

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Dvorak's New World Symphony

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SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR (1875-1912) **HIAWATHA: SUITE FROM THE BALLET MUSIC**

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor will always be remembered as a better composer than businessman. After finishing his soon-to-be-famous cantata, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* in 1898, he sold the publishing rights for a one-time fee. The score was a hit and sold more than 200,000 copies, and while it made him famous, the royalties went elsewhere. The frustrated artist traded a life of relative ease for an exhausting workload that, many believe, led to his death from pneumonia at age 37.

"If I had retained my rights in the *Hiawatha* music," he once lamented, "I should have been a rich man."

Coleridge-Taylor was born in Croydon, England, the child of a Black doctor from Sierra Leone and a white Englishwoman, who named her son after the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His musical gifts were apparent at age 5, when he was given a violin and began singing in the choir of the local Presbyterian church. At 15, he enrolled in London's Royal College of Music – one of its first Black students – putting aside the fiddle to focus on composition.

Of his more than 100 works, a handful are considered American originals: the *Petite Suite*, the *African Dances*, the *Clarinet Quintet*, and the warmly lyrical *Violin Concerto*. Edward Elgar called him "the cleverest fellow" among the young composers in England at the time, and his teacher Charles Villiers Stanford praised his "assured technique and stylistic panache."

Coleridge-Taylor based his cantata on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* from 1855, the first part of the composer's choral trilogy based on the epic poem. Its overnight success made the composer a man in demand, including in the United States, where he made three conducting tours. His celebrity reached its height in 1904 with an invitation to meet with President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House.

The Suite from the *Hiawatha Ballet* is in six short sections: The Wooing, the Marriage Feast, Bird Scene, Conjurors' Dance, the Departure, and Reunion. Coleridge-Taylor's adaptation of Longfellow is rich and radiant, full of rhythmic variations that unfold like a set of country dances. The composer said he wanted to capture the poem's "native simplicity, unaffected expression and unforced realism."

"It's terrific music but under-heard these days, so I'm glad to be able to present it," says Thomas Wilkins, former resident conductor of TFO who directs this weekend's Masterworks program. "It's a wonderful match with the Dvorak because they were contemporaries."

ANTONIN DVORAK (1841-1904)
SYMPHONY NO. 9 IN E MINOR, OP. 95, FROM THE NEW WORLD

Any music lover who happened to be in New York in December of 1893 no doubt craved a ticket to Carnegie Hall, which opened with great fanfare two years earlier. The famed Bohemian composer, Antonin Dvorak, was in town for an occasion of special significance: the world premiere of his *Symphony No. 9*, composed on American soil and aptly titled *From the New World*.

Dvorak was a musician of major status – even Brahms praised his work – and his *Seventh* and *Eighth* symphonies had become repertoire standards, and remain so today. But the *Ninth* was special. Dvorak's confidence and artistic skills were at their peak, and he reportedly had infused African-American spiritual tunes into this fresh score. Dvorak served as head of the National Conservatory of Music in New York for three years, and during this time felt he should express an American sentiment. While he never directly quoted native American tunes, his reference to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* at the end of the first movement exposition is, well, undeniable.

“Dvorak couldn't have written this piece if he had not been on American soil,” says Thomas Wilkins, guest conductor for this weekend's performances. “And its two influences – Black and Native American – make it a great parallel with the Coleridge on this program.”

For inspiration, Dvorak turned to Henry Thacker Burleigh, an African-American student at the National Conservatory, who sang to the composer indigenous spirituals and southern plantation songs.

In his 2005 book *Classical Music in America: A History of its Rise and Fall*, Joseph Horowitz notes how the *Ninth* is distinctly American in flavor, yet at the same time manifestly European. This was, of course, an astounding feat coming from a composer so deeply rooted in Slavic idioms. The premiere of the *Ninth* also prompted one of the most elaborate music reviews in the history of newspapers, a 3,000-word essay by the eminent critic William J. Henderson, who raised the question of whether the symphony was in the least bit American.

The composer and critic Virgil Thomson, in a 1950 review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, called the symphony the “work of a European landscape painter charmed by American subjects,” and praised it as “intrinsically tender and imaginative.”

Dvorak cast the *Ninth* in the standard four movements of the classical symphony, although some have accused him of a patchwork style that merely strings together enchanting tunes. What they failed to understand is the power and momentum Dvorak lends to these tunes; from the start, the adagio grabs listeners by the ears and nearly pulls them from their seats. The largo that follows features a sumptuous solo for the cor anglais (English horn) and is the basis for the spiritual *Goin' Home*.

The scherzo is a rousing moment with timpani that mirrors the scherzo of Beethoven's own *Ninth Symphony*, and this leads directly into a propulsive finale, appropriately marked *allegro con fuoco*. The bracing themes and rhythms sound like horses galloping through a field, and the movement builds excitement as it leads to one of the more thrilling climaxes in the orchestral repertoire.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, former music critic for the Tampa Tribune who has covered the area's arts scene for 40 years.