

Bruno Walter (born Bruno Schlesinger, September 15, 1876 – February 17, 1962) was a German-born conductor, pianist, and composer. Born in Berlin, he left Germany in 1933 to escape the Third Reich, settling finally in the United States in 1939. He worked closely with Gustav Mahler, whose music he helped establish in the repertoire, held major positions with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Salzburg Festival, Vienna State Opera, Bavarian State Opera, Staatsoper Unter den Linden and Deutsche Oper Berlin, among others, made recordings of historical and artistic significance, and is widely considered one of the great conductors of the 20th century.

Born near Alexanderplatz in Berlin to a middle-class Jewish family, he began his musical education at the Stern Conservatory at the age of eight, making his first public appearance as a pianist when he was nine; he performed a concerto movement with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1889 and a full concerto with them in February, 1890. He studied composition at Stern with Robert Radeke de:Robert Radecke, and remained active as a composer until about 1910 (see list of compositions below). But it was seeing an 1889 concert by the Berlin Philharmonic led by Hans von Bülow, he wrote, that "decided my future. Now I knew what I was meant for. No musical activity but that of an orchestral conductor could any longer be considered by me. He made his conducting debut at the Cologne Opera with Albert Lortzing's *Der Waffenschmied* in 1894. Later that year he left for the Hamburg Opera to work as a chorus director. There he first met and worked with Gustav Mahler, whom he revered and with whose music he later became strongly identified

Conducting In 1896, he was appointed Kapellmeister of the Stadttheater (municipal opera) in Breslau, on the strength of a recommendation from Mahler to the theater's director, Theodor Löwe. However, Löwe required that before taking up this position the young conductor change his last name from Schlesinger, which literally means Silesian, "because of its frequent occurrence in the capital of Silesia", in a letter to his brother paraphrased by Erik Ryding and Rebecca Pechefsky, Walter said he had "suggested several names, which Mahler wrote down and gave to Löwe, who returned the contract with the name Bruno Walter. These biographers add that Walter wrote to his parents that he found that "having to change his name was 'terrible,'" they report that Mahler and his sisters "pressed" Walter to make the change of name, and add that, contrary to occasional unsubstantiated reports, it "is unknown" whether Löwe's stipulation had anything to do with a desire to conceal Walter's Jewish origins. In 1897, Walter became Chief Conductor at the municipal opera in Pressburg. He found the town provincial and depressing, and in 1898 took the position of Chief Conductor of the Riga Opera, Latvia. While there, he converted to Christianity, probably Roman Catholicism. In 1899 Walter was appointed music director of the Temeswar, Austria-Hungary (now Timisoara, Romania) Opera. Walter then returned in 1900 to Berlin, where he assumed the post of Royal Prussian Conductor at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, succeeding Franz Schalk; his colleagues there included Richard Strauss and Karl Muck. While in Berlin he also conducted the premiere of *Der arme Heinrich* by Hans Pfitzner, who became a lifelong friend. In 1901, Walter accepted Mahler's invitation to be his assistant at the Court Opera in Vienna. Walter led Verdi's *Aida* at his debut. In 1907 he was elected by the Vienna Philharmonic to conduct its Nicolai Concert. In 1910, he helped Mahler select and coach solo singers for the premiere of Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*. In the following years Walter's conducting reputation soared as he was invited to conduct across Europe – in Prague, in London where in 1910 he conducted *Tristan und Isolde* and *Ethel Smyth's The Wreckers* at Covent Garden, and in Rome. When Mahler died on May 18, 1911, Walter was at his deathbed. On June 6, he wrote to his sister that he was to conduct the premiere of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, he did so in Munich on November 20, 1911, in the first half of an all-Mahler concert (the second half contained Mahler's *Symphony No. 2* (Mahler) On June 26, 1912 he led the Vienna Philharmonic in the world premiere of Mahler's *Symphony No. 9*.



Bruno Walter / Dvorak New World Symphony



New World Symphony, byname of Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95: From the New World, orchestral work by Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák, a major milestone in the validation of American—or “New World”—music and lore as source material for classical composition. Written while Dvořák was living and working in New York City, the symphony purportedly incorporated the composer’s reflections on his American setting. The piece premiered at Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893.

In 1891 the noted American patron of the arts Jeannette Meyer Thurber embarked on a mission to find a director for the National Conservatory of Music, the school that she had founded in New York City. Determined to fill the position with a person of global reputation whose own prestige would boost that of the conservatory, she offered the attractive annual salary of \$15,000. Although many Americans would have leapt at the opportunity, there were no suitably qualified candidates, largely because classical music was still in its adolescence in the United States. Thurber ultimately offered the job to Dvořák, who at that time was a music professor at the Prague Conservatory in Austria-Hungary (now in the Czech Republic). As a skilled composer of international renown—a conservative late Romantic who specialized in lush symphonic works and chamber music rather like that of his mentor Johannes Brahms—Dvořák had much to share with aspiring musicians. Moreover, according to his colleagues, he had a flair for teaching. Dvořák accepted Thurber’s offer and moved to the United States in 1892, but he was uncomfortable in the urban American setting, and he disliked being absent from his homeland. His new address of 327 East 17th Street in New York City seemed a poor substitute for the rolling hills of Bohemia. Thus, Dvořák terminated his contract after three years to return to Prague. Dvořák’s American sojourn was brief but productive, and it yielded the piece that widely became regarded as his signature work—the four-movement Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, better known as the New World Symphony. The piece premiered with the New York Philharmonic in a program

shared with Brahms’s Violin Concerto in D Major and Felix Mendelssohn’s incidental music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. A reporter for the *New York Herald* who had attended the last rehearsal before the premiere observed that the new symphony was “a noble composition . . . of heroic proportions” and compared the work favourably to the compositions of Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Brahms. Dvořák’s writings reveal that he admired the beauty of African American spirituals and plantation songs of the American South and that he advised other composers also to study them for inspiration. Many musicologists have speculated that, at least in part, the melodies of the New World Symphony were based on such spirituals. The second theme in the first movement, for instance, is to some ears reminiscent of the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and the gently lyrical second movement is popularly perceived as an orchestral setting of the spiritual “Goin’ Home.” However, “Goin’ Home” has no organic tie to the South or to plantation life; it is Dvořák’s own melody, written specifically for the New World Symphony and later given words by one of his students.

In addition to the songs of the African American South, Dvořák was fascinated by Native American tradition—or, at least, by his imagination of it. He acknowledged that certain segments of the symphony were inspired by *The Song of Hiawatha*, a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow that recounted the tale of Hiawatha, the legendary Onondaga chief. A dancelike passage in the third-movement scherzo supposedly evokes the Native American wedding feast depicted in Longfellow’s poem. Ironically, it was unlikely that Dvořák actually heard Native American music until after the symphony was completed; he had summered in a Czech community in Iowa, but by then there were few Native Americans left in the area. Whether tapping Native American or African American musical styles (he made no distinction between the two), Dvořák avoided strict quotation. As he explained to one quizzical European conductor, “I tried to write only in the spirit of those national American melodies.”

Bruno Walter / Dvorak New World Symphony

Bruno Walter conducting the Columbia Symphony Orchestra

1. Adagio, 4/8 – Allegro molto, 2/4, E minor
2. Largo, common time, D-flat major, then later C-sharp minor
3. Scherzo: Molto vivace – Poco sostenuto, 3/4, E minor
4. Allegro con fuoco, common time, E minor, ends in E major

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