



DISCOVERY

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# DVOŘÁK

Legends | American Suite

West Australian Symphony Orchestra • Handley



## ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK 1841-1904

### Legends, Op. 59/B122

		[44'01]
<b>1</b>	I. Allegretto (D minor)	3'26
<b>2</b>	II. Molto moderato (G major)	4'37
<b>3</b>	III. Allegro giusto, scherzando (G minor)	4'20
<b>4</b>	IV. Molto maestoso (C major)	6'55
<b>5</b>	V. Allegro giusto (A-flat major)	4'56
<b>6</b>	VI. Allegro con moto (C-sharp minor)	4'31
<b>7</b>	VII. Allegretto grazioso (A major)	3'07
<b>8</b>	VIII. Un poco allegretto e grazioso (F major)	4'13
<b>9</b>	IX. Andante con moto (D major)	2'36
<b>10</b>	X. Andante (B-flat minor)	4'49

### 'American' Suite in A major, Op. 98b/B190

		[21'29]
<b>11</b>	I. Andante con moto	5'27
<b>12</b>	II. Allegro	3'44
<b>13</b>	III. Moderato (alla Pollacca)	4'24
<b>14</b>	IV. Andante	4'07
<b>15</b>	V. Allegro	3'35

Total Playing Time 65'33

West Australian Symphony Orchestra  
Vernon Handley conductor

In July 1874, the 32-year-old Czech composer Antonín Dvořák applied to the Imperial Government in Vienna for a young artist's grant. Dvořák's home city, Prague, had been a provincial capital firmly within the Habsburg Empire since the early 17th century, and as an Imperial subject Dvořák was eligible to compete for stipends offered to talented young musicians in need of financial support. On the basis of submitted compositions, Dvořák was recommended warmly to the Imperial Minister for Education, Karl Stremayer, both in 1874 and in the years following, by a distinguished panel including the music critic of the *Neue freie Presse*, Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904) and, from 1875 onward, the composer Johannes Brahms (1833-1897). Again, on 30 November 1877, Hanslick (who had been born in Prague into a German-speaking family) wrote to his countryman Dvořák not only to warn of the imminent arrival of another 600 gulden from Vienna, but also to signal that his fellow judge, Brahms, was actively recommending Dvořák's song set, *Moravian Duets* (Op. 29), to his own publisher, the Berlin-based Fritz Simrock (1837-1901):

Dear Sir,

I take particular pleasure in informing you that at today's meeting with Minister Stremayer you were unanimously awarded an artist's scholarship of 600 gulden. Johannes Brahms, who along with me proposed this grant, takes great interest in your formidable talent...The attentions of an artist as influential and famous as Brahms should not only be pleasing to you, but also useful...He has kept your vocal duets so that he can recommend them to his own publisher. If you could provide a good German translation, he would certainly arrange for their publication...In any case, it would be greatly advantageous for your things to become known beyond the limits of your Czech homeland, which, after all, has done little for you so far.

At Brahms' prompting, Simrock accepted the *Moravian Duets* for re-publication (they had been released two years earlier under a small Prague imprint) and, moreover, commissioned a new series, the *Slavonic Dances* (Op. 46), the first scores issued in a steady stream of releases of Dvořák's music to an international market.

Both Hanslick and Brahms continued in their warm support of Dvořák, support that Dvořák returned on a number of occasions. In October-November 1880, for instance, Dvořák obliged Simrock by making, for publication, a set of fine orchestrations of five of Brahms' latest *Hungarian Dances*. And the ten *Legends*, composed almost immediately afterward, were soon destined to be dedicated to Hanslick.

The *Legends* (Op. 59) were originally composed as a set of pieces for piano duet (B117) between 30 December 1880 and 22 March 1881. They were published by Simrock. Work on the orchestral version (B122) came later, between 13 November and 9 December 1881. A selection of orchestrated *Legends* (Nos 1, 3 and 4) was first performed at a Prague Conservatory concert on 7 May 1882, conducted by Antonín Bennewitz.

Though the *Legends* are a loose collection from which individual pieces may be taken and played separately (in this respect they resemble the *Slavonic Dances* more than the formalised 'American' Suite), Dvořák nevertheless arranged them in a logical key sequence (focussed around D and B-flat) to allow for continuous performance. Otherwise, in mood, orchestration and duration, they vary widely, and are bound together perhaps only by the entirely implicit significance of their title. In composing the *Legends*, Dvořák may (as elsewhere) have drawn inspiration from the historical sagas of the Czech or Slavic peoples. Yet it is not impossible that his interest in the folk literature of other nations also had an impact on the set (witness Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, later significant in the works of his American period, but which he first read in the Czech translation of his friend Josef Sládek in the early 1870s). In either case, his precise sources remain un-named and unacknowledged.

Not surprisingly, however, traditional idioms – dance, song and ceremonial music – find echoes in the *Legends*. The first legend, *Allegretto* (D minor), is like a refrain dance, in which repeats of its simple four-square tune alternate with excursions into major keys (B-flat and F). The quiet recurring melody of the second legend, *Molto moderato* (G major), anticipates the pentatonic idiom of Dvořák's American period (compare the third movement of the 'American' Suite), its fleeting intimacy contrasting with more turbulent fully scored episodes (in B-flat and G minor). The third legend, *Allegro giusto, scherzando* (G minor) is another robust dance piece on a simple theme, framing a self-contained contrasting central section *Andante, tranquillo e molto espressivo* (B-flat major).

The fourth legend, *Molto maestoso* (C major), is a stately processional, scored with prominent horns, trumpets and drums. By contrast, the intimate fifth legend, *Allegro giusto* (A-flat major), dispenses with the brass entirely and adds a harp. The imaginative treatment of its gently arching melody, for once, draws little on traditional formal elements. Again with harp, the haunting sixth legend, *Allegro con moto* (C-sharp minor), one of the most popular of the set, seems, likewise, to be a product of unalloyed inspiration.

The seventh legend consists simply of a rather polite dance piece, *Allegretto grazioso* (A major), followed by a slightly more energetic central episode, *Poco più mosso* (A minor), and a reprise of the opening. Another pentatonic melody serves as the theme of the eighth legend, *Un poco allegretto e grazioso* (F major), setting a pastoral mood. The ninth legend, *Andante con moto* (D major), is also rustic in tone, characterised by its playful toying with a single theme, treated in canon over a drone bass. Eschewing grand gestures, the tenth and final legend, *Andante*, calmly remains a true miniature. Dance-inspired, it alternates two tunes, one minor, the other major.

Both Hanslick and Brahms responded positively to the *Legends*. Brahms wrote to Simrock asking him to: 'Tell Dvořák how his *Legends* continue to charm me. It is a delightful work, and one envies the fresh, cheerful and rich resourcefulness of the man.' Hanslick contributed an enthusiastic review in the *Neue freie Presse* (Dvořák was pleased, saying: 'He laid it on thick, and no mistake'), noting how difficult it was to choose a favourite: 'Perhaps this one is the most beautiful of all the ten *Legends*, or maybe another one is; about that there are bound to be different opinions, though always subject to the general verdict that they are all beautiful.'

The 'American' Suite in A major (Op. 98b/B190) was also first conceived in a non-orchestral form, as a work for piano solo (B184). It was composed during Dvořák's second winter in New York, where, on leave of absence from Prague Conservatory, he served as foundation director of the privately funded National Conservatory of Music from 1892 to 1895. The Suite was begun on 19 February 1894, completed in draft on St Matthias's Day (24 February), which as Dvořák additionally noted found the city experiencing '11 degrees of frost', and was finished on 1 March. Writing to Simrock on 20 April, Dvořák named the Suite, together with the recently completed *Biblical Songs* (Op. 99), as 'the best things I have written in these genres'. The orchestration, which miraculously retains much of the intimacy of the piano original, was probably not begun until after Dvořák's final return to Prague in 1895. He apparently viewed its completion with little urgency, and the orchestral version was not performed in public or published until after his death.

It is not certain what, precisely, prompted the composition of the suite, Dvořák's only work to bear this title. However, in the introduction to his critical edition of the work (1957) Jiří Berkovec suggests that the composer may have taken it as an opportunity to work up a number of previously unused melodies from his sketch books. In his article 'Dvořák and His Black Students' (1996), Thomas L. Riis

quotes from an interview in the *Chicago Tribune* (13 August 1893) that contains another possibly relevant piece of information. In it, Dvořák stated that 'the most promising and gifted of [my] pupils is a young Westerner, Strothotte by name, a native of St Louis. A suite of 'Creole dances' written by him, and which contains material that he has treated in a style that accords with my ideas, will be given in New York during the winter.' The suite, *American Plantation Dances* by Maurice Arnold Strothotte (1865-1937), was premiered in New York on 23 January 1894, at a concert which also included Dvořák's choral arrangement (B605) of Stephen Foster's *Old Folks at Home*, performed by a black choir.

During the previous year, Dvořák had been creatively engaged with the native (rather than black) American heritage in two notable works, the Symphony 'From the New World' (Op. 95), partly inspired by Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, and the 'American' String Quartet (Op. 96). In an interview with the *New York Herald* (15 December 1893) he explained: 'I carefully studied a certain number of Indian melodies...and became thoroughly imbued with their character...with their spirit, in fact. It is this spirit I have tried to reproduce in my new Symphony. I have not actually used any of the melodies. I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music, and, using these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, harmony, counterpoint...[My String quartet was] written along the same lines as the Symphony and [it breathes] the same Indian spirit.'

Michael Beckerman (1996) has argued that the 'American' Suite, more so even than the Symphony and Quartet, 'may well be the most characteristic and revealing work of [Dvořák's] American period'. It shares with the two 1893 scores the same 'Indian spirit', which Dvořák evokes through the use of pentatonic (five-note) scale structures. A significant development in his treatments of these new melodies (compared with pentatonic themes in earlier works, such as Nos 2 and 8 of the *Legends*) is their noticeably more relaxed harmonic environment, characterised by the gentle oscillation between the major and minor tendencies inherent in pentatonic structures. For example, the descending scale of his first movement's opening figure (F#-C#-B-A) contains pitches of both the home chord (A major) and its related minor chord (F-sharp), emphasising the natural harmonic affinity of these two chords while relegating, by way of contrast, the traditionally intrusive dominant chord (E) to a secondary importance.

The first movement begins and ends with a relaxed pentatonic *Andante con moto* (A major), contrasting with a more urgent dance-like central episode, *Pochettino più mosso* (A minor), couched in an elementary tonic-dominant idiom. The second movement is a negative image of the first: it opens and closes with a brisk *Allegro* (C-sharp minor) in a propulsive tonic-dominant idiom, relaxing briefly into a quiet central pentatonic episode marked *Dolce* (D-flat major). The third movement is a *Moderato* subtitled 'alla Pollacca' (in Polish style), an idyllic polonaise that rests comfortably in the pentatonic camp. Its recurring flute theme (A major) is a rhythmicised transformation of the first movement's opening, and there are two contrasting episodes, the first on a sombre hymn-like tune for strings (F-sharp minor) accompanied by winds, the second on another rustic polonaise tune set to a drone (C-sharp minor) announced by flute and oboe and repeated by the cellos.

Again, the plangent melody of the fourth movement (*Andante*) is a loose transformation of the pentatonic idea, this time into a minor mode of A (using the scale A-B-C-E-G). After its opening appearance, for solo oboe with clarinet accompaniment, the melody is treated through a series of simple repeats, contrasting recurrences of the theme in the home key (A) with moves flatwards (into minor and major modes on C). The fifth movement (*Allegro*) uses the same minor-pentatonic scale for its energetic opening dance (A minor), and the original major pentatonic scale in its quieter A-major central episode. Finally, the coda quotes the first movement's opening note-for-note (F#-C#-B-A) in a brilliant flourish.

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