

An inordinately gifted conductor, István Kertész died at age 43 in a tragic drowning off the Israeli coast. He had already reached full maturity as a musician, proving his worth in opera, oratorio, and the symphonic repertory. His interests were wide-ranging, including works from the Classical and Romantic periods and large portions of twentieth century music.

Beginning with private lessons in childhood, Kertész studied piano and violin. He continued with violin training at the Ferenc Liszt Academy in Budapest, adding composition under the supervision of such teachers as Weiner and Kodály. He pursued his conducting studies with László Somogyi, at the same time benefiting from studying the performances of Otto Klemperer, who was then working at the Hungarian State Opera. In 1953, Kertész was appointed resident conductor at Győr, two years later transferring his activities to Budapest, where he was hired as coach and conductor. Following the political uprising and Soviet response in 1956, Kertész moved with his family to Germany, subsequently acquiring German citizenship.

From 1958 to 1963, Kertész was general music director at Augsburg. His British debut took place with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in 1960, followed by appearances with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1961. His American debut came with a tour with the NDR Symphony Orchestra in 1961, during which he made a positive impression on American audiences and critics alike. An appointment as general music director in Cologne came in 1964 and 1966 brought both a Covent Garden debut, directing *Un ballo in maschera*. A global tour with the London Symphony Orchestra led to his succeeding Pierre Monteux as LSO principal conductor in 1966. In 1971, he became music director of Cologne's Gürzenich-Orchester, a position he held until his death two years later.

Kertész was decidedly non-interventionist as a conductor. With scrupulous attention to the composer's directions, his interpretations were more remarkable for sound musicianship than for striking individualism. Still, his performances often held high drama, and he was intentional about advocacy of works he believed in, which, in light of his broad interests, were numerous. At Cologne, he presented the German premiere of Verdi's *Stiffelio* as well as Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* (a work he recorded in its first complete edition on disc).

For Decca, Kertész recorded a superb *Bluebeard's Castle* with Christa Ludwig and Walter Berry, still unsurpassed after several decades. His complete recordings of the Dvorák, Brahms, and Schubert symphonies still enjoy honorable places among the best versions committed to disc. The first Western recording of Kodály's *Háry János* (the complete opera) was made with the London Symphony under Kertész's direction. The Decca label coupling of Dvorák's *Requiem* and Kodály's *Psalmus Hungaricus* is another fitting tribute to a superb artist too soon departed.

In addition to Bartók, Kertész was an indefatigable champion of works by Stravinsky, Henze, and Britten. Britten's *Billy Budd* was first presented to German audiences under Kertész's baton and he directed the first performance of the *War Requiem* heard in Vienna. For Ravinia Festival audiences, Kertész directed the *War Requiem* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra & Chorus shortly before his death. With soloists Phyllis Curtin, Robert Tear, and John Shirley-Quirk, the conductor's shattering interpretation left audience members limp.

DVORAK

Symphony No. 9 "From The New World"

ISTVÁN KERTÉSZ / VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Smetana the Bartered Bride Overture

Fritz Reiner / Chicago Symphony Orchestra



Mastered in DSD256

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.”

Aside from any actual or attributed links to American music, the New World Symphony notably employed stylistic elements that were suggestive of Bohemian, German, French, Scottish, and other Old World sources. The theme from the third movement, for example, resembles Dvořák’s earlier Slavonic Dances, Op. 46 (1878), which was inspired by the rhythms and spirit of Bohemian folk music. The symphony also exhibits cyclic form (having movements that are linked motivically or thematically), a structure that was popular among European composers—most prominently, Beethoven—throughout the 19th century. In its character, then, Dvořák’s New World Symphony was an expression of both the Old World and the New, and as such it enjoyed transoceanic appeal.

Unlike Rossini, who would often wait until the very last minute to write an overture for one of his operas, or even himself for his other operas, Bedřich Smetana actually wrote the overture for his opera *The Bartered Bride* before he wrote anything else for it. While the libretto was still being worked out, Smetana composed the overture in piano score during autumn 1863, two and a half years before the premiere of the first version of the opera. He was excited about his second work in the genre, one that would depict rustic Czech life rather than aristocratic life, that would represent Czech music rather than copy German styles, and that would be light and comic rather than Wagnerian. The final orchestration does succeed in those respects. It also reflects the excitement he felt, opening with brief fanfare, then with the strings building up to the main theme, a peasant dance-like melody. This theme is developed somewhat fugally and is followed by a brief oboe melody. Another idea appears in the strings, before the return of the first theme, which is again elaborated and is also the basis of the coda. All of the themes were used in the finale of the opera’s second act. Along with Dvořák’s music, these themes contribute a great deal to the character of Czech Romantic music, using peasant dance and song idioms for new melodies. The fresh and earthy Overture to *The Bartered Bride* is perhaps Smetana’s second-most famous work, behind only *The Moldau*.

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- 1 Adagio - Allegro Molto 9:52
 - 2 Largo 11:51
 - 3 Scherzo (Molto Vivace) 7:39
 - 4 Allegro Con Fuoco 11:09
 - 5 The Bartered Bride: Overture 6:38
- Total Time: 47:09

Dvorak: Recorded by Decca 22-24 Mar 1961 at Sofiensaal, Vienna Producer: Ray Minshull Engineer: James Brown

Smetana Recorded by RCA December 12, 1955 in Chicago Producer: Richard Mohr Engineer: Robert Layton

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