Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, op. 95 (“From the New World”)

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, strings

Duration: 40 minutes in four movements.

THE COMPOSER – ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904) – In 1891, Dvořák was offered a position at the National Conservatory of Music in New York. America was country already greatly enamored of his music and the Conservatory leaders were intensely interested in his nationalistic voice as an artist. In a country without its own established musical identity, his example could have a powerful effect. Dvořák was fully aware of this hope and took the desires of his hosts quite seriously.

THE HISTORY – Two months after his arrival in the States, Dvořák wrote to a friend. “The Americans expect great things from me,” he acknowledged, adding, “I am to show them a way into… the realm of a new, independent art.” Hardly daunted, he felt inspired to succeed and immediately sought out samples of American folk idioms. Dvořák found a wealth of possibility in the spirituals of the African-American tradition as well as the culture of the continent’s Native people. He believed the future of American music to be dependent on these two sources, that they were a “product of the soil” and that young composers should turn always to them if they wished to “express the true sentiment of [their] people.” The heartfelt Symphony No. 9 (1893) grew out of this fascination and created a representation of the “New World” that hardly seemed possible from the pen of a guest, even a pen as talented as Dvořák’s. Many of the themes in the symphony appeared to be folk quotations but Dvořák was insistent that he crafted them from scratch, using his deep study of our indigenous melodies as a guide. So natural were his distillations of our heritage that, even today, this can be difficult to accept. The finest example of this effect comes from the Symphony’s famous Largo movement and the music we now know familiarly as “Goin’ Home.” Though it is easy to imagine this as a pre-existing Negro Spiritual, one already present in America for decades, the words to this distinctive tune were actually added later by William Arms Fisher. Whatever the provenance of his source material, Dvořák gifted America with a masterpiece, one that delighted in the charms of our nation and celebrated its unique musical soul.

THE WORLD – 1893 was the year of the World’s Fair in Chicago, the first ever vehicle license plates in Paris, the fall of the Hawaiian monarchy and the publication of Oscar Wilde’s controversial play Salome.