

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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J. Michael Allsen

This program opens with two works that are heard for the first time at these concerts. Jennifer Higdon's *Loco* is a colorful and intensely rhythmic work...inspired by a commuter train. Cellist Steven Isserlis last appeared with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2007, performing the Schumann *Cello Concerto*. We welcome him back to Overture Hall to perform Kabalevsky's virtuosic *Cello Concerto No. 2*. Our third work has been chosen by *you*, by way of our "audience choice" survey. After intermission, we turn to Dvořák's fine "New World" symphony—a musical response to the composer's extended visit to the United States.

Higdon, one of America's leading composers, wrote this work in 2004, for the Ravinia Festival, among America's most renowned summer festivals, to be played by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Jennifer Higdon

Born: December 31, 1962, Brooklyn, New York.

Loco

- **Composed:** 2004.
- **Premiere:** July 31, 2004, at the Ravinia Festival, by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work
- **Duration:** 8:00.

Background

The Ravinia Festival has a long history with train travel: Ravinia Park was in fact founded by a commuter rail line! This work was commissioned in honor of the Ravinia train, which links the festival with downtown Chicago.

Jennifer Higdon is among America's most successful contemporary composers. Born in Brooklyn, she studied flute at Bowling Green State University and composition at both the University of Pennsylvania and at the Curtis Institute, where she taught until 2021. In 2010, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her *Violin Concerto*, one of many honors she has garnered in the past twenty years. In just the

last few years, her first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the prestigious International Opera Award for Best World Premiere in 2016—the first American opera to do so in the award’s history. Within the past two years, Higdon has had successful premieres of her *Double Percussion Concerto* with the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the *Cold Mountain Suite* with the Delaware Symphony, and *The Absence, Remember*, a choral work commissioned by several choruses. She is among America’s most frequently-programmed composers, and her *blue cathedral* is among the most often-played pieces of contemporary music, receiving well over 600 performances since its premiere in 2000 (including a performance by the MSO in 2013).

As electric railways and trolley lines began to spread across American cities at the turn of the 20th century, it was relatively common for the operators of these new lines to open amusement parks and other attractions that could be easily reached by rail. This was a public service, providing leisure activities to people from all levels of society...but it was also good business, increasing ridership on weekends, holidays and during the summer. In 1904, the newly-established Chicago and Milwaukee Electric Railroad opened Ravinia Park in Chicago’s northern suburb of Highland Park. Music was a centerpiece of the activities at Ravinia from the beginning, with opera performances and concerts by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. (Ravinia became the CSO’s official summer residence in 1936.) Today, the Ravinia Festival bills itself as “the oldest and most programmatically diverse music festival in North America.” And the train—which is free to ticket-holders—is *still* the best way to get there from downtown Chicago! *Loco* was commissioned by the Ravinia Festival to celebrate the Ravinia Train.

What You’ll Hear

A brisk “curtain-raiser,” *Loco* is an entertaining and rhythmically intense piece that subtly refers to the sound and motion of a rail journey.

In describing the work Higdon noted: “*Loco* celebrates the Centennial season of Ravinia, and the train that accompanies the orchestra. When thinking about what kind of piece to write, I saw in my imagination a locomotive. And in a truly ironic move for a composer, my brain subtracted the word ‘motive,’ leaving ‘loco,’ which means crazy. Being a composer, this appealed to me, so this piece is about locomotion as crazy movement!” This intense eight-minute work evokes the train in machine-like writing across sections and in small details, like the “Doppler effect” train horns from the trombones.

This concerto is generally considered to be among Kabalevsky's finest orchestral works: an emotional showpiece for the cello, with a beauty that sometimes rough-edged.

Dmitri Kabalevsky

Born: December 30, 1904, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Died: February 14, 1987, Moscow, Russia.

Concerto No. 2 in E minor for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 77

- **Composed:** 1964 .
- **Premiere:** Cellist Daniil Shafran, to whom the score is dedicated, played the first performance in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in 1965, under the direction of the composer.
- **Previous MSO performance:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 29:00.

Background

Kabalevsky wrote this work for the Soviet cellist Daniil Shafran.

Dmitri Kabalevsky was one of the leading composers of the Soviet Union, and worked comfortably for his entire career in the restrictive atmosphere of Soviet music. Kabalevsky's musical style was never even remotely "modernist" and suited perfectly the ideal that music should be uplifting and in service of the people. A loyal member of the Communist Party, he enthusiastically supported Soviet musical policies, and held several important political positions and editorships. Interested in the cause of education, Kabalevsky also helped to formulate the Soviet music education system, writing dozens of works for children's choir, and later in his career, influential books on teaching music.

Kabalevsky wrote his first cello concerto in 1949, as part of a trio of works—with his third piano concerto and violin concerto—that the education-minded composer had created with accessibility to younger players in mind. (I'll note that all three of these works have been performed over the years by young soloists at MSO youth programs.) The second concerto was an entirely different sort of piece, written for a specific virtuoso, Daniil Shafran (1923-1997). Shafran was among the most prominent soloists in the Soviet Union, and was known as a peer and sometime competitor to his contemporary, Mstislav Rostropovich. Kabalevsky was particularly pleased by a 1954 recording of the *Cello Concerto No. 1* by Shafran. Ten years later, he dedicated the *Cello Concerto No. 2* to the cellist, and Shafran played its premiere and first recording under the direction of Kabalevsky.

What You'll Hear

The concerto is in three movements, played without pauses:

- A lengthy opening movement with slow opening and closing sections surrounding a wild middle. It ends with a solo cadenza.
- A fast-paced scherzo, also ending with a cadenza.
- A finale that explores themes from previous movements before ending quietly.

The first movement opens mysteriously (*Molto sostenuto*): a *pizzicato* melody from the soloist above long-held bass tones. This melody is played twice more, by flutes and then by violins, with a passionate overlay from the soloist. A fourth statement is interrupted by a sudden change in tempo (*Allegro molto e energico*) and a furious and angular melody from the cello. The tempo eventually slows and the cello lays out a melancholy melody. The movement ends with a large solo cadenza, which leads into the second movement (*Presto marcato*). This begins with aggressive music led by a solo alto saxophone. The cello takes up this idea, and plays fierce perpetual motion above the shifting rhythms of the orchestra. The forward motion is halted momentarily by a strident brass statement, but the cello soon launches into another fast-paced countermelody. Once again, Kabalevsky uses an extended solo cadenza as a bridge into the next movement. The closing movement begins quietly (*Andante con moto*) with a lyrical cello line. As the tempo quickens (*Allegro*), Kabalevsky refers to ideas from the previous movements, before the piece ends calmly and quietly.

Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9*, his last and most enduringly popular symphony, was written during an enjoyable three-year stay in America in the 1890s.

Antonín Dvořák

Born: September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, Czech Republic.

Died: May 1, 1904, Prague, Czech Republic.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op.95 (From the New World)

- **Composed:** During the winter and spring of 1892-93 in New York City.
- **Premiere:** December 16, 1893, by the New York Philharmonic, Anton Seidl conducting.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 1930, 1935, 1975, 1994, 2005, 2014, and 2017.
- **Duration:** 40:00.

The symphony is partly a response to his time in the New World.” Dvořák was fascinated by American culture and music, and there are few distinctly American elements in this work.

Background

In 1892, Jeannette Thurber made Dvořák an offer he couldn't refuse. Thurber, the wife of a wealthy New York businessman, had a dream of raising the standards of American art music to equal those of Europe. She had founded the National Conservatory of Music in 1885, and recruited some of the finest teachers in the world to serve on its faculty. At this time, Dvořák's reputation among American musicians was surpassed only by that of Brahms, and Thurber resolved to hire him as the director of the Conservatory. Dvořák was lukewarm at first, but the terms she offered were very generous: a two-year contract, with very light teaching duties and four months' paid leave each year. The annual salary, \$15,000, was about 25 times what Dvořák was making as an instructor at the Prague Conservatory, and in the end he accepted, eventually spending about three years in this country.

Dvořák enjoyed this American sojourn. American audiences adored his music, and he blended comfortably into New York society. He spent two summers in the small town of Spillville, Iowa, where he felt at home in a large Bohemian community. He had several promising composition students at the Conservatory, and agreed heartily with Thurber's ideal that American composers should foster their own distinctive style of composition. He wrote that:

“My own duty as a teacher is not so much to interpret Beethoven, Wagner, and other masters of the past, but to give what encouragement I can to the young musicians of America... this nation has already surpassed so many others in marvelous inventions and feats of engineering and commerce, and it has made an honorable place for itself in literature—so it must assert itself in the other arts, and especially in the art of music.”

The “New World” symphony is the most famous of the works Dvořák composed while in America. According to Thurber, the symphony was written at her suggestion—she felt that Dvořák should write a symphony “...embodying his experiences and feelings in America.” It was an immediate hit with audiences in both America and Europe. The new symphony closely matched the style of his other late symphonies, a style based on the German symphonic style of his mentor, Brahms, and with occasional hints of Bohemian folk style. There are a few “Americanisms” in the *Symphony No. 9*, however. As a strongly nationalistic

Bohemian, Dvořák had always brought the spirit of his homeland into his works by bringing in folk tunes, and by more generally imitating the sound of Bohemian music. According to his own account of the work's composition, Dvořák attempted to do the same with regards to American music in the *Symphony No. 9*, and he was particularly interested in two forms of music that had their origins on this side of the Atlantic: Native American music and African American spirituals. Dvořák frequently quizzed one his students at the National Conservatory, a talented young Black singer named Harry T. Burleigh, about spirituals, and he dutifully transcribed every spiritual tune Burleigh knew. His contact with Native American music was a little more tenuous—most of what Dvořák knew came from rather dubious published transcriptions. (The only time he ever heard an “authentic” American Indian performance was when he went to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show!) While he did not use any true American melodies in the symphony, Dvořák immersed himself in American music and culture, and wrote musical themes from this inspiration. At its heart, however, the *Symphony No. 9* is a work “*From the New World*” by an Old World composer. Dvořák was not trying to create an “American Style”—he firmly believed that that was a job for American composers.

The symphony is in four movements:

- An extended movement in sonata form with a slow introduction. Its bold main theme, introduced by the horns will appear as a musical motto in all four movements.
- A slow movement, whose lovely main theme evokes the sound of a spiritual.
- A lively scherzo.
- A fiery finale in sonata form, which recalls themes from earlier movement in its closing section.

What You'll Hear

The opening movement begins with an *Adagio* introduction, which gradually speeds and resolves into the main body of the movement (*Allegro molto*). Dvořák immediately announces the main theme, a distinctive motto that will appear, in one form or another, in every movement of the symphony. This bold E minor theme is first played by the horns, and then expanded by the strings. He introduces two contrasting melodies, a dance-like minor-key melody in, introduced by the oboe, and somewhat brighter theme heard in the solo flute. This sonata-form movement features a lengthy development section, which focuses on the motto theme. After a conventional recapitulation, there is a long coda, which again explores the motto theme.

There are a few programmatic elements in the *Symphony No. 9*. According to Dvořák, the second and third movements were inspired by Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*; in the *Largo* it is *Hiawatha's* "Funeral in the Forest." This movement is set in a broad three-part form. It opens with a solemn brass chorale, which leads into the movement's main theme, a long Romantic melody played by the English horn. (This melody became popular as nostalgic song called *Goin' Home*—so popular, in fact, that it was widely assumed that it was a traditional spiritual that Dvořák had quoted!) The contrasting middle section features a more pensive melody heard first in the flute. The movement ends with a return of the English horn melody.

Dvořák again referred to *Hiawatha* in the Scherzo (*Molto vivace*), stating that this movement was supposed to depict "...a feast in the wood, where the Indians dance." The first section features two main themes, an offbeat melody introduced by solo woodwinds and a more lyrical melody played by the woodwinds as a section. Echoes of the motto theme lead gradually into a central trio. The trio section is certain dancelike, but its waltz-style themes seem to have a lot more to do with a Viennese ballroom than an American Indian dance. The opening section returns, and Dvořák closes the movement with more reminiscences of the motto theme.

The finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) begins with a few stormy introductory measures, and then Dvořák brings in the main theme in the brass. After this powerful theme, there is a more lyrical melody in the solo clarinet. Dvořák set the finale in sonata form, but he used the lengthy development not only to work with this movement's themes, but also to develop music from previous movements. In particular, we hear versions of the motto and a faster reading of the *Largo's* main theme. After recapitulating the fourth movement's main themes, Dvořák launches into a huge coda, which again brings back material from previous movements.