

A NOTE TO CHORISTERS

by James McCullough

“A Cuckoo’s Christmas Gift” (my title) was composed by Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. He was born in Nelahozeves, The Czech Republic, on September 8th, 1841. His parents were František and Anna Dvořák. Of nine children, he was their first child, according to John Clapham, the noted Dvořák scholar (1979). His father, an innkeeper and butcher, and his homemaker mother gave to the young Antonín the best elementary school and music education that they could afford.

In 1847 at age six, Dvořák’s earliest education was entrusted to Kantor Joseph Spitz, the village schoolmaster, who also gave Dvořák singing and violin lessons. Six years later, in 1853, his parents sent him to study music and German with Kantor Antonín Liehmann and the Deanery Church choirmaster, Joseph Toman, in nearby Zlonice. Early in 1856, he was sent to Česká Kamenice to study with Franz Hanke at the German training college in the Franciscan Monastery of Maria Schnee. His family also moved there soon after.

Then, in 1857, the sixteen-year-old Antonín, at Liehmann’s insistence, was sent by his parents for two years of study to the famous Prague Organ School. While he was there, Dvořák also played and mastered the viola in the German St. Cecilia Society Orchestra, under Antonín Apt.

In July, 1859, Dvořák graduated from the Prague Organ School, after having placed second in his final examinations. And later, finding no success at making a career as a church organist, he worked as a violist in the Karel Komzák Orchestra. Then, in 1862, he moved on to playing the viola in his opera and town orchestras.

However, Jamil Burghauser, a scholar who made a thematic catalog of Dvořák’s complete works, soon dated Dvořák’s twentieth year in 1861 as the start of his serious stage as a composer with his *String Quintet in A Minor*, Op. 1 (B.7).

Later, at age 32 in 1873, Dvořák and Anna Čermáková were married. That year also marked the completion and performance of his patriotic cantata, *Hymnus*, which he had started in the summer of 1872. It was his first significant, successful composition.

Dvořák went on to compose a significant amount of music and lived the last years of his life cherished and honored by millions. Sadly, on May 1, 1904, during a Prague festival devoted to his music, Dvořák died. Four days later, thousands of Czech mourners attended his burial at Vyšehrad Cemetery.

Music for “A Cuckoo’s Christmas Gift” is taken from the first of four duets for soprano and alto voices with piano accompaniment called *Moravian Duets, Op. 38*. The earliest songs of the set were composed in July of 1877, but were probably not completed until around August of that same year.

The texts of Dvořák’s set came from Moravian folk poems by unknown authors. However, the original words of the work are not used here. When I translated two of the German verses into English, I found the characters unappealing and the story rather unsatisfying. However, one background character, the Cuckoo, seized my interest and imagination. So I created a new English text, making the Cuckoo the star of the story and deserving of a happy ending.

Now, let us look at the score. Two introductory bars of music in E major (the original key) are played alone by the piano in a 3/4 meter. Then two voices enter with eight successive measures (mm. 3–10), divided into two four-bar *phrases* (a basic unit of music that moves to a point of relative repose).

The first two phrases of Part I are almost the same, except for the last note of bar 10 (the G on the word “rove”). Part II is different in every way from one phrase to the next. For this reason, the two voices display one noncontrasting phrase (A).

In measure 11, the second restatement of the melody with a different harmony line is heard (A'). And in this same measure, notice how the tonality changes to the G major chord on beat 2, in contrast to the G# minor chord that was used in measure 7.

In measure 15, Dvořák uses a G major chord again. This is the third restatement of that melody, which unfolds in four concluding measures (A"). The harmony line, which is delayed by one measure, gives an "answer." Both lines are followed by a two-bar interlude in the piano. In the original score, an additional two-bar *codetta* (a short extended ending) appears after the second verse.

To achieve good storytelling, I have transformed Dvořák's original, two-verse Czech text into three new English verses with a whimsical "Cuckoo" ending. Since the progressive melodic and harmonic movement of the three similar phrases of this work are related, it can be called a *period*. (A period is a series of phrases that are related by their harmonic organization.) Therefore, this work is in one-part form, designed in three sections. And graphically, its formal structure would look this way: A A' A". The major, overall outline of this work is called *strophic* in its full design structure.

Finally, in summarizing Dvořák's life and music, his fellow Czech contemporary composer Bohuslav Martinů gave this thoughtful viewpoint about Dvořák: "Music should always be joyful, even when it is tragic. Dvořák is a happy man who leaves such a legacy behind him."

For The West Texas Children's Chorus, Lubbock, TX.
Dr. Susan Brumfield, Founder and Artistic Director

A CUCKOO'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

from *Moravian Duets, Op. 38, No. 1*

for 2-part voices and piano

English Text by
JAMES McCULLOUGH

Music by ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)
Edited and Arranged by JAMES McCULLOUGH

Andante semplice (♩ = ca. 72)

3 *sadly, but hopeful*
p

PART I

PART II

Do you hear a
sadly, but hopeful
p

Do you hear a

Andante semplice (♩ = ca. 72)

PIANO

p

4

mp *dim.*

cuck - oo weep - ing down in a pine grove?

mp *dim.*

cuck - oo weep - ing down in a pine grove?

mp *dim.*

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p *mf*

Lit - tle chil - dren run to help thee

p *mf*

Lit - tle chil - dren run to help thee

dim. *p*

where they should not rove. "Lit - tle cuck - oo,

dim. *p*

where — they should not — rove. "Lit - tle cuck - oo, —

why such weep - ing so near Christ - mas

why such weep - ing so near Christ - mas

14 *mp* *p*

Day? Love - ly song - birds should be joy - ful

mp *p*

Day, so near Christ - mas Day? Oh, be joy ful

mp *p*

17 *rit.*

and al - ways at play.”

and al - ways at play.”

rit.

20 *a tempo* *mp* *tearfully*

“I will tell thee, lit - tle chil - dren,

mp *tearfully*

“I will tell thee, lit - tle chil - dren,

a tempo *mp*

22

why I am so sad. I re-hearsed all

why I am so sad. I re-hearsed all

mp

mp

25

year a new song which made me so glad.

year a new song which made me so glad.

mp

28

But a night - in - gale came call - ing, and it stole my

But a night - in - gale came call - ing, and it stole my

mp

mp

31 *mf* *mp*

song! So you know now of my sor - row;

mf *mp*

song! It stole my — song! Ah! My sor - row;

mf *mp*

34 *rit.*

I weep all day long.”

I weep all day long.”

rit.

37 *a tempo* *mf with resolve*

“Lit - tle cuck - oo, cease your weep - ing, your song is not

mf with resolve

“Lit - tle cuck - oo, cease your weep - ing, your song is not

a tempo *mf*

40 *mf*

lost. We will teach you now a new song,

lost. We will teach you now a new song,

43 *mf*

but at a new cost. Since it's al - most

but at a new cost. Since it's al - most

46

Christ - mas morn - ing, long songs would be

Christ - mas morn - ing, long songs would be

48

wrong. We will teach you

f

cresc.

wrong, long songs are wrong.

f

50

now just two notes, sing them all year long.”

mf

f Teach you two notes, sing them all year long.”

mf

53

rit. as from afar *mp* Cuck - oo!

as an echo from afar *p* Cuck - oo!

rit. *mp* *p*

slow roll