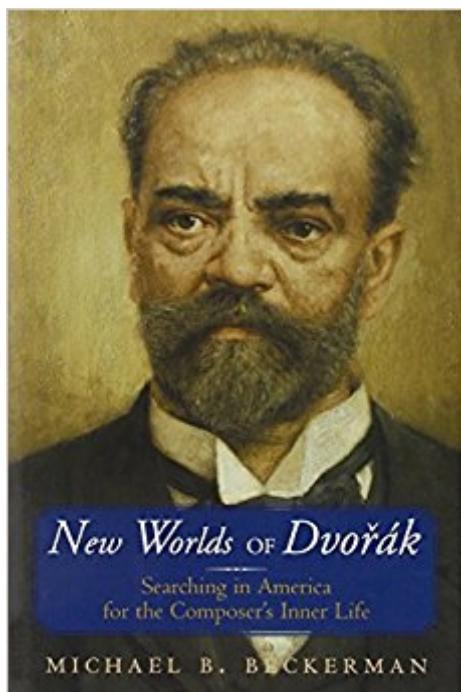


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# New Worlds Of Dvorak: Searching In America For The Composer's Inner Life



## Synopsis

A forceful reinterpretation of the composer's personality and work. Focusing on Dvorák's eventful stay in the United States from 1892 to 1895, this book explores the world behind the public legend, offering fresh insights into the composer's music. We see the traditional image—that of a simple Czech fellow with a flair for composing symphonic and chamber music—give way to one of a complex figure writing works filled with hidden drama and secret programs. In his cogent examination of Dvorák's state of mind, Michael B. Beckerman, a noted scholar of Czech music, concludes that the composer suffered from a debilitating and previously unexplored anxiety disorder during his American sojourn. Using Dvorák as a model, he argues convincingly that the biographical images we carry of composers condition the way we approach their music. *New Worlds of Dvorák* also presents us with a wealth of new information about the origins of the composer's "New World" Symphony, its strong relationship (in the face of Dvorák's denials) to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, the *Hiawatha* opera that the composer envisioned but did not write, and the "Negro themes" that Dvorák claimed as a strong influence on his American works. Along the way we are introduced to a cast of characters that could easily spring from the pages of a novel. First there is Jeannette Thurber, a wealthy New Yorker who founded a music conservatory and persuaded Dvorák to direct it. We meet Henry T. Burleigh, a black composer of art music, who sang African American spirituals to Dvorák. Among the critics of the day who wrote endlessly about the Czech composer and his "American" symphony, we meet James Huneker, who derided Dvorák's claim that his music was American, even though Huneker himself played a major role in acquainting Dvorák with African American songs. We learn that Huneker was not quite the villain he has been made out to be in the Dvorák saga. We also meet the newspaperman James Creelman, who was nurtured under Pulitzer and Hearst and was an early proponent of "yellow journalism," in which the journalist plays an active role in the story being reported. Finally, we meet Henry Krehbiel, who became a friend of Dvorák's and who saw the music critic as mediator between the musician and the public, arousing interest and paving the way to popular comprehension of concert music. In this forceful reinterpretation of the composer's personality and work, readers will gain a rich new view of Dvorák that will deepen their understanding of his works, especially the "New World" Symphony and the other compositions dating from his American years. "After having done extensive research on Dvorák and writing my novel *Dvorák in Love*, I thought I knew everything there was to know about the composer. Now Michael Beckerman's brilliant *New Worlds of Dvorák* shows me the size and number of gaps in my knowledge. . . . The CD included with the volume . . . makes it easy even for readers with not much

musical education to follow Beckerman's arguments and thus experience the pleasant shock of discovering the deepest and subtlest aspects of Dvorák's great and beloved works." •Josef Ákvorecký "Ingeniously conceived, thoroughly and skeptically researched, entertainingly written, and graced by a wealth of lovely audible examples, this book somehow succeeds in being both an important work of revisionist scholarship that specialists in the field will need to consider carefully and a delightful meditation on music loved by many that deserves •and will attract •a wide general readership." •Richard Taruskin, Class of 1955 Professor of Music, University of California, Berkeley

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Die-hard Dvorak fans will adore this arcane but vividly written musicological study of the composer's sojourn in America. Dvorak was director of the National Conservatory in New York from 1892-95, and during this time he wrote his famous "New World" Symphony as well as a number of lesser works. Beckerman, a New York University music professor, explores the literary, political and personal influences that helped shape this creative outpouring. His detailed analysis ascribes much of the "New World" to a programmatic setting of Longfellow's Song of Hiawatha, a precursor to a planned opera that never materialized. Beckerman also provides a fascinating account of the ideology of musical nationalism in which Dvorak was steeped. Dvorak, he says, aspired to be the "Slavic Wagner" and was an exponent of a self-consciously "Czech" musical style. In America, egged on by journalist-provocateurs and influenced by black musicians at the

National Conservatory, Dvorák became a champion of an "American" national music to be based on African American spirituals and Indian folk tunes. Although an agnostic on the subject of musical nationalism (he feels that Dvorak's music was traditional German-style classical music with Czech and American gestures) Beckerman is a sympathetic and insightful guide to the controversies of an era when music was taken very seriously indeed. His contention that Dvorak suffered from agoraphobia and an accompanying panic disorder brought on in part by tremendous stress, and that the composer drank as self-medication, is interesting but not as compelling as the rest of this committed investigation. An accompanying CD, keyed to the text, illustrates Beckerman's arguments through the music itself. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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A man from Prague in America. How Dvorak loved his work in America and how he longed to be home !

Wow, this book does everything you'd hope a book would do: enlightens, entertains, and informs. The author has done a lot of work trying to understand Dvorak, and his compositions. His explanations of the New World Symphony are extremely convincing, he has found which sections of the poem go with which passages of music.

I appreciate what Mr. Beckerman is trying to do here, but this book strays far from the path of scholarly research and well into the realm of conjecture. Beckerman tries to analyze every phrase of Dvorak's New World Symphony to uncover its meaning, but Dvorak left few or no details about his thoughts in composing it. Dvorak didn't want the New World Symphony to become a programmatic piece. Instead, he used Native American and African American musical concepts to create a vision of America as he saw it at the end of the nineteenth century. He believed strongly that America's musical future rested mostly with Native American and African American traditions. Unfortunately, Beckerman's insistence on analyzing every phrase puts him way out on a limb, grasping for any explanation and often fabricating rationales to suit his purpose. His love for the New World Symphony is evident, but the process itself is neither enlightening nor particularly interesting, so I'd have to say this book was a disappointment. Instead, I'd recommend "Dvorak in America," by Joseph Horowitz, which sticks to the facts.

Much of what is given above is also reflected in this second volume by Beckerman. Both go together in developing an appreciation of Dvorak's life.

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I had a hard time finding a thorough bio of Dvorak. This is readable and interesting. Can add to understanding and enjoying his music.

Beckerman takes a real chance with this book. Rather than trying to analyze Dvořák's musical legacy by starting with Dvořák himself, he starts largely with an analysis of the music and uses this to infer the composer's personality. Unfortunately I think Beckerman has in some places strayed to far from the objective reality of Dvořák's life and has been swept away by the passions of music, which magnify the passions of life. Perhaps most curious about *New World of Dvořák* is that it barely seems to discuss the Master at all, but rather seems to spend most of its time discussing the critics, music researchers, philanthropists, and journalists who were so caught up in what they say as the promise of Dvořák. In many ways Beckerman does not describe who the composer really was, or what he really wrote, but what he represented to the Americans who brought him to America and followed his every move as though he was single-handedly spelling out the destiny of American music. Rather than being a true biography of the composer, I would consider this book more of a very narrow historical and thematic sketch of American musical culture at the time of the Master's visit. Although Beckerman makes some very compelling musical arguments that attempt to find the true inspiration of Dvořák's supposedly "American" pieces, his analysis goes so far as to claim there in fact exists no American nationalist music whatsoever, and this conclusion is just too hard to swallow. It is likewise odd that Beckerman insists that Dvořák suffered from debilitating mental anguish and persistent psychological problems. It almost seems that it offends Beckerman's sensibilities that a composer of Dvořák's historical significance was essentially "clean."

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