

Timothy Cheek
Assistant Professor
University of Michigan, School of Music
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The Songs of Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904): Czech Culture, Style, and Performance

Relevance and contribution to field

The one-hundred-twelve songs of Czech composer Antonin Dvorak constitute a body of work that reflects the culture of the times, both in terms of its musical style and in terms of its poetry, which spans over three-hundred years of Czech history. The songs should have the international acclaim of most of Dvorak's music, but the language barrier and the interference of Zdenek Nejedly, Minister of Culture in the 1950's, dampened study of these works. This project sought to examine the songs textually, culturally, and stylistically to give them the renown and accessibility they deserve, and to display them as the mirror of Czech culture that they are.

Little has been written about Dvorak's songs, and most of what was written was in Czech in the early twentieth century. My research, which should bear fruit in teaching, lectures, performances, and publications, helps fill a large gap in scholarly work, and has the advantage of historical perspective. New critical editions of the songs, some of which have never been published, are planned for 2011. My work, then, will also help provide a basis for a better understanding of Dvorak's songs in time for these long overdue editions. All of the one-hundred-twelve songs will finally be accessible in print, and through my research also accessible internationally for performers and scholars.

Summary of approach and research methodology

Research in libraries and archives, which was to have taken up the first half of my four-month grant, ended up requiring the entire four months. On-hands work at the piano with Czech singers was sacrificed, then, as one question led to another and a wealth of resources opened up before me. The results, however, were excellent. My approach was as follows:

(1) I began my grant period by attending an international conference on Dvorak in Prague, September 8—11, 2004, at the Czech National Museum, the Museum of Czech Music, and the Dvorak Museum. Besides gaining new insights from hearing papers, I was able to consult leading Dvorak scholars, and begin my research with several new questions and new contacts, including Czech musicologist Jarmila Gabrielova, editorial head of the new planned editions of Dvorak's works.

(2) Study of Dvorak's original manuscripts was carried out at the Antonin Dvorak Museum, Prague; the Prague Conservatory archives; and the Moravian Museum, Brno.

(3) Study in libraries was made at: Prague City Library, National Library, Czech Music Library (a brand new, state-of-the-art building), and the Kralupy nad Vltavou City Library (very near Dvorak's childhood home).

(4) Scholars consulted in Prague were: David Beveridge, Jan Dehner, Jarmila Gabrielova, Alan Houtchens, Bohuslava Jelinkova, Ales Kanka, and Jan Smazny.

(5) Scholar consulted in Brno was: Milan Jelinek.

(6) Interview with Radoslav Kvapil, pianist, who performed the world premiere of Dvorak's first song cycle *Cyprise* [Cypresses], was carried out in Prague.

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

(1) One question I had was: "Did the Czech Minister of Culture in the 1950's, Zdenek Nejedly (who despised Dvorak and even forbade performances of some of his works) cause any of the editions of Dvorak's songs to be altered, musically or textually?" Such had been the case, for example, in the Soviet Union. The answer with Dvorak, however, is "no." Perhaps Nejedly's policies are to blame for a low amount of copies of some songs (only four hundred printed for worldwide distribution), but the scholarship was excellent.

(2) Historical perspective now allows Czech scholars to accept Dvorak's often flawed setting of Czech declamation. This means that Dvorak's first songs, the cycle of eighteen songs called *Cyprise*, will finally be published, in 2011, adding a beautiful Czech musical work to the international repertoire.

(3) About one fifth of Dvorak's songs have never been published. I found one reason for this to be petty competition among Czech music publishers—to avoid complications, competing parties simply postpone publications indefinitely, even though Dvorak's works are in the public domain! Manuscripts will not be released to foreign publishers, either.

(4) The pressure for Dvorak, a Czech nationalist, to write for a German audience was enormous. This meant that songs in Czech had to be singable in German, one reason for some of the Czech declamation problems.

(5) Dvorak's accomplishments were truly remarkable, in that he was able to meet the demands of publishers, write in a style that was internationally popular, pay particular attention to the needs of the German market, be true to the nationalistic ideals of his Czech homeland, and satisfy his innermost artistic goals. This

accomplishment is most extraordinary in the case of his songs, because their creation began so specifically with Czech words.

Some of Dvorak's songs, such as the *Gypsy Songs* and the *Moravian Duets*, had actually entered the German repertoire and from there attained international renown. However, singers are now more skilled in singing in various languages, so Czech vocal music is almost mainstream internationally in the original language. For Dvorak, the timing is perfect—one hundred years after his death we can now see his songs as true reflections of Czech culture, accessible, rewarding, and enlightening across many cultures.

(6) I foresee writing two books as a result of this research:

- (a) A book on the *Moravian Duets*, which launched Dvorak's international renown. With them began his lifelong association with Brahms and the German publisher Simrock, and they established a marketable style. Also, each of the twenty-three duets is a snapshot of Czech culture, as the texts are from folk poetry from villages and towns throughout Moravia, rich in folk symbolism, Czech history, and dialects. Dvorak's music also employs various Czech dance rhythms.
- (b) A book on the solo songs. Dvorak set some of the best Czech poetry of his time and earlier, spanning five-hundred years. They truly reflect Czech culture of his era and earlier.

Besides addressing historical, cultural, and musical issues, both books will contain English word-for-word translations and pronunciation, to aid performers and scholars.

V. Suggestions for future research agendas in music for the scholarly community

More needs to be done to bring to light the works and lives of the interwar Czech composers, many of them Jewish, such as Pavel Haas and Gideon Klein. They are receiving more and more attention, but their vocal repertoire truly reflects the culture and times of the era. They were virtually ignored by Czechoslovakia since World War II.