

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

**When Minnehaha Falls Inspired Dvorak Part 1 of 4**

By Lionel B. Davis and Kenneth Carley

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SEVENTY-FIVE years ago [in 1893] a middle-aged man with deceptively fierce eyes and a bristly beard stood in wonder "Where the Falls of Minnehaha Flash and gleam among the oak-trees. Laugh and leap into the valley."

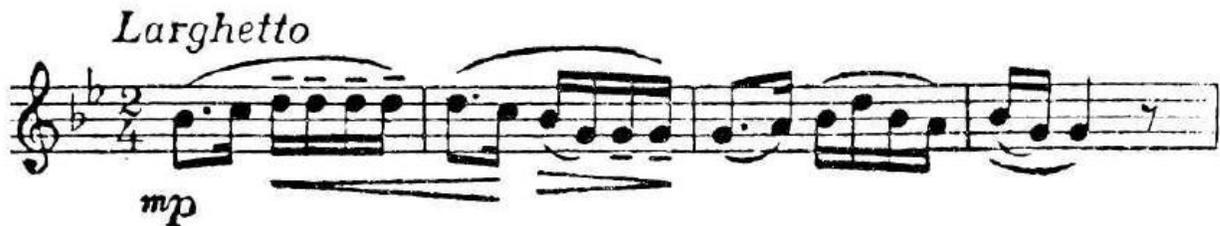


He was Bohemia's renowned composer, Antonin Dvorak, who only a few weeks earlier had completed his celebrated *Symphony in E Minor (From the New World)*. Dvorak, like many a visitor before and since, was drawn to the falls by the effective "press agency" of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*. Dvorak had read the poem in a translation that a Bohemian writer, J. V. Sladek, had made

while spending the winter of 1868-69 on a farm near Caledonia, Wisconsin. Sladek's translation was published in Prague in 1872. Dvorak even did some preliminary work on a Hiawatha opera. Nothing came of this, but he apparently used some of his sketches for the opera in the *New World Symphony* and in his *Humoresques* for piano.

Minnehaha enchanted Dvorak. He lingered there for more than an hour before he departed. "It is so intensely beautiful that words cannot describe it," he said. If he lacked words he nevertheless was inspired to expression in a way that perhaps no other visitor throughout all the years been. He thought of a melody while watching the sparkling waters. Suddenly turning to his American secretary, Josef J. Kovarik, Dvorak said, "Quick, lend me paper and pencil!" Kovarik had a pencil he handed the composer but no paper, so Dvorak wrote down the theme in rough form on the starched cuff of his shirt. The following November, in New York, he put the theme to good use in the slow movement of his charming *Sonatina in G Major*, opus 100, for violin and piano. Noted violinist Fritz Kreisler later popularized the theme and movement as *Indian Lament*.

*Dvořák's "Minnehaha" melody*



WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES led one of the world's foremost composers to the Twin Cities in September, 1893? Answering that question requires considerable background. Dvorak was born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves (then called Muhlhausen), a Bohemian village on the Vltava (Moldau) River near Prague, then the capital of Austrian-controlled Bohemia. The son of an innkeeper who doubled as a butcher, Dvorak served stints as a butcher's apprentice, but it soon was obvious that he was more cut out to be a musician. He learned to play the violin, organ, and other instruments and showed great promise as a composer. When Dvorak decided to make music his livelihood, "the fate which gave the 'world an eminent composer robbed Bohemia of a butcher."

It took a long, hard pull in rather reduced circumstances for Dvorak to gain acceptance as an important composer. However, by 1891, when he was fifty, he had acquired a wife and a family of six children (he had married a former pupil of his, Anna Cermakova, in 1873), a country home (Vysoka), and an international reputation as a skilled writer of joyful, melodious music often created in the spirit of folk tunes from his native land. His *Slavonic Dances* in particular spread his fame in Germany and England, which he visited on several occasions. Even when he had "arrived" musically, Dvorak remained just a villager at heart — a pious family man who was essentially goodnatured but also obstinate and given to occasional fits of temper and moroseness.'

In April, 1891, four months after he was appointed professor of composition, orchestration, and theory at the Prague Conservatory of Music, Dvorak began receiving overtures to visit America. They came from Jeannette M. Thurber, wife of a millionaire wholesale grocer and founder of the National Conservatory of Music in New York.

Mrs. Thurber wanted a big European name to direct and teach at her conservatory — and was willing to pay for the privilege. She gave some consideration to Jean Sibelius (if he had been named there might have been a Finnish version of the *New World Symphony!*) but decided she wanted Dvorak. At first he turned down Mrs. Thurber's offer because he disliked the prospect of spending two years away from his beloved native land. He finally consented, however, and secured leave from the Prague Conservatory when the forceful Mrs. Thurber spelled out her generous terms: A salary of \$15,000 a year (more than twenty times what he made in Prague), four months' vacation, and time to compose."

**Next week: Dvorak arrives in America...**

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: [tkadlec@gmail.com](mailto:tkadlec@gmail.com) or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. See this article online at: [www.kadlecovi.com](http://www.kadlecovi.com) Dekuji! Tony Kadlec