

Retelling the Story of American Music

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Joseph Horowitz, Dvořák's Prophecy and the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music. Foreword by George Shirley. W. W. Norton, 256pp., \$30 cloth.

Dvořák's Prophecy: A New Narrative for American Classical Music. Six-film series on DVD, 7 1/2 hours total running time. Written and produced by Joseph Horowitz, visual presentation by Peter Bogdanoff. Naxos Educational.

WHEN ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK ARRIVED in America in 1892, he believed he was entering “The New World.” He was no Christopher Columbus, in geo-navigational terms at least, but he was certainly a geo-musical explorer. Jeannette Thurber, then president of the National Conservatory of Music in America, had offered the Bohemian an astonishing salary (equivalent to half a million dollars today) to work in New York City. Dvořák embraced the opportunity, and quickly realized he had a treasure trove of opportunities for compositional exploitation: the songs of American black folk, the so-called “Negro Spirituals” that had often begun in the cotton fields but, by 1892, had made their way far beyond those fields. What kind of music might be written using these lyrical, passionate, distinctively American songs? What might a “classically trained” European offer to them? Could there be new music for

“The New World” based on the “old music” of American slaves? Could racial representatives of those who had been enslaved contribute to the project? Such questions animated Dvořák’s work in America, and eventually he believed that “negro melodies” should be (and would be) the foundation of America’s classical music. As he put it: “In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.”

Dvořák was wrong in his predictions, but Joseph Horowitz wants to vindicate the composer against the charge of misjudgment. In *Dvořák's Prophecy and the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music*, Horowitz tells us a “new story” about American classical music that renders Dvořák’s prophetic failure as virtuous. For Horowitz, Dvořák’s prophecy didn’t fail because he was *prescriptively* wrong; he was only *descriptively* wrong. Dvořák didn’t understand how deeply engrained racism still was in early twentieth-century America, and how difficult it would be to convince elite white Americans to appreciate the music of nineteenth-century black American musicians.

Horowitz details the nature of this problem by comparing early twentieth-century approaches to previous American literature and music. The primary culprits, Horowitz argues, are also some of the most celebrated American musicians, the “deans of American classical music,” if you will:

Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein. Together, they shaped the standard narrative of American classical music, which asserted (in Horowitz's words) that "there was no American music of consequence before 1910." While the deans of American literature had extolled the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman as a rich and "usable past," American composers had decided they completely lacked the corollary musical literature. Notice that, according to these figures, even Dvořák himself (already an established master of European classical music) had not written consequential American music by 1910. The deans of American classical music did not only ignore Negro spirituals and other folk music; they also ignored someone who had fused European high culture with American low culture. According to them, even Dvořák-the-European was unusable? Or was he somehow non-American? Regardless of the "artistic usability" of Negro spirituals, why would Dvořák's "New World Symphony" not be considered a "usable American past"?

The truly fascinating thing about this book, then, is not that Horowitz is claiming that nineteenth-century black Americans (here Horowitz explores the work of figures such as Samuel Coleridge Taylor, William Levi Dawson, Florence Price, and Nathaniel Dett) were denied their artistic dues by twentieth-century white Americans; such claims are nothing new today, and Horowitz explains expertly how jazz, as "American classical music," fits into such a narrative. What's perhaps new, at least to some audiences, is the idea that even Dvořák, a *European* master, was denied his American artistic dues. Part of Horowitz's agenda here is the idea that early twentieth-century American classical musical culture was unjustifiably nationalistic, to the extent that even a

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European master using black American songs could be excluded from the ideal of a "usable American past." Perhaps Virgil Thomson subconsciously thought of Dvořák as the very opposite of an "Uncle Tom," a white traitor to his own musical culture. No serious musician, Thomson must have thought, would use Negro spirituals to write a *symphony*. Well, Dvořák did, and Horowitz extols his example. Dvořák's 1893 *Symphony No. 9*, "From the New World," is a magnificent work of American classical music.

Horowitz does well to foreground this symphony in his account, in at least two key ways: first, it is clearly Dvořák's most popular work, often performed by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and similar orchestras. But second, and most importantly, the very content of the symphony *performs* an aspect of Horowitz's overarching argument: the "Negro melodies" that black musicians created and cultivated could serve as rich source material for American classical music. For Dvořák did not just come to America, "appropriate" the melodies of black folks, and write his own work. No, his "New World" symphony was written while he worked closely with Harry Burleigh, a black American musician who Dvořák first met while Burleigh was a custodian at the

New York Conservatory of Music. Burleigh would sing Negro spirituals while he cleaned the building, and Dvořák would hear the melodies he wanted to base his symphony on. Dvořák would eventually quote Burleigh's own melodies in the symphony, and the melody from movement two, the famously gorgeous "Goin' Home" melody, was Dvořák's (and his student William Arms Fisher's) attempt to write something in that style. Dvořák's prophecy was false, Horowitz admits, because American classical music was eventually bifurcated into "white classical" and "black jazz." But Dvořák practiced what he preached, and the result was (in the view of many) the finest work of American classical music ever written.

As convincing as Horowitz's account may be, however, one might reasonably ask him some pressing questions: Are there any clear artistic or aesthetic criteria for distinguishing between various works of art, whether sung in the black slave fields or written in the halls of white academia? Horowitz names and details many examples of nineteenth-century black musicians who were allegedly underappreciated, but how are we to know the truly talented ones from the untalented, rightly neglected ones? Is it just that some have accidentally survived, and others haven't? Are there certain criteria that ought to apply across the board? To press the matter even further, is it possible that Dvořák was just plain *wrong*, and that much of nineteenth-century black American music is "unusable" because black Americans were denied the trappings of musical culture, things that Dvořák himself took for granted? Is it possible that the only element of "classical music" that Negro spirituals could supply were pretty tunes, and that such tunes could hardly form the basis of a true national musical culture?

Horowitz operates mainly as a historian in this book, so his answers to such questions would require a much longer project. However, Horowitz's book could also be taken in a fruitful philosophical or theological direction if one notices the interplay of the ideas of "the old world" and "the new world" in Dvořák's life and work. Consider the fact that Dvořák entered America as a *Catholic immigrant in 1892*, seeking out "The New World." Accordingly, he was an outsider, and had he ended up in white Boston rather than multicultural New York, Horowitz rightly mentions, his intercultural project would have had little chance of success. It was only the melting pot of New York City that made such an audacious intercultural attempt possible. Dvořák was a white European, but in 1890s America, he was only "the right kind" of white European in certain areas.

This outsider status, one might argue, enabled him to appreciate songs *from* "The New World" *about* "a new world." Negro spirituals almost universally have one common component: a yearning for a new world, better than this one, where all troubles will soon be done. These are the songs of those who feel dislocated, whether dragged into slavery in a foreign land or rejected as a Papist Bohemian hardly worthy of being considered an "American composer" at all. Unfortunately, Horowitz presents us with an accurate image of a Bostonian elite whose sense of "elite culture" was basically coterminous with "white Protestant culture." Horowitz, it seems, is unafraid of dealing with the most interesting and uncomfortable racial elements in Dvořák's American story.

Indeed, it took some measure of socio-political courage for Horowitz to write this book, because certain readers would immediately question the identity-matrix involved in its production. Horowitz,

a white male, is really trying to tell the story of American slave songs while using the music of yet another white male who himself had allegedly already appropriated those very same songs? Is this not one act of cultural appropriation built upon another?

Horowitz does well to deflect this sort of criticism, both explicitly in later chapters and implicitly in his chosen foreword, in which George Shirley, the first black tenor to perform a leading role at the Metropolitan Opera, reflects on the subject matter of the book. By having Shirley write the foreword, Horowitz does something rather ingenious: he kills his potential critics with pre-emptive magnanimity. Shirley is precisely someone whose singing career was profoundly (often negatively) affected by the occlusion of black classical music, evidenced by the fact that he only sung *Sporting Life*, the lead tenor role in *Porgy and Bess*, in his late sixties (Shirley had sung most of the major operatic tenor roles in most of the major opera houses of the world by then, so it was not due to lack of personal ability). When Shirley was off in Europe singing Mozart, he was not rejecting *Porgy* offers in the US, much less performing the works of the black classical composers Horowitz referenced. Such performances simply didn't happen. Thus, Shirley is *exactly* the sort of person who might have good reason for being bitter about "the vexed fate of classical music." If anyone could criticize Horowitz's reading of black American musical history, Shirley would surely be the man.

Yet Shirley does no such thing, and opens up a wonderfully hospitable space for thinking about how race relations and artistic activity can intersect. Shirley seems rather unimpressed by the recent uptick in concerns over "cultural appropriation." He's happy to admit that, in the terms of

"appropriation," black musicians have "appropriated" Western instruments, European musical forms, and the like. But he couches all this cultural exchange within the overarching context of "cultural appreciation," describing it thus: "If I am going to sing the Duke in *Rigoletto* with respect for the language and the style, then I can sing the Duke in *Rigoletto*. You don't have to be Ethiopian to sing *Aida*, or Japanese to sing *Madama Butterfly*. We see or hear something for which we have an affinity and we are drawn to it, no matter its origin. If it speaks to us as a way of life, we have no reason not to pursue it. Music is like that; it belongs to no one person or ethnic entity." In an age of apparently increasing racial animus, such words and thoughts should be greeted as a healing salve.

In this vein, it should be also mentioned that in addition to the book, and in collaboration with Naxos, Horowitz offers a series of six companion DVD films (also, thankfully, available online), replete with musical scores, performances, images, and the like. When he says, for example, that Dvořák wove "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" into *Symphony No. 9*, you can see the score and hear a version (sung by the excellent bass-baritone Kevin Deas), all while Horowitz narrates and explicates. Such a multimedia encounter with such multisensory music enriches the book, and given the working relationship between Dvořák and Burleigh, it is only fitting that the white Horowitz would collaborate with the black Deas to produce such an impressive set of documentary films.

Horowitz, Shirley, and Deas are urging us to imagine what American classical music would have sounded like if Dvořák's prophecy had come true. Although we still can't hear much of it today, they encourage us to make it more audible. ♪