

Born to be wild

A new study of Dvorak's musical sketches reveals that pivotal moments in the New World Symphony derive from his ill-fated opera Hiawatha

By Jessica Duchon

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Ye who love the haunts of Nature,

Ye who love the haunts of Nature,

Love the sunshine of the meadow,

Love the shadow of the forest,

Love the wind among the branches...

Ye who love a nation's legends,

Love the ballads of a people...

Ye whose hearts are fresh and simple,

Who have faith in God and Nature.

When the young Antonin Dvorak first read Henry W Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, the saga of an American Indian hero, he was hooked instantly. The lines above, from its introduction, could almost have been addressing him personally: nature, God and national legends were central to his own creative spirit. For years he dreamt of creating an opera from the poem. It was fated never to be written. But a recent study has shown that the music Dvorak sketched for *Hiawatha* found a home instead in his Symphony No 9, *From the New World* - the most popular of all his compositions.

The symphony features in an all-Dvorak Prom on the composer's birthday, 8 September, with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras, commemorating the centenary of Dvorak's death. Mackerras puts Dvorak into perspective by drawing a comparison between him and Brahms, Dvorak's one-time mentor. "There is an apparent simplicity and innocence to

Dvorak's music that in many ways matches his personality," he says. "He was deeply religious, much more so than Brahms. He excelled in music of all genres, whereas Brahms had never written an opera. And Dvorak's symphonies contain more tragedy than Brahms's, but also more sunshine."

How the shadows, as well as the sunshine, of Dvorak's musical world uncannily match those in Longfellow's poem is shown vividly in *New Worlds of Dvorak: Searching in America for the Composer's Inner Life* by Michael Beckerman, professor of music at New York University. Beckerman also paints a portrait of a troubled man beset by agoraphobia, who dreaded being alone outside and was too fond of his beer. "After his opera *Armida* flopped," Beckerman comments, "Dvorak may have drunk himself to death."

Often labelled "a Czech Brahms", Dvorak dreamed of becoming "a Slavic Wagner", eventually rejecting abstract composition in favour of opera and narrative tone-poems. As Mackerras points out: "His later operatic music is deeply Wagnerian - the final scene of *Rusalka*, for example, and much of *Armida*." Perhaps *Hiawatha* could have become Dvorak's *Ring Cycle*. But it failed to materialise, thanks to a bizarre series of events that saw this anxiety-ridden Czech nationalist cross the Atlantic to live in New York.

In 1892, a wealthy American philanthropist, Jeanette Thurber, persuaded Dvorak to become director of a National Conservatory in New York that she was helping to finance. Here, Dvorak found himself charged with a complex compositional task. He had successfully created a Czech musical idiom - not so much authentic as idealised, brightly coloured by folk stories, heroic legends, national dance rhythms and folksy, pastoral melodies. America was embarking on its own quest for a musical identity; Thurber and certain New York music critics had decided that Dvorak should create that identity for them. "He was a master chef who had cooked up Bohemian music," says Beckerman. "Now they wanted him to cook up American music to a similar recipe."

Rising to the challenge, Dvorak, Beckerman continues, "decided that the folk element for this was going to be black. Negro spirituals, with their religious dimension, had the extra profundity that he wanted. But soon he found this would not be enough: only 40 years earlier the associations of this music had been mired in conflict and misery - and it had not existed at all several hundred years earlier. With a little sleight-of-hand, he turned to the American Indians for the equivalent of the Czech heroes and legends that he'd drawn on in his Bohemian works." This brought him back to *Hiawatha*.

Given Dvorak's passion for the subject, the reason his *Hiawatha* opera foundered seems extraordinary. Two attempts at a libretto, by different writers, were both turned down - not by Dvorak, but by a committee at his conservatory that mysteriously had the right to reject them. "Perhaps they feared it would be ridiculed," Beckerman suggests. "A Czech could be enthusiastic about *Hiawatha* in 1893, but the poem had been published several decades earlier and people did sometimes make fun of it." One of the poem's more obvious shortcomings is its repetitive, relentless rhythm - for music, a potential kiss of death. But Beckerman says Dvorak could easily have got round that. "In one arietta that he sketched - 'Onaway awake, beloved' - he finds a very creative,

free approach to the melodic writing. It's exquisite and it could have become as famous as his best-known operatic aria, *Rusalka's* 'Song to the Moon'."

So how did *Hiawatha* find its way into the New World Symphony? The work is probably best known for its use of negro spiritual melodies (for example, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is quoted in the first movement). That in itself was a radical gesture in the 1890s, when many viewed such influences as unsuitable for "high art". But the symphony is not programme music and need not be bound by a single agenda - instead, Dvorak blends negro spiritual themes and ideas for his *Hiawatha* into a traditional symphonic context.

By going through Dvorak's *Hiawatha* sketches, Beckerman has identified many of the symphony's musical ideas with episodes in the poem. The seven monumental chords that recur at crucial moments through the work, he suggests, are a musical "once upon a time", setting the atmosphere of legend. The intense, vigorous scherzo portrays the dance at Hiawatha's wedding of the magician Pau-Puk-Keewis, the hero's adversary and Antichrist figure; and the finale, with its propulsive triplets, matches Pau-Puk-Keewis's headlong flight from Hiawatha, who finally kills him. But most telling of all are the associations that fill the famous slow movement.

Originally, Dvorak had planned to mark this movement andante, a quicker tempo than its eventual, sombre indication, largo. Why did he slow it down? What gave it its air of tragedy? Early accounts of the symphony described it as "a funeral in the forest". But according to Beckerman, it depicts not only a funeral, but a death - the death of Hiawatha's bride, Minnehaha. The cor anglais with its drone-like accompaniment conjures up a pastoral scene by time-honoured musical means - played andante rather than largo, it could have suggested the landscape through which Hiawatha and Minnehaha walk together to Hiawatha's territory. But the moment of her death during a catastrophic famine is directly portrayed in a later episode in the movement, with a descending figure that grows quieter and vanishes - a motif Dvorak used in other works in association with death. The sense of tragedy that pervades the movement comes straight from this.

It is Minnehaha, Beckerman feels, who tells us the most about Dvorak's creative psyche. "She's not just a smiling bride, but a complex woman. Some sort of 'eternal feminine' seems to have been vital to Dvorak. Several figures, real or imaginary - Minnehaha, Rusalka or his wife's sister, Josefina, with whom he is said to have been in love - may have preserved this image for him." In Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, Minnehaha, "Laughing Water", is associated with waterfalls and with the mingled light and darkness of life. These lines are from Hiawatha and Minnehaha's journey: "From the sky the sun benignant/
Looked upon them through the branches,/ Saying to them, 'O my children,/ Love is sunshine, hate is shadow,/ Life is checkered shade and sunshine,/ Rule by love, O Hiawatha!"

The creature of "checkered shade and sunshine" could be more than Dvorak's muse. For they are in his music, with its emotional extremes, its intimations of death, its longing for an impossible love, side by side with some of the most ebullient dances ever created. If ever there was a creature of sunshine and shadows, perhaps it was Dvorak himself.

There is a postscript to this saga. When the half-black British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor set *Hiawatha* as a cantata in 1898, it achieved a popularity in British choral societies to rival Handel's *Messiah*. Coleridge-Taylor, prominent in the black activist movement, championed the cause of his own race through Longfellow's legend of American Indians, mingling the two traditions just as Dvorak had. And no composer was closer to his heart than Dvorak.

Prom 70, a programme of Dvorak conducted by Charles Mackerras, takes place at the Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (020-7589 8212) on Wednesday.

Michael Beckerman's 'New Worlds of Dvorak' is published by Norton