as well as members of the New York Philharmonic, Met Opera, and Juilliard Orchestras. A direct mail campaign also added significantly to the coffers, and most contributions were of modest size. Among those was one from an elderly lady in Florida, whose grandfather, the writer Frantisek Herites, was a friend of Dvorak's. When Herites was returning to Berlin from New York, Dvorak gave him a package wrapped in brown paper at the docks to bring to his publisher, not trusting the mails. It was the manuscript score to the "New World" Symphony!

Finally, on Sept. 13, 1997, after years of struggle, victory was snatched from the jaws of defeat. Although Dvorak's House was gone, his music resounded in St George's Church, in extraordinary performances by violinist Josef Suk, pianist Lincoln Mayorga, and the Dvorak Festival Orchestra of New York, made up of musicians from major American and Czech ensembles, including the Metropolitan Opera, New York Philharmonic, New York City Opera, New York City Ballet, Mostly Mozart, Janáček Philharmonic, and Prague Symphony Orchestras. The program included several works Dvorak had composed literally across the street: the Sonatina for Violin and Piano, Humoresque, and "New World" Symphony, which I had the honor to conduct; a recently discovered Fanfare by Dvorak was performed as well. For the symphony's *Largo* second movement, we brought over from the Prague Symphony Orchestra Iveta Bachmannová, to play the famous English horn solo (thought to be an imitation of Burleigh's voice). Over 2000 people crowded St George's Church, and a line of those who could not

get in extended around an entire city block. The composer's grandson, Antonín Dvorak III, gave a moving speech at the concert, and great-great-granddaughter Markéta Dvorak also attended, which added a special historic and personal touch. My continuing relationship with the Dvorak family, which has shown great warmth and appreciation for our efforts, is a treasure and honor for me personally. At the conclusion of the event, audience members were seen in tears, so great was the emotion of the day and the intensity of the performances. The chamber music portion of the concert was broadcast on WNYC-FM and National Public Radio.

An archival digital recording of the concert was made; however, upon listening to the tape, it was realized that besides being historic, it was an extraordinary document which deserved further hearing. (Dvorak Day Concerts have become yearly events, including major Czech and American artists, and Dvorak Day V is planned for Sunday afternoon, February 10, 2002 at New York's Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.) The world premiere recording of Burleigh's Arrangement for Orchestra of the Spiritual, "Deep River" comes from a subsequent Dvorak Day Concert, since I thought it to be of special interest, which adds a unique dimension to the CD. And Harry Burleigh III, great-grandson of Dvorak's assistant, attended the later concert, bringing the project full circle.

If this were not enough "icing on the cake," I had the further good fortune to be introduced through a mutual friend to Alex Steinweiss, 84-year old inventor of the LP record jacket and illustrated album cover. Mr Steinweiss designed over 2000 classic covers as art director of **Columbia Records**, and for the **Decca**, **London**, and **Everest** labels. He designed a charming, intelligent, warm and whimsical cover for the Dvorak Day CD, which adds immeasurably to the entire package, and has already done another wonderful cover for a subsequent Stravinsky CD I recorded. I am proud to count among my very special friends the Dvorak family, Harry Burleigh III, and Alex Steinweiss.

The Dvorak Monument Dedication Day Concert CD is the culmination of a decade of work, but truly a labor of love.

In addition to being available in stores and over the Internet, the Dvorak Day recording (**Music & Arts CD-1078**) can be purchased directly. (A benefit CD, all proceeds go towards future free Dvorak Day Concerts.) Please send a check (drawn on a U.S. bank only) for \$25 including postage and handling, made payable to: **Harmonie Ensemble, Inc.** (specify: Dvorak Day CD) and mail to: Harmonie Ensemble/New York, 820 West End Ave., Ste. 13B, New York, NY 10025. For foreign orders or additional information on CDs or future Dvorak Day Concerts: tel. 212-222-6684, fax 212-222-4258, sr-harmonienny@juno.com.

*[Steven Richman is the Conductor and Music Director of the Dvorak Festival Orchestra of New York. He is also Conductor and Music Director of Harmonie Ensemble/New York, which has presented wind ensemble, chamber orchestra, and orchestra concerts at all of New York's major halls, as well as national touring, and international radio and television broadcasts. HE/NY has several internationally acclaimed CD's on the **Music & Arts** label, "Salute to France" (CD-649), "Dvorak and Friends" (CD-691), "Overture" (CD-797), and "Dvorak Discoveries" (CD-926), including the world premieres of the Octet-Serenade, and Dvorak's Arrangement for Baritone, Chorus and Orchestra of Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home." His upcoming CD releases include "Hommage à Stravinsky," including four premieres and Histoire du Soldat on the **Koch** label.]*

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