

La forza del destino Overture [1862] Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

La forza del destino, Verdi's 22nd opera, was commissioned by the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg where it premiered in 1862. Verdi was at the height of his powers, having achieved well-deserved success with the masterpieces of his middle period, *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*. In each of these works, Verdi's scoring for the orchestra became more dramatic, and he used repeated musical phrases to underscore dramatic situations, not simply to recall them, but to heighten the dramatic development of the plot by demonstrating a similarity with or contrast to an earlier scene. Verdi incorporates these developments in *La forza del destino*, and, as described by the musicologist Donald Jay Grout, Verdi progresses toward the long-breathed, broadly rhythmed, and infinitely expressive melody which is associated with the composer's later style.

The opera's overture, which, at the St. Petersburg premiere, was only a short introductory prelude, was considerably expanded for the performance of a revised version of the opera at the Teatro alla Scala in 1869. The longer version—the one that remains in the repertoire—is considered one of Verdi's finest overtures, as it seamlessly sets the overall mood of the somber and dramatic story that follows, weaving in several of the opera's sumptuous arias. To begin, the brass intone an ominous three-note warning of doom, immediately followed by vigorous music that foretells the action-packed plot to come. Interspersed among the musical excitement are lyric themes sung by a mournful oboe, a cantabile clarinet, and shimmering strings. Before the overture's stirring conclusion, the brass intone a grand chorale, perfectly appropriate to the plot's tragic ending that takes place in a monastery. The overture is packed full of both dangerous and lovely music, as the work's plot is packed full of thwarted love, cursed fate, vengeful action, and tragic death. And it was Verdi's gift that from such doleful elements would spring such moving music.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in E Minor (Op. 1) Jules Conus (1869-1942)

The brilliant Violin Concerto No. 1, by the Russian violinist and composer Julius Conus, is a work that once flourished on the international concert stage, sharing the spotlight with the great romantic concertos for the violin, those by Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky. The work premiered in Moscow in 1898, with the composer as soloist, and was received with great acclaim. In the early 20th century, the work was performed for international audiences by such masters of the instrument as Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz (the latter's recording of the concerto is considered to be the definitive performance). In recent years, for reasons impossible to explain, performances of the work in the standard symphonic repertoire have dwindled, but within the violinist community, the concerto remains well known and the occasional performance always receives a hearty reception.

Jules Conus (also known as Julius or Julien) was born in Moscow to a musical family of French heritage; his father taught piano and his two brothers also became professional musicians. Jules and his brothers studied at the Moscow Conservatory, where Jules met Tchaikovsky, who became a life-long friend and mentor. After graduation, and a stint in Paris with the Opera Orchestra, Jules moved to New York, where Tchaikovsky had

arranged for him to be the second concertmaster of the New York Symphony Society Orchestra (now the New York Philharmonic), sharing a stand with Adolf Brodsky, who had premiered Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto a decade earlier. Conus stayed in New York for about two years, returning to Moscow in 1893, where he taught violin, performed, and composed. The Violin Concerto, his first published work, was completed in 1896 and was eventually performed in Moscow with the composer as soloist.

The work is loosely structured along the lines of the three-movement concerto form, with its standard fast, slow, and fast sections. However, Conus' piece is performed as one unit without a break, and an extensive cadenza is placed between the second and third sections, rather than at the more traditional placement following the first movement. Musically, the work blends French and Russian styles with its use of yearning chromatic harmony and romantic Russian themes of great pathos. Like Mendelssohn's violin concerto, Conus' work is written in the key of E minor, a favorite sweet-spot key of the violin, as it utilizes the full resonance of the lowest open G string and the high, bell-like harmonic of the E-string double octave at the end of the instrument's fingerboard. In between these extremes, the concerto is an effective and brilliant showcase for the fireworks of which the violin is capable. But the piece does more than simply show off the performer's virtuosity, as the elegance and passion of its voluptuous melodies are what ultimately linger in the listener's ear.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, "From the New World" Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904)

When Antonin Dvořák, with his wife and eldest daughter and son, disembarked at Hoboken, NJ, in late 1892, having accepted the position of Director of the National Conservatory of Music of New York, he was at the height of his career as a conductor, teacher, and composer. Only a short time prior, he had accepted the position of professor of composition, instrumentation, and musical form at the Prague Conservatory, having enjoyed immense acclaim in the performance of his music throughout his native Bohemia, Germany, Russia, and England. It was due to the dogged persistence and generosity of Mrs. Jeannette Thurber, the wealthy heiress to a grocery fortune who was intent on establishing a high-quality music school in New York that would develop a national school of composition, that Dvořák was coaxed to leave his newly appointed position in Prague and settle in North America for what would turn out to be a three-year stay.

Dvořák began sketches of what would be his 9th and last symphony almost immediately upon his arrival in New York, and the work was fully sketched out by the following May, as he was enjoying an early summer vacation at a Bohemian colony in Spillville, Iowa. In November, the completed score was entrusted to the very capable hands of Anton Seidl, a Hungarian who was one of the great conductors of the time, associated with the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The premiere took place in the relatively new Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893, and resulted in the greatest public triumph of Dvořák's life; he wrote to his German publisher, Fritz Simrock, "I had to show my gratitude like a king from the box in which I sat." A review of the symphony written by Henry T. Finck in the New York Evening Post opined: "Any one who heard it could not deny that it is the greatest symphonic work ever composed in this country. . . . A masterwork has been added to the symphonic literature." Yet, along with his praise,

Finck, the astute critic, asked, “But is it American?” While composing the work, Dvořák had written to a friend that “[it] pleases me very much and will differ very substantially from my early compositions. The *influence* of America can readily be felt by anyone with ‘a nose.’ ” It was not until the time of the hand-off to Seidl that Dvořák had added the work’s subtitle, “From the New World.”

In a number of interviews with the *New York Herald*, Dvořák had declared,

I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. . . . When first I came here, I was impressed with the idea, and it has developed into a settled conviction. These beautiful and varied themes are a product of the soil. They are American. They are the folk songs of America. . . . In the Negro melodies of America, I discovered all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay, gracious, or what you will. . . . There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot find a thematic source here.

Equally, Dvořák found inspiration in the legends and music of the Native Americans. He was an admirer of Longfellow’s tragic *The Song of Hiawatha* and had made some effort at using it as the libretto for an opera. The opera never materialized, but a few themes he had sketched for an opera found their way into the “New World” Symphony, themes that use the pentatonic (five-tone) and modal scale. Dvořák declared that the now famous English horn melody of the Largo had been inspired by the scene of the forest funeral of the Dakota woman, Minnehaha, the lover of the poem’s title character. The 3rd movement, Scherzo, “was suggested by the scene at the feast in *Hiawatha* where the Indians dance, and is also an essay I made in the direction of imparting the local color of Indian character to music.” Four days before the work’s premiere, Dvořák declared in another interview: “It is this spirit which 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 rhythm, harmony, counterpoint and orchestral color.” As for the work’s “New World” subtitle, Dvořák later explained that he meant “impressions and greetings from the New World.”

Careful listeners will surely hear the similarity of the first movement’s theme to the African-American spiritual, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and musicologists are able to identify a few other resemblances to less familiar songs of the time, but as a whole, the Symphony is not a paraphrase or collage of existing folk melodies; it is a unified work built on the European symphonic structure, imbued with yearning and, according to the late conductor, Kurt Masur, the pain of homesickness. Had the work, absent its subtitle, been given its premiere in Prague, it is unlikely that any connection would have been made with the music of America; indeed, Czech listeners are prone to finding the “New World” Symphony rich with inflections of their own folk music. As such, the listener is advised to experience the symphony as music of “All Worlds,” without a preconceived program and without a mental checklist of musical bits to identify and catalogue. The

overall unity, grandeur, and pathos of the work are best heard with fresh ears and an open mind and heart.
