

LIONEL B. DAVIS
and
KENNETH CARLEY

MINNESOTA *History*

been. He thought of a melody while watching the sparkling waters. Suddenly turning to his American secretary, Josef J. Kovařík, Dvořák said, "Quick, lend me paper and pencil!" Kovařík had a pencil he handed the composer but no paper, so Dvořák wrote down the theme in rough form on the starched cuff of his shirt.³ 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*.⁴

WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES led one of the world's foremost composers to the Twin Cities in September, 1893? Answering that question requires considerable background.

Dvořák was born September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves (then called Mühlhausen), 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, Dvořák 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 Dvořák decided to make music his livelihood, "the fate which gave the



Antonín Dvořák in 1894

world an eminent composer robbed Bohemia of a butcher."⁵

It took a long, hard pull in rather reduced circumstances for Dvořák 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 Čermáková, in 1873), a country home (Vysoká), 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, Dvořák remained just a villager at heart — a pious family man who was essentially good-natured but also obstinate and given to occasional fits of temper and moroseness.⁶

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

³ Josef J. Kovařík is the sole source for Dvořák's visit to Minnehaha Falls. The composer's reaction to the falls is quoted (as translated by Anne M. Kovařík) from Otakar Šourek, *Život a dílo Antonína Dvořáka: 1891–1896*, 3:165 (Prague, 1930). The second quotation (here translated by Esther Jerašek) is from Alice G. Masaryk, *Hudba ve Spillville*, 17 (New York, 1963). See also Josef J. Kovařík, "Dr. Antonín Dvořák," in *Katolík: česko-americký kalendář*, 40:164 (1934).

⁴ Paul Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 225 (New York, 1941); Anne M. Kovařík to Lionel B. Davis, February 14, 1965.

⁵ Statement attributed to New York critic H. E. Krehbiel and quoted in Vojan, *Antonín Dvořák*, 4.

⁶ For background on Dvořák prior to his visit to America, see Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 25–183; Gervase Hughes, *Dvořák: His Life and Music*, 21–152 (New York, 1967); Alec Robertson, *Dvořák*, 21–74 (New York, 1962).



This view of Minnehaha Falls was taken about the time of Dvořák's visit.

tional 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 Dvořák. 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.⁷

After he had agreed to go to America, Dvořák made a fortunate acquaintance that helped him greatly in all phases of his visit. Completing his studies at the Prague Conservatory in the spring of 1892 was a young Czech-American musician, Josef J. Kovařík, born and bred in Spillville, a Czech settlement in Winneshiek County, north-

eastern Iowa. His father, Jan J. Kovařík, had emigrated in 1869 at the age of nineteen from his native Bohemia. An accomplished musician, Jan Kovařík served as organist and choirmaster at Spillville's St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church. He also taught school and tutored a number of students—including his own children—on stringed instruments.

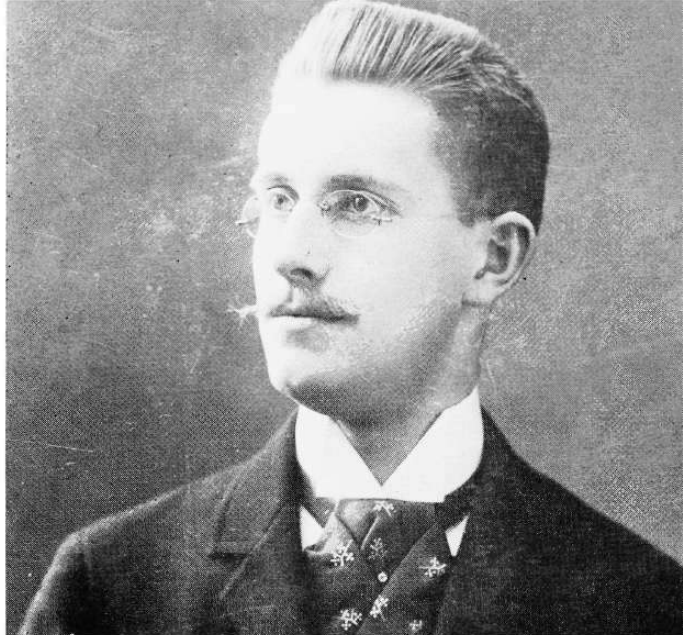
Josef was his father's prize pupil. He became so proficient on the violin and viola that Jan sent him to Prague for finishing studies. On Mondays Josef went to a book and music store in Prague to read newspapers smuggled in from America against the edicts of the ruling Austrian government. One day Dvořák rushed into the shop and asked whether anyone there was acquainted with America. Fingers pointed to young Kovařík whose face was buried behind an American newspaper. "Do you speak English?" Dvořák asked him. Kovařík

⁷ Stefan, *Anton Dvořák, 185–187*; Karel Boleslav Jiráek, *Antonín Dvořák: 1841–1961*, 19 (Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences in America, Inc., New York, 1961).

said he did and then agreed to teach the composer and his family that language in preparation for their stay in the United States. To do this Kovařík lived with the Dvořáks at their home, Vysoká, during the summer of 1892. He also helped them get ready for the trip and on September 17 sailed on the ocean liner "Saale" from Bremen, Germany, with the Dvořáks and their two oldest children (the other four were left at home). They arrived in New York on September 26.⁸

Although he yearned to return to Spillville, Josef Kovařík remained with Dvořák during his first eight months in New York, acting as his interpreter, music copyist, and general factotum and also serving on the conservatory staff. Reports differ about Dvořák's reaction to New York, but for the most part he evidently adjusted well to the big city. Frequently accompanied by his faithful secretary, the composer conquered his dislike for New York traffic enough to pursue some favorite pastimes. These included feeding pigeons in Central Park, watching railroad locomotives and elevated trains, and walking aboard ocean liners at the docks. "He knew to the day and hour what ships were arriving and departing," wrote a biographer, "and prided himself on being able to address his letters to Bohemia, stating exactly on which ship they would be carried."⁹

Dvořák disliked social life — even though he appreciated the desire of fellow Czechs and others to honor him — because it kept him up too late. So did conducting concerts. Born and raised in a small country town, he always preferred to go to bed early and to get up early for walks. He also grew chary



Josef J. Kovařík

of newspaper reporters, who grilled him on practically every subject and wrote some embarrassingly inaccurate stories about how Dvořák had come to America to show budding American composers how to write American music.¹⁰

The composer apparently did a good job of teaching at the National Conservatory. One of his colleagues there — James T. Hunecker — later wrote about "old Borax" (as he was affectionately called): "He scared me with his fierce Slavonic eyes and yet he was as mild-mannered a musical pirate as ever scuttled a pupil's counterpoint." One of his pupils, Negro musician Harry T. Burleigh, enhanced Dvořák's interest in Negro music by singing spirituals to him. This influence is easy to detect in the famed *largo* and other portions of the *New World Symphony*, which Dvořák composed in New York and substantially completed by May 24, 1893.¹¹

⁸ Olin Downes, "Dvorak's Friend," in *New York Times*, June 25, 1950, sec. II, p. 6 (quote); interview with Anne M. Kovařík, New Prague, Minnesota, August 5, 1968; Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 191.

⁹ Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 195–197 (quote); Robertson, *Dvořák*, 79; Hughes, *Dvořák*, 157–159.

¹⁰ Vojan, *Antonín Dvořák*, 12; Robertson, *Dvořák*, 78.

¹¹ Robertson, *Dvořák*, 109 (quote); Jirák, *Antonín Dvořák*, 20; Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 201.

MEANWHILE, Dvořák missed his four children back in Bohemia. When the question of a summer vacation came up, Kovařík suggested that Dvořák send for the youngsters and take the whole family to Spillville. Playing the role of a one-man chamber of commerce, Kovařík pointed out that Dvořák would be able to converse in

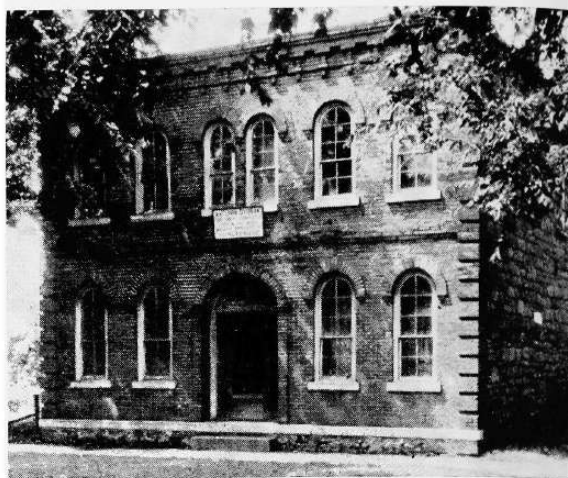
his native tongue with practically all of Spillville's three hundred people. He could relax in a rural atmosphere, play Czech card games, and quaff his favorite Bohemian beer. Dvořák at last became "sold" on the idea, but not before he got Kovařík to draw a map of Spillville and indicate on it the location of houses and what each person did for a living.

The four Dvořák children, summoned by their father, crossed the Atlantic as charges of a sister of Mrs. Dvořák and a nursemaid. They arrived in New York on May 31, and five days later the Dvořák party of eleven, including Kovařík, detrained at Calmar, Iowa, the nearest station, for a short ride to Spillville. There the Dvořáks rented a two-story brick house that stands as a Dvořák museum.¹²

Dvořák was at once delighted with Spillville and became a popular figure in town. He soon was playing the organ for masses at St. Wenceslaus, chatting in Czech with residents, and strolling along the Turkey River. He also walked around the countryside to listen to birds and "the wind in the prairie grasses."¹³

St. Paul violinist John F. Bílý, who has played at the Minnesota State Fair for twenty-six years, was a boy of twelve and living on a farm a half mile from Spillville when Dvořák was there. A nephew and pupil of Jan Kovařík (and cousin of Josef), Bílý remembers going swimming in his farm creek with the two Dvořák boys, Antonín, ten, and Otakar, eight, and recalls seeing the composer on some of his bird-watching walks. The Spillville youngsters "were afraid of him with his wiry whiskers and sharp eyes." Bílý, who later lived with the Kovařík family in New Prague, Minnesota, has also said he never will forget how Dvořák opened up all the stops while playing the church organ. The boy was in a good spot to hear because he helped pump the organ on a few occasions when the composer practiced.¹⁴

The most important fact about Dvořák's Spillville stay was that he found it congenial



The Dvořáks lived in this house in Spillville. It still stands as a Dvořák shrine and the home of the Bílý clock museum.

for composing. During his Iowa vacation he wrote two well-regarded chamber works for strings—the "American" *Quartet in F Major*, opus 96, and the *Quintet in E Flat Major*, opus 97. Musicians detect a mid-western flavor in both, and the quintet has passages inspired by Indian dances the composer witnessed in Spillville. Dvořák could not wait for public performances of these compositions, so he enlisted members of the Kovařík family, including Jan and Josef, to join him in playing them in private for the first time. Neither composition is easy to sight-read. "We just had to swim through to the end as best we could," Josef Kovařík recalled.¹⁵

¹² Hazel Gertrude Kinscella, "Dvorak and Spillville, Forty Years After," in *Musical America*, 53:4 (March 25, 1933). Based largely on an interview with Jan Kovařík in New Prague, this is the best account of Dvořák in Iowa. See also Ramona Evans, "Dvorak at Spillville," in *The Palimpsest*, 11:113–118 (March, 1930); Downes, in *New York Times*, June 25, 1950; Miss Kovařík to Davis, February 14, 1965.

¹³ Homer Croy, *Corn Country*, 160 (quote) (New York, 1947); Kinscella, in *Musical America*, 53:49.

¹⁴ Interview with John F. Bílý in St. Paul, August 13, 1968.

¹⁵ Hughes, *Dvořák*, 164–166 (quote), 167; Robertson, *Dvořák*, 208–211; Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 216–219; Kinscella, in *Musical America*, 53:4, 49.

Before finally leaving Spillville, Dvořák took two side trips in which thousands of midwestern Czechs apart from those in Iowa revealed their great esteem for the Bohemian composer and his music. One jaunt was to Chicago, where Dvořák conducted some of his own works in a concert at the Columbian Exposition on "Czech Day," August 12, 1893. "There was a great ovation at the conclusion," wrote Josef Kovařík, who—invariably—had accompanied the composer to Chicago. After the concert Dvořák went to his favorite Austrian restaurant at the fair and was greeted by a great crowd of people. Among them was a Moravian priest, the Reverend Jan Rynda, from the parish of St. Stanislaus in St. Paul. Father Rynda invited the composer to visit him in St. Paul, and Dvořák replied that he found it impossible to decline an invitation from a Moravian (Moravians had a reputation for geniality). Besides, he had always wanted to visit Minnehaha Falls.¹⁶

IN THE FIRST WEEK of September Dvořák, his wife, and Kovařík set out on a second trip that took them to Omaha, Nebraska, and the Twin Cities. Their host in



Dvořák at Columbian Exposition

¹⁶ Kovařík, in *Katolík: česko-americký kalendář*, 40:161–163. The quotation (here translated by Milada Jackson of Minneapolis) is on page 162. See also Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 220.

¹⁷ Kovařík, in *Katolík: česko-americký kalendář*, 40:163; Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 222.

¹⁸ Kovařík gives September 4 as the day Dvořák spent in the Twin Cities, but it probably was September 5. St. Paul papers of September 6 said the reception for Dvořák was "last night."

Father Rynda was born in Moravia, a province east of Bohemia, in 1859. After studying for the priesthood, he emigrated to America in 1884 and served for a time at Delano, Minnesota. He was priest at St. Stanislaus from 1886, when a new church was erected, until 1924. The church was destroyed by fire in 1934 and rebuilt. Father Rynda died later in his native land. Both Miss Kovařík and John Bílý remember him as a good musician who sang well. See Jan Habenicht, *Dejiny českých amerických*, 423 (St. Louis, 1910); The Reverend Jan Rynda, *Průvodce po českých katolických osadách v arcidiecesi St. Paulské*, 86–93 (Chicago, 1910); James Michael Reardon, *The Catholic Church in the Diocese of St. Paul*, 583 (St. Paul, 1952).

Omaha was Edward Rosewater, a newspaper publisher of Bohemian Jewish ancestry who had been a friend of Dvořák's father in Bohemia. After two days spent visiting the plant of Rosewater's *Omaha Bee*, seeing other sights, and being feted by numerous Czechs in the area, the three travelers took a train by night for the journey to St. Paul by way of Sioux City, Iowa, and Mankato.¹⁷

Father Rynda greeted the Dvořák party when it arrived at the St. Paul station at 7:00 A.M. September 4 (or September 5).¹⁸ He took his guests immediately to the St. Stanislaus rectory. After breakfast, Dvořák asked when he could see Minnehaha Falls, as he was eager to get back to Spillville. Father Rynda had other plans, however, and acted as though he did not hear his guest. He diverted Dvořák's attention by telling him a number of gay Moravian stories. "You



Father Jan Rynda

can be sure he served the composer Bohemian beer, too," Anne M. Kovařík, Josef's sister, said in a recent interview.

Before long, a delegation of St. Paul Czechs arrived to greet their beloved composer and to invite him to a reception in his honor that evening at Č.S.P.S. Hall at the corner of West Seventh Street and Western Avenue. Dvořák agreed to attend.¹⁹

In the afternoon the Dvořáks toured the city with Father Rynda and Kovařík. The composer admired the Mississippi River and, as has been told, was impressed enough by Minnehaha Falls to be inspired to melodic expression. In the evening the Č.S.P.S. Hall was crowded with 3,000 people for the informal reception.²⁰ St. Paul newspapers covered the event in detail in their September 6 issues.

When he entered the hall — to Franz von Suppé's *Light Cavalry Overture* played by Emil Straka's orchestra — Dvořák "was hailed with great applause and cheering. . . . The audience rose en masse to do him honor, and Antonín Jurka delivered the

address of welcome."²¹ After Jurka's "glowing tribute," Dvořák "was presented with a beautiful bouquet by Miss Antonia Klecat-sky."²² Dvořák then replied briefly, thanking St. Paul's Bohemians for their hospitality. E. M. Povolney welcomed Mrs. Dvořák.

In addition to leading the orchestra, Emil Straka "gave a violin solo, which was rendered in his usual fine style," and Josef Kovařík contributed "Bohemian melodies." Straka, who was born in Suez, Egypt, had attended the Prague Conservatory ahead of Kovařík and became a well-known St. Paul musician and teacher. In between musical numbers and speeches, "many of the citizens who were present were introduced to the honored guest of the occasion."²³

Members of the committee in charge, said the *St. Paul Daily Globe*, "are entitled to much credit for the excellent arrangements made at such short notice." The paper ended its account of the evening thus: "The reception which his St. Paul countrymen gave him last night is but a slight tribute to the esteem in which he is held by all Bohemians. The occasion was a very informal one, and every one present was very much pleased to have an opportunity to do honor to the man whose name is a household word with his own people."

Although Father Rynda did his best to get Dvořák to extend his visit, the composer would not be persuaded. He left St. Paul by train the next morning at eight. Traveling by way of Austin, he was back in Spillville by 4:00 P.M.

¹⁹ The hall's initials stand for Česko Slovanský Podporující Spolek — Czech Slavonic Benefit Association. Built in 1887 and remodeled in 1917, the hall still stands. It houses a bakery and grocery on the first floor, a large second-floor room used for gymnasium classes of the American Sokol Organization and also rented out on occasions to veterans' groups for bingo, and third-floor headquarters for a lodge of the Czechoslovak Societies of America.

²⁰ The main source on Dvořák's stay with Father Rynda is Kovařík, in *Katolík: česko-americký kalendář*, 40:164.

²¹ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 6, 1893, p. 2.

²² *St. Paul Daily Globe*, September 6, 1893, p. 1.

²³ *St. Paul Daily Globe*, September 6, 1893, p. 1.

TEN DAYS LATER, their vacation over, the Dvořáks left Spillville for New York. Long after that summer idyll, Spillville honored its distinguished visitor by erecting a memorial in Riverside Park near the Turkey River. And in 1929 the road from Calmar through Spillville and the Czech town of Protivin, Iowa, to Preston, Minnesota, was officially designated the “Dvořák Highway.”²⁴

Back in New York for another busy season at the National Conservatory, Dvořák remembered his “Minnehaha theme” when he sought to do something noteworthy for his hundredth composition. He decided to compose a modest piece that his youngsters, Otilie and Antonín, could play. The result was the *Sonatina* for violin and piano, opus 100, in which the “on-the-cuff” tune he conceived at Minnehaha graces the slow



Emil Straka

second movement. Josef Kovařík coached the children for the performance. When they played it for their father in the winter of 1894, “Dvořák was so beside himself with joy that he cried and embraced his children and thanked them for the happiness that they gave him that evening.”²⁵

²⁴ Kinsella, in *Musical America*, 53:4; Hughes, *Dvořák*, 169.

²⁵ Jan Löwenbach, *Josef Jan Kovařík: Dvořákův americký sekretář*, 22 (Prague, 1946). Miss Kovařík translated the passage. See also Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*, 225; Hughes, *Dvořák*, 170.

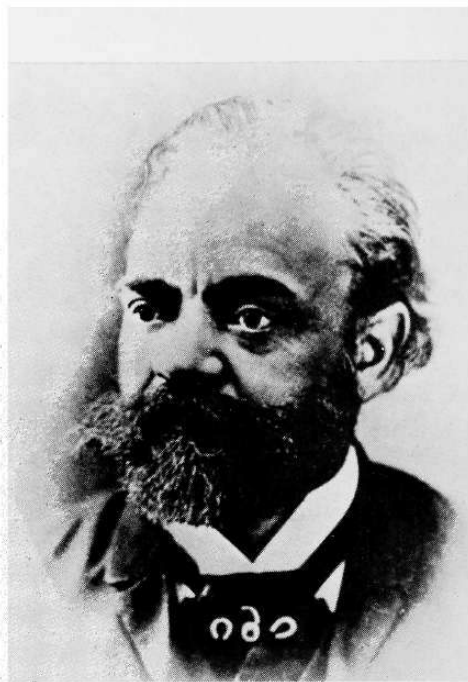


Modern view of Č.S.P.S. Hall where Dvořák was entertained

The *Sonatina* is for adults, too, and has not been forgotten. Only recently, what is thought to be the first long-playing recording of the work was made by two Twin Cities chamber musicians — violinist Joseph Roche, a member of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, and pianist Richard Zgodava, “the area’s leading accompanist.”²⁶

After spending the summer of 1894 at his home in Bohemia, Dvořák returned for a third season in New York, but no longer was happy there. He then went back to his homeland for a relatively quiet decade and died in Prague in 1904. Josef Kovařík stayed in New York and served for years as a violinist and principal violist in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He died in 1951.

Jan Kovařík remained in Spillville for thirty years — until 1899 — when he moved with his family to New Prague, another Czech settlement. The elder Kovařík resided there forty years — until his death in 1939. He taught school and gave music lessons, as at Spillville, and directed community concerts. He also played the organ and directed the choir at New Prague’s St. Wenceslaus Church. His daughter Anne, who still lives in New Prague next door to a sister, Mrs. John Brůžek, still serves as a church organist. Miss Kovařík has many



Portrait Dvořák gave Jan Kovařík

mementos of her family and Dvořák. Hanging on her studio wall, for instance, is the framed photograph of himself that Dvořák autographed and sent to her father in gratitude for his hospitality.

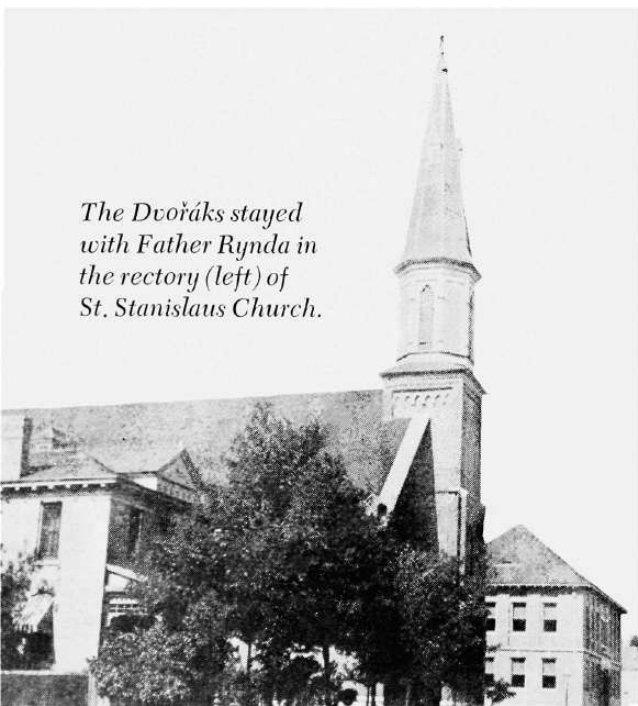
As a direct result of his short sojourn in America, Dvořák left a rich legacy of compositions inspired by the “New World” scene. Minnesotans can take pride that that legacy owes a small but significant part to Dvořák’s visit to Minnehaha Falls.²⁷

²⁶ Allan Holbert, “Roche and Zgodava Produce Own Record,” in *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 11, 1968, sec. E, p. 12.

²⁷ For a recent scholarly treatment of the Minnehaha episode, see John Clapham, *Antonín Dvořák, Musician and Craftsman*, 209 (London, 1966).

THE MUSICAL THEME on page 128 and the photograph on page 132 are from Stefan, *Anton Dvořák*; the picture on page 129 is from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, February, 1895; the photograph on page 131 was lent by Miss Kovařík; the illustration on page 133 is from Vojan, *Antonín Dvořák*; the photographs on pages 134 and 136 (bottom) are from Rynda, *Průvodce po českých katolických osadách*; that on page 136 (top) was lent by John Bílý; that on page 135 (bottom) was taken by Kenneth Carley; and the ones on page 130 and 135 (top) are from the society’s collection.

The Dvořáks stayed with Father Rynda in the rectory (left) of St. Stanislaus Church.





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