

Dvořák and Rachmaninoff – November 14 – 16, 2025

Although Dvořák began as an impoverished composer who had been tempted to steal bread to feed his family, he ultimately found fame and fortune during his life as one of the greatest composers of his time. It was Dvořák who encouraged American composers to look to American folk music and the Negro spirituals he first heard from Harry T. Burleigh, his young assistant and student at the all too short-lived National Conservatory of Music of America, as the basis for “any serious and original school of composition in America.”



Dvořák

Antonín Dvořák achieved worldwide recognition for transforming his culture’s folk tunes into great 19th century Romantic music. Today, Dvořák’s works hold a place among the greatest music of all time. But for the first 37 years of his life, Dvořák

balanced precariously on the brink of poverty.

Born on September 8, 1841, in the region called Bohemia (part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), Dvořák was the oldest of nine children. His large family was crammed into miniscule living quarters within the tavern operated by his parents. His father, a professional zither player who devoted most of his time to music, barely supported the family despite his “occupation” as a butcher and innkeeper. The village bands that performed in the family tavern gave Dvořák a wide range of musical experiences. Until the age of 12, Dvořák attended a one-room school, which offered a limited curriculum for the lower classes, but the schoolteacher, Josef Spitz, was a skilled musician who instructed a young Dvořák in violin and voice, and the youngster quickly became a proficient violinist. Even as a child, Dvořák contributed to the music-making scene in his father’s tavern and joined his father in the local band.



Dvořák Childhood Home

Dvořák’s early talent for music was quickly recognized and encouraged by his parents. When he was 12, his parents sent him to live in Zlonice (about nine miles to the west of his hometown) with an aunt and uncle so that Dvořák could attend a higher caliber school where his musical studies could be enhanced. It was then that Dvořák added piano and organ to his list of instruments and undertook his first attempts at composition. He also added viola to his growing list of accomplishments. Dvořák changed schools again at the age of 16 to continue his musical studies at the Institute for Church Music in Prague, then the second-largest city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, after Vienna. During his time as a student, he composed several organ preludes and fugues, and at least one mass which he later discarded.

Upon graduation, employment opportunities were limited. He applied for a position as church organist but was rejected. He ultimately found work as a violist with an entertainment orchestra that performed in coffee houses and restaurants. In 1862, he was hired as the principal violist for the Provisional Czech Theater, playing in performances nearly every evening year-round. It was there that he heard the first three operas composed by Bedrich Smetana, who was already established as a leading Czech composer. Dvořák held the orchestra position for 9 years and supplemented his meager income by giving piano lessons.



Dvořák



Dvořák and Anna

In 1864 Dvořák began teaching piano to two sisters, Josefina and Anna Čermáková, then fifteen and ten years old. Composer Josef Suk (Dvořák's student who later married Dvořák's daughter, Otilie) revealed that the young Dvořák had fallen in love with Josefina, a beautiful and popular actress in the theater where he worked as violist. Dvořák never disclosed his

feelings but in 1865, he composed *Cypresses*, a song cycle about frustrated and unrequited love.

Dvořák composed prolifically throughout the 1860s and early 1870s including orchestral and chamber works, songs and two operas, but throughout that time his works were never performed or even published. Bluntly, he lacked the higher-level connections and social skills needed to successfully promote himself, but undoubtedly, another factor was the difficulty and highly experimental style of his compositions. For his first sixteen years in Prague, Dvořák lived with relatives except for a brief period in 1864-65 when he shared a single room with four other men, reportedly because one of them had a piano. While living in the cramped quarters, Dvořák produced a copious outpouring of music including his first two symphonies and a Cello Concerto in A major.

In November of 1873, the struggling 32-year-old Dvořák married Anna, his former piano student and Josefina's younger sister. Anna, who became pregnant in the summer of 1873, was a talented 19-year-old singer, and thirteen years younger than Dvořák. In the same year, Dvořák resigned his position with the theater orchestra when he learned that the first of his operas, *King & Collier*, was to be performed. No doubt the scheduling of the performance was aided by his friend and mentor, composer Smetana, who was then the head of the Provisional Czech Theatre's opera company. The opera was modeled on the style of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, but almost as soon as the rehearsals began, the opera was declared unperformable, landing a major blow on Dvořák's dream of earning income as a composer. In 1874, with a baby on the way and no source of income, Dvořák accepted a low-paying position as a church organist and simultaneously applied for a grant offered by the Austro-Hungarian government to help support poor but talented artists. As the grant income was not nearly enough for the family's needs, Anna helped



Czech National Theater

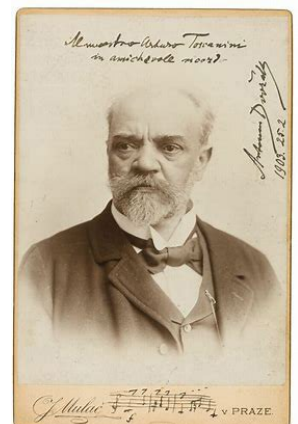
by performing as a paid church singer. In early 1875, Dvořák received the first of five such annual grants and with the award, his luck finally began to change.

The judging committee for the state-issued grants included Johannes Brahms, who was impressed with the young composer and began to promote his works. Brahms sent one of Dvořák's compositions to his own publisher in Berlin, Fritz Simrock, and for the very first time, Dvořák's music was published. But Dvořák did not receive any income from the publication of his compositions until 1879. Until that time, he struggled financially and emotionally, as the not even one of the couple's first three children survived infancy. It was during this difficult period that Dvořák later confessed he had been tempted to steal bread in order to feed his family. Ultimately, he and Anna had six other children, all of whom survived. Throughout their marriage, the couple remained close to Anna's sister Josefina, and, according to his son-in-law, composer Josef Suk, the nostalgic portion at the conclusion of Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B minor (the piece to be performed by the Hartford Symphony this weekend), was composed as a memorial to Josefina. The closing section of the concerto includes fragments from Dvořák's song, *Leave Me Alone* which, according to Suk, was one of Josefina's favorites.

The assistance from Brahms paid off and Dvořák finally received international recognition. His highly imaginative music was suddenly appreciated and one of his most successful works, written at Simrock's urging, was the first of his two sets of *Slavonic Dances* composed in early 1878. Originally written for piano four-hands, Dvořák orchestrated it later that same year. By 1879, the orchestra version had been performed in Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin, Nice, London and New York, cementing an international reputation that has not dwindled to this day.

From 1883 to 1886, he composed works in response to commissions he received from abroad, mostly from Simrock, Brahms' friend and Berlin-based publisher. In that period,

Dvořák also received multiple international invitations to conduct his music. He made five extended trips to England to conduct, and accolades were heaped upon him as one of the greatest composers of the time. In 1890, at the



Dvořák

invitation of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Dvořák conducted his own orchestral works in St. Petersburg and Moscow. In 1891, he returned to England to conduct and was granted an honorary doctorate from Cambridge. In the span of a little more than ten years, the impoverished theater musician who could not feed his family had become a composer of international renown and his adventures in America were just about to begin.

In June of 1891, Dvořák was offered the position of composition teacher and Director of the newly created National Conservatory of Music of America, located in New York City. The Conservatory had been specifically founded by philanthropist Jeannette Meyers Thurber, who convinced several philanthropists, including Andrew Carnegie to create what she hoped would be a federally funded national conservatory, open to all, with the mission to “seek out and encourage female, minority, and physically disabled students.”

The Conservatory’s offer to Dvořák included four months’ annual vacation and the astonishing salary of \$15,000 per year, which was more than 30 times his income from the Prague Conservatory, equal to roughly \$650,000 in today’s dollars. To sweeten the deal, half of his first year’s salary would be paid in advance. While Dvořák deliberated about accepting the job, Anna had no reservations whatsoever and at her urging, the entire family moved to New York City, taking up residence in a five-room apartment at 327 East 17th Street, near Stuyvesant Square Park (which sits between 15th and 17th Streets in New York City, bisected by Second Avenue.) The family lived in America for almost three years, from September 1892 through April 1895 and traveled to Iowa, Omaha, Minnesota and Chicago, where Dvořák conducted a concert of his works at the World’s Columbian Exposition. On their way back to New York the family visited Niagara Falls.



Dvořák Home in New York City

During Dvořák’s time in the United States, he became fascinated with African American spirituals, thanks to an introduction to the art form by Harry T. Burleigh, then a young student and his assistant at the Conservatory. Dvořák was greatly moved by the music he heard and argued that the music of the Black community should

inform the future sound of American music: “In the Negro melodies of America, I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.” Dvořák challenged American composers to make better use of “these Negro melodies” and to look to American folk music as the basis for “any serious and original school of composition in America.”

Dvořák’s influence during his brief time in New York was far-reaching. His students garnered recognition and in turn, educated some of the most recognized names in music. Dvořák mentored Harry T. Burleigh, who in turn coached Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson, three of the most prominent African American soloists. Dvořák’s student Will Marion Cook was not only a respected composer in his own right, but taught Duke Ellington. Another student, Harry Rowe Shelley, taught Charles Ives, and student Rubin Goldmark taught both Aaron Copland and George Gershwin.

Dvořák’s Symphony No. 9, famously known as the *New World Symphony*, was composed during his years in the United States. The piece was commissioned in 1893 by the New York Philharmonic and was premiered at Carnegie Hall in December of that year. It was an instant success, but Dvořák chose not to remain in New York, even though he had been contracted for the 1895-96 school year. His salary was in arrears (a consequence of the financial ‘panic’ of 1893, and when Dvořák and Anna returned to their home in the summer of 1895, they made the decision not to return to the U.S. Dvořák resumed his teaching position at the conservatory in Prague and in 1901 he was named artistic director.



Dvořák

Many who knew Dvořák reported that he suffered from agoraphobia, a condition of extreme anxiety in situations perceived as dangerous or uncomfortable, often associated with crowds. He began to slow down in the years preceding his 63rd birthday. Even his

correspondence became sparse and sporadic. He died in Prague on May 1, 1904, likely from a stroke due to complications of influenza. His death came as a shock to the entire music world. One obituary read, “If it were possible, the Afro-American musicians alone could flood his grave with tears.”

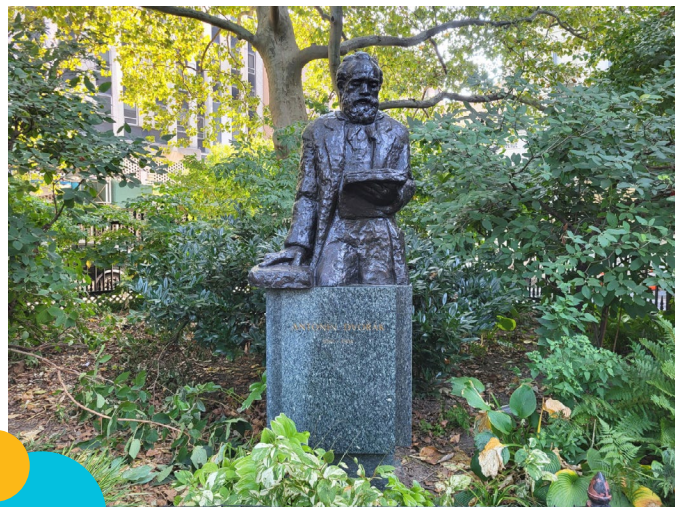
On December 13, 1941, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth, a dedication ceremony took place at the 17th Street residence where Dvořák had lived. A plaque was mounted on the building, and the ceremony was attended by many, including Harry T. Burleigh and New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. In the early 1990s, the building where Dvořák lived was designated a landmark, but the decision was quickly rescinded and in 1991, the building was demolished. Artifacts and memorabilia from the apartment including the commemorative plaque that was once affixed to the side of the building are now exhibited in the Dvořák room of the Bohemian National Hall, located at 321 East 73rd Street in Manhattan. The room is part exhibition and part study room, dedicated to the life and work of Dvořák.



Dvořák room of the Bohemian National Hall in NYC



Dvořák Grave in Prague



Dvořák Statue in Stuyvesant Square Park

JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on November 14 - 16, 2025, to enjoy a thrilling performance of Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B minor, featuring soloist Tommy Messa and Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2, all under the baton of HSO's assistant conductor Adam Kerry Boyles.

Did you borrow this *Prelude*? Get your own free copy! Whether you're a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org. We'll make sure you receive *Prelude* by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!

Interested in listening to more music by Dvořák? Try these suggestions:

We are very familiar with Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 (the New World Symphony) but what of his others? For a change of pace, and a challenge, follow the conductor's score as you enjoy his Symphony No. 2 in B-flat major:

[Dvořák: Symphony No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 4, B 12 \(with Score\)](#)

Do you know Dvořák's wonderfully lyric *Serenade for Strings*? Enjoy this performance by the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra recorded live at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam in 2016:

[Serenade for Strings | Dvořák | Netherlands Chamber Orchestra | Concertgebouw](#)

Perhaps you'd like to try some of Dvořák's chamber works? Try his Piano Quintet No. 2, Op 81, performed at the International Chamber Music Festival in 2019:

[Dvořák: Piano Quintet No. 2, Op. 81 - Janine Jansen - International Chamber Music Festival 2019](#)

Dvořák's compelling *American Quartet* is another wonderful example of his chamber work, performed by the New York Philharmonic String Quartet:

[The New York Philharmonic String Quartet performs Dvořák's American Quartet - YouTube](#)

The HSO performance will include the Cello Concerto in B minor, but Dvořák's first was his Cello Concerto in A Major. Enjoy this performance by Mstislav Rostropovich, with the NHK Symphony conducted by Seiji Ozawa:

[Mstislav Rostropovich:Dvořák Cello Concerto,NHK Symphony Orchestra cond.Seiji Ozawa 小澤征爾 ×ロストロポーヴィチ](#)

Delight in Dvořák's deeply expressive and challenging Violin Concerto in A minor, performed by Joshua Bell:

[Dvorak: Violin Concerto in A minor - Joshua Bell /Jakub Hruška /Bamberg Symphony Orchestra](#)



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

Here is Dvořák's Cello Concerto in B Minor, performed by cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, with the NHK Symphony, conducted by Seiji Ozawa:

[Dvořák Cello Concerto in B minor - Rostropovich - YouTube.](#)

Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2, is performed in its entirety by the Oslo Philharmonic conducted by Vasily Petrenko:

[Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 / Vasily Petrenko / Oslo Philharmonic - YouTube.](#)



Dvořák Stamp



Dvořák Museum in Prague



Dvořák Sheet Music



Dvořák Stamp

SOURCE MATERIAL

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antonin-Dvorak>

<https://www.classicfm.com/composers/dvorak/guides/dvorak-facts/>

<https://www.dvoraknyc.org/bio>

<http://www.antonin-dvorak.cz/en/life>

Jeannette Meyer Thurber | Music Educator, Philanthropist, Arts Advocate | Britannica

MRS. JEANNETTE THURBER; Founded National Conservatory of Music Here in 1885--Dies at 94 - The New York Times

What Happened to Antonín Dvořák's Children?: Their Tragic Stories