

2018 Winter Festival
America, Inspiring:
Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Britten: *Simple Symphony*. Britten based his *Simple Symphony* on piano pieces and songs that he wrote aged 9 to 12. Each movement is a delightful, transparent miniature touched with humor. Eloquent writing shows off the silken sound of strings.

Korngold: *Violin Concerto*. Infamously dismissed at its premiere as “more corn than gold,” the concerto has found its champions. Redolent with the swashbuckling, romantic themes of movie music from Hollywood’s Golden Age, its rondo finale opens with a bang and closes in a burst of fireworks.

Dvořák: *Symphony No. 9, “From the New World.”* The culmination of Dvořák’s years in the United States. Bohemian dance blends with spirituals and Native American music in its themes, thereby combining the New World with the Old.

BRITTEN: *Simple Symphony, Op. 4*

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born: November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England

Died: December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh, England

Composed: December 1933–February 1934

World Premiere: 1934 in Norwich. The composer conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1988–89 season; Michael Pratt conducted.

Duration: 16 minutes

The English composer Benjamin Britten is probably best remembered for his splendid contribution to the operatic stage. Through masterpieces such as *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *Albert Herring*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Turn of the Screw*, he dominated English musical drama for some 30 years. Britten was a multitalented musician, however, who wrote memorable and beloved works in many genres. His *A Ceremony of Carols*, *Saint Nicholas* and *A War Requiem* are all masterpieces of choral literature. Children in many parts of the world get their first exposure to symphonic music through his *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. His chamber music, too, contains some jewels. Young string players' first acquaintance with Britten frequently comes from playing the *Simple Symphony*.

Benjamin Britten re-scored a number of his early piano pieces and songs to produce his *Simple Symphony* for string orchestra. The alliterative movement titles indicate the humor with which he approached the project. They also imply a dance suite. Actually, the piece bears more relation to a miniature string symphony, a 20th-century counterpart to Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*.

Both the copyright date of 1934 and the early opus number identify this miniature symphony as a youthful work. Precisely how youthful is revealed in an introductory note in the score. "This 'Simple Symphony' is entirely based on material from works which the composer wrote between the ages of 9 and 12. (The actual sources are given in footnotes to each movement.) Although the development of these themes is in many places quite new, there are large stretches of the work which are taken bodily from the early pieces—save for the re-scoring for strings."

Largely diatonic in its musical language, *Simple Symphony* is remarkably well written for strings, especially considering that the composer was barely 20 when he composed it. His early training as a violist doubtlessly helped him. Britten dedicated the piece to his viola teacher Audrey Alston, who

introduced him to Frank Bridge. (Bridge became Britten's composition teacher.) Part of its charm lies in the skill with which Britten used the string orchestra, allowing for performance by modest amateur players. In the hands of skilled professionals, the *Simple Symphony* shines.

Instrumentation: strings.

KORNGOLD: Concerto in D for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 35

ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD

Born: May 29, 1897, in Brno, Czechoslovakia

Died: November 29, 1957, in Hollywood, California

Composed: 1937; revised 1945

World Premiere: February 15, 1945, in St. Louis. Jascha Heifetz was the soloist; Vladimir Golschmann conducted the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: 2001–02 season. Gil Shaham was the soloist; Uriel Segal conducted.

Duration: 24 minutes

Remember all those swashbuckling and romantic Errol Flynn films from the 1930s and 1940s—*The Sea Hawk*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Captain Blood*, *Anthony Adverse* and *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*? A substantial part of their aura was the sweeping, lush scores of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, unquestionably one of the greatest film composers in Hollywood history. But what is he doing in the concert hall?

Austrian child prodigy

The same Korngold who composed so many wonderful Hollywood scores was one of the great child composition prodigies of the last century. As an adolescent, he produced scores that drew both admiration and awe from such prominent composers as Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler. He published a piano trio at age 12; by the time he was 16, both Artur Nikisch and Felix Weingartner had conducted his orchestral compositions in Vienna. Two short operas were produced in Munich before

his 19th birthday, and the opera for which he is best known, *The Dead City*, received simultaneous premieres in Cologne and Hamburg in 1920, when Korngold was just 23. His meteoric career expanded to cinema in 1929, when he began working with the Austrian director Max Reinhardt. Inevitably, involvement in the film industry took him across the Atlantic to Hollywood.

Because of the rise of Nazism, Korngold eventually settled permanently in Hollywood and changed his citizenship in 1943. He was an unquestioned star among Hollywood composers, with a dozen important scores to his credit in addition to those for the Flynn films. After his father's death in September 1945, however, Korngold felt the need to return to abstract musical composition. The Violin Concerto was one of the first works he completed after making that decision.

Two legendary violinists

Its roots extend back to the mid-1930s. Korngold was friendly with the Polish violinist Bronislaw Huberman, who founded the Palestine Orchestra in 1937. (That orchestra was the forerunner to the Israel Philharmonic.) Huberman had long urged Korngold to write a concerto for him, and the Viennese expatriate blocked out such a work in the late 1930s. Huberman declined to set a date for the premiere, however, and Korngold shelved the project in 1939 after hearing another less gifted violinist read it through.

In 1945, the legendary Jascha Heifetz got wind through his manager that Korngold's concerto was languishing, unfinished. Huberman's health was by then declining; he died in 1947. Heifetz became the new concerto's great champion. His 1953 recording with Alfred Wallenstein and the Los Angeles Philharmonic remains a classic interpretation, and it did much to establish Korngold's concerto in the repertoire. Korngold declined to dedicate the concerto to Heifetz, however, instead giving that honor to Alma Mahler Werfel as a condolence gift following the death of her third husband, Franz Werfel, in 1945.

Nevertheless, he was keenly aware how valuable was Heifetz's advocacy. In his note for the premiere, Korngold wrote: "In spite of its demand for virtuosity in the finale, the work with its many melodic and

lyric episodes was contemplated rather for a Caruso of the violin than for a Paganini. It is needless to say how delighted I am to have my concerto performed by Caruso and Paganini in one person: Jascha Heifetz.”

Roots in film music

Listeners familiar with Korngold’s film work will recognize both style and content in the concerto. The opening theme is adapted from his music for *Another Dawn*, another Errol Flynn film from 1939. Less obvious connections to music from the scores to *Juarez* (1939) and *Anthony Adverse* (1936) are also discernible. The horn call in the finale derives from music in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937). Inevitably, these links came back to haunt Korngold. After the New York premiere, Olin Downes of *The New York Times* disparaged the new work as “a Hollywood concerto.” Irving Kolodin of *The New York Sun* earned a dubious measure of critical immortality by dismissing the piece as “more corn than gold.”

The concerto deserves far better. Korngold was certainly not the first serious composer to turn his gifts to Hollywood. Film scores have been an honorable avenue for composition since the silent-movie era. Other distinguished 20th-century composers who wrote for cinema are Vaughan Williams, Walton, Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Copland. One reason that Korngold and his musico-cinematic contemporaries—Max Steiner, Franz Waxman, Alfred Newman, Miklos Rosza and others—were so successful is that they understood the great traditions of Western music and were able to write with considerable mastery. Having grown up in Vienna, Korngold was steeped in the musical language and culture of Wagner, Strauss, Brahms and Mahler. In many respects, he was the last of the great Romantics. His joyous, extroverted concerto attests to his gifts as a melodist. Particularly in the finale, the virtuosic violin part is remarkably well suited to the instrument, fully exploiting its capacity to sing operatically.

Instrumentation: two flutes, (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta, strings and solo violin.

DVOŘÁK: Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, “From the New World,” Op. 95

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born: September 8, 1841, in Mühlhausen, Bohemia

Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague, Czechoslovakia

Composed: December 1892–May 1893

World Premiere: December 16, 1893. Anton Seidl conducted the New York Philharmonic.

NJSO Premiere: 1929–30 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 40 minutes

Misunderstood masterpiece

“In spite of the fact that I have moved about in the great world of music, I shall remain what I have always been—a simple Czech musician.”

These words of Dvořák are uncannily apt when considering the familiar, beloved and misunderstood “New World” Symphony. Sketched and written between December 1892 and May 1893, when Dvořák had come to New York to head the new American Conservatory, the piece was ridiculed at its premiere because of its alleged incorporation of Native American tunes. The critics did acknowledge the symphony’s individuality and its unique amalgam of Czech and American elements. In fact, Dvořák never intended to directly appropriate African-American spirituals or Indian folk song. Some years later, in 1900, he wrote to his former student Oscar Nedbal, declaring of the “New World” Symphony: “I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies.”

Connections to indigenous American music

Since his first visit to the United States, Dvořák had been intensely curious about the native music of the American Indian tribes. Late in 1892, through a scholarship student at the American Conservatory, Dvořák became acquainted with African-American spirituals as well. The young man, Henry Thacker Burleigh, played timpani and double bass in the conservatory orchestra, and he eventually became the orchestra’s librarian and Dvořák’s copyist. Their interaction bore rich fruit. Innumerable critics have

commented on the strong echoes of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in the first movement of the “New World” Symphony and of “Deep River” later in the work. In fact, as Dvořák’s biographer Gervase Hughes has pointed out:

Folk-tunes often tended (one could put it no higher than that) to be based on a pentatonic scale—C, D, E, G, A (or the equivalent)—indigenous to Bohemia, Somerset, the Hebrides, Ireland and the Appalachians; furthermore the old ‘plantation songs’ of the ‘deep south’ of North America sometimes held rhythmic inflexions similar to those of Slav folk music. Dvořák had the pleasant sagacity to capitalize on these coincidences.

The result is a symphony with extraordinary and spontaneous emotional appeal. It features rhythmic punch and a wealth of memorable, singable melodies that have made this symphony his most popular work.

The most famous movement is, of course, the delicious Largo, which opens with a startling series of coloristic modulations from distant keys: E major to D-flat major. The immortal “Going Home” melody is said to have been inspired by Dvořák’s consideration of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* as a potential opera subject. He was drawn to the legend; nothing came of that project, but his mind was clearly churning with ideas stimulated by his exposure to African-American and Native American musical culture. His English horn solo has become one of the best known melodies in all of classical music.

Structurally, the first movement is the strongest; its rhythmic profile manifests itself in one form or another in all of the succeeding movements. Dvořák wrote a true scherzo for this symphony rather than the Czech *furiant* he favored in so many other large instrumental works. And in his finale, he incorporates quotations from each of the preceding movements to cyclically unify the symphony.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.