

Dvorak at Spillville

With the smoke from his pipe curling around his head as he strolled on an exploratory tour, Antonin Dvorak was already beginning to enjoy the little Bohemian village of Spillville, Iowa, after a residence of only an hour. How pleasant to be far from the nerve-racking noise of New York City, how restful to escape from the hurry and surge of the restless millions. Here, beside the Turkey River, the tranquility of nature and the songs of many birds invoked a mood of quiet contemplation.

In the fall of 1892, Antonin Dvorak, accompanied by his family and his American assistant, came to New York. It was his purpose, as Director of the National Conservatory of Music, to develop for America a school of music that would be as typical of American life and ideals as the German, Russian, and Italian schools are expressive of their distinctive national traits. Characteristically he assumed the duties of his position on the day after his arrival. At the same time he began the orchestration of a cantata upon which he had been working.

Dvorak's assistant, a combined pupil, interpreter, and secretary, was J. J. Kovarik, a native of Spillville, Iowa. As a boy he had shown considerable musical ability, so his father had sent him to Prague that he might study in the fatherland under Dvorak.

Upon his arrival in New York with his master he asked permission to go at once to visit his parents in Iowa, but Dvorak, knowing his need for an assistant, kept him until spring.

That winter was very trying for Dvorak. He was by nature a country gentleman, used to the serenity of rural life and accustomed to the solitary enjoyment of nature. In contrast to such an environment he was suddenly the center of great attention in New York. His social engagements were scarcely less numerous than his musical appointments. After meeting these private demands in addition to his duties as Director of the National Conservatory, he had little time left for composing. And when he did try to make a tune, it was invariably accompanied by the roar of elevated railway trains and the general clamor of traffic.

As spring approached Dvorak wanted more than ever to escape from the noisy city. He was anxious to work on some new music that he had in mind. One day Kovarik suggested that Dvorak accompany him on a visit to Iowa. Apparently his master did not hear, for he paid no attention to the remark and made no comment. A few days later, however, he quite unexpectedly asked Kovarik about Spillville. Kovarik explained that Spillville was a little Bohemian settlement, where his native language was spoken on the street; that it was peaceful and quiet, as well as beautiful; and, most important of all, there were no railroads in Spillville. Several days

passed. Then Dvorak asked his assistant to draw a map of Spillville, indicating every house, every street, every person who lived in each house and what they did. That was all; Dvorak made no comments. But when some friends of his from South Carolina tried to persuade him to go there for his rest he said, "No, I am going to Spillville."

So it was that a lovely day in June saw Antonin Dvorak, his wife, their six children, a sister, a maid, and his assistant, alight from the train at the little station of Calmar, eleven miles from Spillville. Kovarik sent the family on to the village while he remained to look after the baggage. Upon his arrival, he found Dvorak strolling around, smoking his pipe, quite at home, and apparently very much pleased with his surroundings.

The idyllic conditions at Spillville seemed to furnish the very incentive that was needed, for Dvorak began composing immediately. Within three days he had sketched his "String Quartette in F Major", Opus 96, and at the end of twelve days it was finished — a very unusual achievement. Indeed, this amazing feat was regarded with awe by the musical world. The score was begun on June 12th and finished on June 23, 1893.

The "New World Symphony" was still in manuscript form when he came to Spillville. To supply duplicates for publishers, Kovarik made several additional copies. "It is strange you don't have the trombones playing at the end of the last movement

when they have had such a prominent part in the rest of the Symphony", he remarked to the master. Dvorak had apparently overlooked this fact, so he set to work and added the trombone parts to the final movement. This was probably the only revision he made in the Symphony while he was in Iowa.

No sooner had the "Quartette in F Major" been finished than Dvorak began composing other chamber music. There is no evidence to show just when the "String Quintette in E Flat", Opus 97, was started, but he finished it in August. The third movement, "theme with variations", was originally intended as a new tune for the hymn "America", but Dvorak changed his mind and used the air for this wonderful set of variations.

Progress on the "Quintette" was interrupted for a week early in August when Dvorak went to Chicago to visit the Columbia Exposition and to conduct the Theodore Thomas Orchestra on Bohemian Day at the World's Fair. On the day after the concert he hurried back to Spillville and to work.

A week later, when the "Quintette" was finished he made a trip to Omaha and Minneapolis. He especially desired to see the Minnehaha Falls. As he stood at the foot of the falls and looked up at the beautiful cataract, he caught the inspiration for a new melody. Turning to his assistant he asked for some manuscript paper. But Kovarik had none with him, so Dvorak took his pencil and made some notes

on his stiff cuff. When he returned to Iowa he utilized this theme in the second movement of his Sonata for violin and piano, Opus 100. This particular movement as rearranged by Fritz Kreisler is well known as the "Indian Lament".

It is natural to suppose that his intervening works, Opuses 98 and 99, were written in Iowa, but nobody knows just when they were composed. Perhaps they were written previously and numbered later.

Probably Dvorak planned to leave Iowa at the end of the summer but his actual departure was precipitated by his eldest daughter. Unknown to her parents she had become infatuated with a young man in Spillville. According to tradition their elopement was intercepted in the nick of time, and so ended the youthful romance. When "Papa" Dvorak learned of the affair he was so incensed that he ordered the family to pack up immediately and they all left for New York the next day.

Many years passed and the visit of the great composer to the little Bohemian village in Iowa was almost forgotten. But in 1922, at the annual meeting of the Iowa Conservation Association, Mrs. Louis B. Schmidt, then Chairman of the Historic Spots Committee and president of the Iowa Federation of Music Clubs, proposed the commemoration of that notable episode in the history of Iowa. The suggestion met a cordial response and after several years of careful investigation definite plans were adopted

for the erection of a suitable monument at Spillville.

The memorial which stands on the banks of the Little Turkey River, was dedicated on September 28, 1925. On each face of the monument is carved the name of a Dvorak masterpiece, and around the bottom is a list of the compositions upon which he worked while in Iowa. On a bronze tablet set on a large central boulder are the words:

In Commemoration of the Visit

of

Antonin Dvorak

Renowned Composer

to

Spillville in 1893

This Tablet is Erected by

His Friends

and

The Iowa Conservation Association

Every year hundreds of people visit the Dvorak memorial. A glance at the pages of the register reveals the signatures of many noted musicians who live at the ends of the earth. Some of them no doubt have travelled far out of their way to visit this Iowa shrine of the famous composer.

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