

About the *HIAWATHA* MELODRAMA

By Michael Beckerman

Dvorak himself stated that the two inner movements of the *New World* Symphony were studies for a longer work to be based on Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*. And indeed Dvorak started sketching such a vocal work – a cantata or opera. But this project foundered for lack of an acceptable libretto. All that remains is a second set of sketches.

The *Hiawatha Melodrama* is my attempt (supplemented by contributions from Joseph Horowitz) to highlight some of the places in movements three and four where Dvorak clearly imagined textual or narrative images. (In musical terminology, a “melodrama” is a composition combining speech and music – here, excerpts from Longfellow's poem set to excerpts from Dvorak's symphony.) While this may seem far-fetched, we must remember that as soon as he returned to Bohemia in 1895, Dvorak composed a series of tone poems based on the ballads of K. J. Erben. In at least one of these, he set down the poem line by line, beneath the music – so this process was not alien to him.

According to Dvorak, the Scherzo of his E minor symphony “was suggested by the scene at the feast in Hiawatha where the Indians dance.” In fact, the clearest link between the symphony and poem is the opening of this third movement, which can only be the Dance of Pau-Puk-Keewis at Hiawatha's wedding. The composer captures the growing wildness of this dance, which begins “treading softly like a panther.” The pulsing backdrop may be interpreted as pounding tom-toms.

I have assumed that the quick transition to a different kind of music reflects the poem's quick transition to the love song of Chibiabos, whose opening words – “Onaway, Awake Beloved!” – match the rhythm and inflection. Finally, it was a strange series of bird-like trills which led me to conjecture that the Scherzo's central section continues the events of Hiawatha's wedding with the story of Osseo, a tale about a group of Indians changed into birds.

While there is no evidence that Dvorak applied Longfellow's poem to the finale, it is my surmise that this fourth movement reflects the climactic battle between Hiawatha and Pau-Puk-Keewis. Vividly suggested are the bounding gait of Pau-Puk-Keewis, the “water music” of the stream, and the accompanying storm.

Despite his reputation as a composer of abstract instrumental music, Dvorak used extra-musical images to generate musical ideas throughout his career. In fact, his central ambition was to be a successful composer of opera. In the context of Dvorak's career, “From the New World” is at once his last symphony and a precursor of the mature symphonic poems, all of which follow a narrative thread, and to his final trio of operas. In the context of its own time and place, the symphony testifies to a composer's ability to combine worlds, and in so doing to create a new one.