

Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

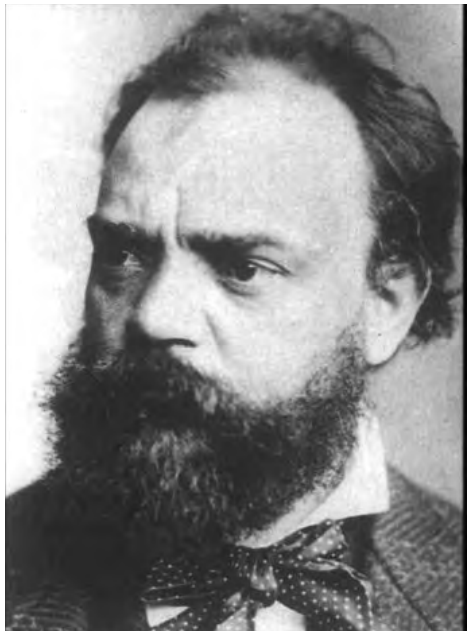
Glancing at the concerto repertoire, it's a wonder cellists don't suffer from a bad case of violinist envy.

Few of the famous pre-Romantic composers, apart from Haydn, bothered to write a concerto for the instrument, and even among later composers there's a relative paucity of choices compared with the almost embarrassing plethora of riches on offer for the pampered violinist. Mozart, for example, wrote five sparkling concertos for the violin but nothing for the cello. Beethoven wrote arguably the world's finest violin concerto but no solo work for the cello (to

soften the blow, he did write a rarely played triple concerto for violin, cello, and piano). Brahms wrote a violin concerto and a double concerto for violin and cello, but again nothing exclusively for the cello.

Dvořák, a contemporary and friend of Brahms, started work on a cello concerto in his younger days but abandoned it after deciding the sound of the instrument was inadequate for the role of soloist. (It was too nasal at the high end and mumbled too much in the bass – cello playing has probably improved by leaps and bounds since those days.) But later in life he had a change of heart, apparently after hearing a new cello concerto by contemporary composer, Victor Herbert, better known these days for his many operettas. It was thus something of an irony that Dvořák eventually produced what is now probably the most beloved of all cello concertos.

The work, which had long been requested by his cellist friend and member of the Bohemian Quartet, Hanuš Wihan, was conceived in 1894 while Dvořák was living in New York. He had been appointed director of the National Conservatory of Music, a now defunct institution, but one that enjoyed its heyday under his tenure. Dvořák's three year sojourn in America proved to be a highly productive period in which he composed some of his most famous works including the New World Symphony, the "American" String Quartet, and this cello concerto. For a man from Bohemia who had acquired



the rudiments of music in his father's butcher's shop and pub, and who had later sat for years playing viola in the pit of the Prague Opera House, Dvořák had traveled far, both figuratively and literally.

Unlike the New World Symphony and American String Quartet, which were notably influenced by his exposure to African-American and Native American music (particularly in their use, for example, of pentatonic scales), the cello concerto hewed more closely to Dvořák's Slavonic roots, a sign perhaps that he was by now yearning to return to his homeland. The expansive first movement opens with one of his most memorable themes, played on clarinet and bassoons with dark accompaniment from violas, cellos, and basses. The orchestral introduction then offers a second theme that the musicologist, Donald Tovey, aptly described as "one of the most beautiful passages ever written for the horn." Finally, the cello solo makes its grand appearance with the first theme and we are then led on our way through the work's rich melodic pastures. While the concerto offers plenty of virtuosic opportunities for the cello soloist, the orchestration is highly symphonic and includes solos for many other instruments within the rest of the orchestra.

While writing the slow second movement Dvořák received word that his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová, for whom he had once had romantic aspirations, was seriously ill and he chose to quote at length, within the movement, one of his songs which had been one of her favorites. The depth of his feeling for her is clearly evident within the music. When she died soon after Dvořák returned home permanently to Bohemia, he decided to add a reflective coda to the final movement, an otherwise lively rondo, as a final tribute to her memory.

Dvořák's friend Wihan made many suggestions on how to "improve" the cello part including replacing this coda with a cadenza, a common soloistic ingredient Dvořák had decided to forgo in this concerto. Perhaps not surprisingly, Dvořák chose to ignore this advice and wrote to his publisher "I give you my work only if you will promise me that no one – not even my friend Wihan – shall make any alteration in it without my knowledge and permission, also that there be no cadenza such as Wihan has made in the last movement; and that its form shall be as I have felt it and thought it out."

Though he rejected Wihan's suggestions, Dvořák still wanted him to give the concerto's first public performance. As it turned out, because of scheduling conflicts, Wihan was unable to do so and the first performance was given instead by Leo Stern in 1896 in London under the baton of the composer. Nevertheless, Wihan later performed the work to great

success and the two remained firm friends. As another fitting symbol of the work's importance, Dvořák's friend and mentor, Brahms, took a keen interest in the cello concerto and even went to the trouble of checking the proofs, a tedious task that one could hardly have expected from such an esteemed musical figure. After playing (on the piano) the concerto with a cellist friend, Brahms was reported as having said: "If I had known that it was possible to compose such a concerto for the cello, I would have tried it myself."

— Julian Brown

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