ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104, B. 191
BORN: September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, Bohemia
DIED: May 1, 1904, in Prague
WORK COMPOSED: 1894–95
WORLD PREMIERE: March 19, 1896, in London. Leo Stern was the soloist, and the composer led the London Philharmonic Society Orchestra.

In 1896 Johannes Brahms received a guest at his home in Vienna. Robert Hausmann was one of the leading cellists of his day and had given the first performance of Brahms’ Double Concerto for violin and cello. Now, with Brahms playing the orchestra part at the piano, he read through a new work, a cello concerto by Antonín Dvořák. When they had finished Brahms, who was near the end of his life and widely celebrated as the greatest living composer, reportedly exclaimed: “Why on earth didn’t I know one could write a cello concerto like this? If I had, I would have composed one long ago.”

Perhaps. But even if Brahms had written such a work, it would not have sounded like Dvořák’s masterpiece, which remains one of the very finest concertos in the cello’s repertory. Dvořák was born into a humble peasant family Bohemia, the largest part of today’s Czech Republic, and he retained strong patriotic feelings throughout his life. Pride in his homeland and cultural heritage led him to use melodic inflections derived from Czech folk music in many of his compositions. There is, as a result, a strong national flavor to those works, a quality that sets them apart from the more cosmopolitan character of Brahms’ music and that of most other major composers of his time.

Yet there is nothing provincial about Dvořák’s output. Although Brahms praised him as “a spontaneous talent who knows from inside himself what is right,” the Czech composer had worked long and hard to master the forms and techniques of the symphony, concerto and other classical genres. Fusing folk-like themes with highly developed musical architecture can prove trite in the hands of lesser composers, but with Dvořák it produced music that is melodious, colorful and intellectually arresting. Indeed, it was his ability to use the distinctly Czech elements of his style within the most advanced tonal forms and language of his day that elevated Dvořák from a regional artist to an important international one. The Cello Concerto is among the finest examples of this stylistic synthesis. Dvořák composed the work in 1895, near the end of his three-year stay in America, a sojourn that also produced his famous “New World” Symphony.

The composition follows the standard concerto design of three movements. The first, a broad Allegro, begins with paragraph for the orchestra, which sets forth the movement’s themes. The entrance of the solo instrument is marked “Quasi improvisando,” but the independent character this suggests is quickly subordinated to a more cooperative one. Indeed, the extent to which the solo part blends with that of the orchestra is one of this concerto’s outstanding features. There follows an expressively varied and complex slow movement, then a finale in which Dvořák recalls material heard earlier in the piece, a procedure he also used in his “New World” Symphony.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Dvořák builds the initial theme of the first movement through successive statements, each less tentative and more fully scored, so that the third sounds as a grand orchestral tutti. The second subject, first heard as a horn solo, is as lyrical as the first is grave, its melodic outline recalling the famous English horn melody in Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony.
The ensuing slow movement opens with a tender theme traded between clarinet and solo cello, but the peaceful atmosphere is disturbed as the orchestra interrupts loudly in the minor mode. Here Dvořák quotes one of his own songs. It had been a favorite of the composer’s sister-in-law, who died while he was working on the concerto, and Dvořák included its melody here as a tribute to her.

The finale, which is built around a march-like theme, adheres closely to classic rondo form in its use of a recurring principal subject that alternates with contrasting episodes. Finally, Dvořák adds a coda section in which he recalls material from the previous movements. We hear in the clarinets a recollection of the concerto’s opening measures, as well as a variant of the song melody from the second movement, before the work swells to its conclusion.

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