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EVOLUTION OF PIANO WRITING IN DVORAK'S SOLO PIANO COMPOSITIONS [1]

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Abstract:

It is generally admitted that Dvořák's compositional work has been sealed mainly by his symphonic and chamber music production, while he has not been a piano virtuoso like the majority of his contemporary composers of the romantic era. However, he composed a large volume of solo piano compositions - apart from his popular four-hands original works and transcriptions – that are technically less demanding for the pianist than his chamber music works containing the particular attributes of Czech music. Although Dvořák's piano compositions are often overlooked for the benefit of works by other romantic composers consisted of more idiomatic characteristics and features of impressive virtuosity, nevertheless, surprisingly, his best piano music is to be found at his less virtuosic compositions. This study, examining comprehensively Dvořák's piano sets and single pieces, particularly his most defining compositions for solo piano, aims to capture composer's distinctive and potentially personal traits in his piano writing regarding use of technical devices, in order to abstract conclusions about his possible influences by other romantic composers, to figure a certain manner of pianism, to evaluate the quality and peculiarity of his pianistic writing, to detect weak points that reveal likely lack of familiarity with the piano instrument and ultimately to view the evolution of his pianistic style throughout his compositional lifetime course.

Keywords: piano music, Dvořák, performance, music interpretation, solo piano works, Czech music, virtuosity, piano writing, technical devices, pianistic style.

Introduction

It is generally admitted that Dvořák's compositional work has been sealed mainly by his symphonic and chamber music production, while he has not been a piano virtuoso like the majority of his contemporary composers of the romantic era [2], instead his training and early performing experience were mainly as a string player [3]. He considered himself to be a pianist more or less of "an average competence" [4] contrary to the other leader of Czech National School of Music, Smetana, who has been an accomplished and ambitious pianist [5]. However, Dvořák composed a large volume of solo piano compositions - apart from his popular four-hands original works and transcriptions, defined by a way of thinking as a symphonist [6] – with preference to cycles of piano pieces with contrasting characters featuring the particular attributes of Czech music such as syncopated rhythms related to folklore dances, lyrical passages which express the sentimental Slavic soul and limited presence of counterpoint in favor of expressive melodic lines as well as, in general, technically less demanding compositions for the pianist than his chamber music works which are characterized by his gift for orchestration, "weaving the piano in and out of the strings in colorful and innovative ways" [7]. Although Dvořák's piano compositions are often overlooked for the benefit of works by other romantic composers, consisted of more idiomatic characteristics and features of impressive virtuosity, nevertheless, his best piano music is to be found at his less virtuosic compositions where there was no need for him to flatter the expectations of a virtuoso

soloist [8]. Besides, absolute instrumental music had been described by the Czechs as Dvořák's domain [9]. His piano music, rather light and modest, is defined by "idiosyncratic innocence, tenderness, sensuality" [10], and personal inspiration. According to Dvořák's biographer, Vaclav Holzknecht, his compositions for solo piano, although they have not "attracted general interest," yet they "contain many lovely melodic, harmonic and rhythmic ideas" [11]. Surprisingly, the best-known of all his works happens to have been written for solo piano: the *Humoresque in G-flat major*.

Dvořák and Czech music

Dvořák's pianistic writing for solo piano contains the general traits of Czech music listed by Michael Beckerman in his article "In Search of Czechness in music" [12]:

1. First beat accent, related to speech and folk song.
2. Syncopated rhythms, often related to characteristic dances.
3. Contrasting lyrical sections in a lively dance movement in ternary form.
4. Harmonic movement outlining triads a major third apart.
5. Two-part writing involving parallel thirds and sixths.
6. Alternation between parallel major and minor modes.
7. Use of modes with lowered sevenths and raised fourths.
8. Avoidance of extended counterpoint.
9. Use of melodic cells which repeat a fifth above.

These compositional techniques create simplicity, ironic humor, and a melancholic profundity that carry the essence of Bohemian atmosphere. In any case, Czech piano music, and Dvořák's in particular, is receptive to the tendencies of the nineteenth century in western Europe, characterized by a more fluid form of expression, by the presence of a diversity of musical styles, and by the predominance of small-scale genres for solo piano within romanticism, influenced significantly by the most important representatives of this era: Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Brahms.

The piano production of Dvořák could be divided in three periods within four decades: his early works (1855-1879), his middle period works (1877-83), and his later works (1884-94). Analytically:

Early Works, 1855-79

- *Forget-me-not Polka* in C major, B. 1 (1854)
- *Per Pedes Polka*, B. 2bis (1859)
- *Polka* in E major, B. 3 (1860)
- *Potpourri on King and Charcoal Burner*, B. 22/43 (1871-1875)
- *Twelve Silhouettes*, Op. 8, B. 32/98 (1872/1879)
- *Two Minuets*, Op. 28, B. 58 (1876)
- *Dumka* in D minor, Op. 35, B. 64 (1876)
- *Theme and Variations* in A \flat major, Op. 36, B. 65 (1876)

In his early pianistic output, the *E-major Polka* offers a premature mixing of Austro-German and Slavonic idioms melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically that would characterize Dvořák's music throughout his career, while the *Two Minuets*, Op. 28 strengthen these attributes. His more ambitious turn to the piano in the fall of 1876, when he started composing his *Piano Concerto in G Minor*, Op. 33 was not as successful as he wished to be, since the work never entered the mainstream concerto repertory due to a solo part which lacked in polished pianism and shining virtuosity being technically inelegant and poor.

Nevertheless, his work on the concerto inspired him to intensify his attempts on solo-piano music composing, consecutively, the *Dumka in D Minor*, Op. 35, defined by modest canonic

textures and chromatic harmony, where he sets a new level of skill in piano writing, and the *Theme with Variations in A-flat Major, Op. 36*, his first substantial piano piece - possibly his greatest and most accomplished for the piano - as well as Dvořák's only solo piano work that is neither a short piece nor a set of short pieces. In his *Variations*, the Czech composer makes the "first real exploration of the piano as an independent instrument" [13]. Composed at the beginning of the period of Dvořák's contact with Brahms, this work balances variety and unity demonstrating a classically-orientated language in the composer's output, combined with counterpoint and chromaticism decorating simple harmonic progressions, concerned with creating a large-scale structure aimed towards the climax in the final variations, and exploring the piano's textural and sonic capabilities by using more virtuosic passages and extrovert gestures, whereas the resemblances with the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 26 are apparent. Especially noticeable are the virtuosic double octaves including leaps in Variation V,

Figure 1: Dvořák, *Theme and Variations*; Variation V, bars 1-5



as well as the etude-like texture in Variation VII demanding nimble finger work, and the effective culmination in the final variation VIII with the original theme presented in between powerful chordal statements, scalar passages, and rapid octaves and arpeggios.

With his next solo piano work, the *Silhouettes Op. 8*, a set of twelve short pieces which range from polkas to sentimental Romantic mood pieces, Dvořák goes, piano writing-wise, one step backwards, as these pieces are simple and unpretentious, and the composer after the recent positive reception of his *Slavonic Dances* clearly aims at the amateur market in order to repeat the success of the *Dances* and satisfy the demands of the publishers. While the first Silhouette recalls the last bagatelle of Beethoven (Op. 126, op. 6, in E-flat major), the set shows composer's awareness of the musical style of respective cycles of Schumann, using connections between types of texture and metre among the pieces, juxtaposing high and low styles, featuring a sense of humor, and creating a musically unified and contrasted whole which exploits the capabilities of the instrument by making use of staccato octaves, sempre legato flowing quavers, and culminating double octaves providing a gradual climax to the cycle.

Figure 2: Dvořák, *Silhouettes*; No. 12, bars 53-62

Middle Period Works, 1877-83

- Scottish Dances, Op. 41, B. 74 (1877)
- Two Furiant, Op. 42, B. 85 (1878)
- Eight Waltzes, Op. 54, B. 101 (1879-1880)
- Four Eclogues, Op. 56, B. 103 (1880)
- Four Album Leaves, B. 109 (1880)
- Six Piano Pieces, Op. 52, B. 110 (1880)
- Six Mazurkas, Op. 56, B. 111 (1880)
- Moderato in A Major, B. 116 (1881)
- Question in G Minor, B. 128bis (1882)
- Impromptu in D Minor, B. 129 (1883)

Dvořák entered his middle period of piano works output with *Scottish Dances Op. 41*, a series of fifteen simple, stylized dances in the ecossaise style of Beethoven and Schubert, pervaded by Slavonic soul but not particularly interesting pianistically, and subsequently with the *Two Furiant, Op. 42*, more virtuosic in character and appropriate for concert performance. The commercial success of the *Slavonic Dances* must have encouraged Dvořák to continue writing for the popular market [14] since all his following piano works would be sets of short pieces relatively simple in form but with a strong Slavonic character. The *Eight Waltzes, Op. 54*, closer to Austro-German predecessors rather to the salon style of Chopin, contain impressive fertility of ideas and a -though never virtuosic, yet particularly picturesque- piano writing, while the *Four Eclogues, Op. 52* – as a originally literary term [15] first used in music by the Bohemian composer Václav Tomásek (1774-1850) [16], to describe a robust or lyrical piano miniature of moderate level of technical difficulty making them suitable for the amateur pianist - correspond with some of Smetana's albumleaves and sketches [17].

The following *Four Pieces Op. 52*, a collection of individual, contrasting pieces, not meant as a unified whole (as the former *Theme and Variations* and *Silhouettes*), included initially six pieces in all, but received much revision from the composer, revealing probably Dvořák's dissatisfaction regarding his piano writing, but, simultaneously, his effort to produce music on demand without sacrificing his standards. Highly characteristic is No. 1 *Impromptu*, featuring syncopated bass, cross-rhythms, and a turbulent, rising triadic figuration in the right hand,

Figure 3: Dvořák, Op.52 pieces; No.1, *Impromptu*, bars 1-16



which contains piano writing-wise strong resemblances with the opening piece of Schumann's *Kreisleriana*.

Figure 4: Schumann, *Kreisleriana*; No.1, bars 1-8



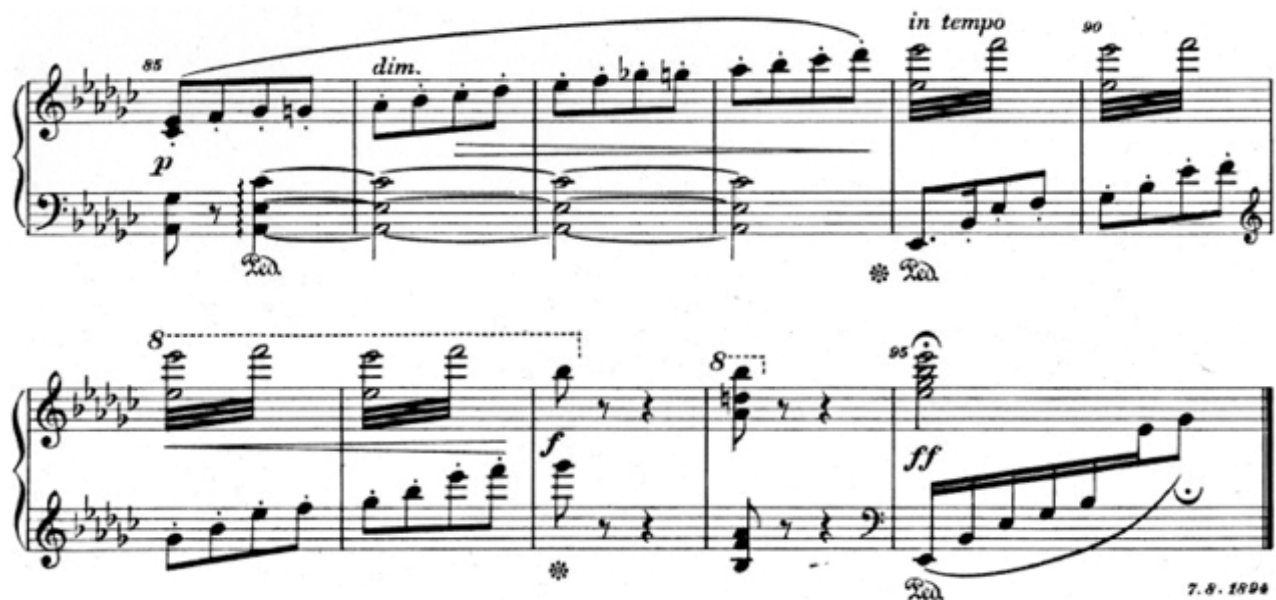
The *Six Mazurkas Op. 56* belong with the *Waltzes* among Dvořák's best and most inspired piano works from this period. Although the comparison to the respective mazurkas of Chopin is inevitable, Dvořák's mazurkas seem to be simpler in their melodic and harmonic vocabulary, and consequently less stylized, with frugal accompaniment and relatively undemanding technically being more accessible to the amateur market. The same holds for the four untitled *Album Leaves B. 109*, which were never published in his lifetime.

Later Works, 1884-94

- *Dumka* in C minor, Op. 12, B. 136 (1884)
- *Furiant* in G minor, Op. 12, B. 137 (1884)
- *Humoresque* in F# Major, B. 138 (1884-1892)
- *Two Little Pearls*, B. 156 (1887)
- *Album Leaf* in Eb Major, B. 158 (1888)
- *Thirteen Poetic Tone Poems*, Op. 85, B. 161 (1889)
- *Suite* in A Major, Op. 98, B. 184 (1894)
- *Eight Humoresques*, Op. 101, B. 187 (1894)
- *Two Piano Pieces* in G major and G minor, B. 188 (1894)

The last decade of Dvořák's piano production, after 1884, included major sets, on the one hand, and some isolated short works, on the other. Whereas the melancholic *Dumka* in C Minor and the enthusiastic *Furiant* in G Minor, published together as Op. 12, are not particularly inspired and technically brilliant, these years comprehend three substantial piano works: The *Thirteen Poetic Tone Pictures Op. 85*, the *Suite in A Major Op. 98*, and the *Eight Humoresques, Op. 101*. The last two compositions belong to the last products of his especially fertile residency in the United States, between 1892-95, where he was intensively inspired by his study of American Negro spirituals delivering, consequently, works like the *New World Symphony*, the nicknamed "American" *String Quartet* and *String Quintet*, as well as the *Sonatina for violin and piano*, distinct from his typical Slavonic style. His personal and stylized conception of musical Americanism is clearly imprinted also in the *Suite*, a coherent cycle of five movements. In the opening fast movement presenting a pentatonic melody, Baroque elements are to be found through the ornamentation used, whilst second and third movement, a scherzo and a march, respectively, feature characteristic syncopated rhythms and intense dynamic and textural changes, and the final noisy movement applies a further Baroque element, a two-part invention texture. The intentional primitivism of the composition, depicting the unpolished, and crude American folk idiom, contains a certain degree of technical difficulty intended for concert performance by a professional pianist.

Also strongly influenced by American folklore, jazz, and Negro spirituals, Dvořák's *Humoresques* constitute one of his most attractive and well-written piano cycles conceived during a period of highly fruitful creativity, and including his most famous and often played solo piano piece, the *No. 7 Humoresque in G-flat major*. The peculiar attributes of the composition, namely the use of pentatonic melodies and the lowered seventh in the minor mode, the characteristic syncopated and dotted rhythms, the existence of crude melodies and hammered repeated notes shape a concise portrait of the composer's musical experience in America. Particularly interesting is also the appearance of pedal points, drone-like accompaniments, and discrete melodic ornamentation, which remind folk instruments and seem to be associated with folk practice [18].

Figure 5: Dvořák, *Humoresques* Op.101; No.1, bars 85-95

The piano writing of the cycle is considered to be more advanced, in general, than in most of his earlier music, since the textures are richer, the contrapuntal elements more frequent, and the transformation of themes into accompaniments to new thematic material in inner voices becomes apparent.

In his very last work for solo piano, the *Two Pieces in G major and G minor*, B. 188, under the titles *Lullaby* and *Capriccio*, which reflects a return to the Slavonic roots and away from the American idiom, the composer maintained the high standards set in the *Humoresques* accompanied by technical security.

Definitely, as a highlight in Dvořák's piano output stand the thirteen *Poetic Tone Pictures*, Op. 85, composed in 1889, before his time in the US, which is his largest single piano work: an hour-long set of thirteen titled descriptive character pieces inspired by the programmatic subject, images, and feelings of his beloved Bohemia. The collection demonstrates the composer's connection with contemporary European Romanticism at the end of the nineteenth century representing a kind of apotheosis for Dvořák as a composer for the piano, and constituting an anthology of short individual pieces, but of a size and depth greater than those of his earlier or later sets, while the piano writing is of a significantly higher order [19]. Although the work has been considered by some pianists as overwritten or superficially virtuosic [20], the *Pictures* move away from Dvořák's typical modest and limited piano writing attempting - through the adoption of the techniques, textures, and rhetoric of the great piano composers - to approach professional virtuosity. Being no longer under the compulsion to produce piano music for the domestic market and driven by personal creative desire, the composition represents a reconsideration of his piano writing with an increased scale and level of technical difficulty, remote from the simplicity and accessibility established in previous sets of pieces [21]. The balanced, technically and artistically, pieces exploit the piano's textural and sonic capabilities in creating visual images through sound, as they depict poetic pictures ("Twilight Way", "Reverie"), dances ("Goblin's Dance", "Bacchanalia"), and various 'national' images ("In the Old Castle", "At a Hero's Grave") in a more virtuosic, extrovert manner, making references to Romantic composers, such as to Grieg's "In the Old Castle", to Mendelssohn in the "Spring Song", to Chopin in the "Reverie", to Bellini in the "Serenade", and to both Chopin and Brahms in the final piece "On the Holy Mount". Specifically, in the opening "Twilight Way", the mood of twilight is captured through arpeggiation, register, texture, and

chromatic shifts of harmony, whilst in the subsequent *Allegro moderato* technical challenges are presented in the form of trills, repeated notes, and staccato figuration.

Figure 6: Dvořák, *Poetic Tone Pictures*; *Twilight Way*, bars 124-127



Noticeable is the tremolo accompaniment requiring exceptional control of all the left-hand fingers. “Goblins’ Dance” uses a constantly changing hand position in the arpeggiated accompaniment, “Spring” is decorated by many chromatic inflections, and “Toying” demonstrates the more virtuosic approach to pianism in this collection, in its interlocking octave and chord patterns and quasi-cadenza passages.

Figure 7: Dvořák, *Poetic Tone Pictures*; *Toying*, bars 16-24



“Peasant’s Ballad” recalls the style of a Chopin waltz, combined with several passages of rapid octaves and cadenza figuration found in Smetana’s *Czech Dances* [22],

Figure 8: Dvořák, *Poetic Tone Pictures; Peasant's Ballad*, bars 126-130

and “Tittle-Tattle” frequently uses broken octaves and tenths. “Furiant”, clearly one of the most technical pieces with pervasive octaves, and fast tempo, which has much in common with an etude, includes the rhythmic opposition of two against three between the two hands, and “Bacchanalian” makes use of rapid figuration, interlocking chordal patterns, and wide intervals of technical difficulty. “At a Hero's Grave” is defined by accents and dotted rhythms related to a march, thick staccato chords as accompaniment (recalling clearly similar passages from Chopin's *Ballade*, No. 1 Op. 23 [23]),

Figure 9: Dvořák, *Poetic Tone Pictures; At a Hero's Grave*, bars 1-6

as well as virtuosic octaves, right-hand flourishes, large leaps in both hands, and repeated melodic notes, whereas the small rhythmic subdivisions in the accompanimental figuration, as the piece progresses, refers to the extrovert virtuosity of Liszt's piano writing (particularly Liszt's *Transcendental Études*) [24].

Figure 10: Dvořák, *Poetic Tone Pictures; At a Hero's Grave*, bars 46-51

Finally, “On the Holy Mount” the chorale theme is accompanied by rapid, quasi-cadenza arpeggiac figuration, while the thick texture exploits the full range of the keyboard creating a sense of culmination.

Dvořák's piano writing

Comprehensively, the technical devices used in Dvořák's piano writing, although not in particular large and demanding scale compared to the great piano composers, and not in the totality of his piano output, could be reduced to the following:

1. Arpeggiated figuration - Full, arpeggiated chords.
2. Polyrythms - Rhythmic complexity - Small rhythmic subdivisions (64ths, 32nds, and 32nd sextuplets) - Rhythmic ambiguity (triplets vs 16th notes).
3. Hand crossings.
4. Detailed articulation - Variety of articulation combinations.
5. Rapid octaves.
6. Left-hand leaps - Large leaps in both hands.
7. Large intervals (10ths and octaves).
8. Integration of ornaments.
9. Pedaling.
10. Unusual and sudden harmonic shifts.
11. Rapid chromatic chord changes.
12. Rapid accompaniment.
13. Sudden dynamic changes.
14. Pervasive octaves in both hands.
15. Left-hand accompaniment patterns.
16. Extended hand position - Close hand position.

17. Repeated left-hand chords.
18. Chromatic scalar passages.
19. Repeated notes in melody.
20. Meter changes.
21. Broken-chord accompaniment divided between hands.
22. *Quasi cadenza* sections.
23. Right-hand flourishes, and
24. Melodic phrasing.

Conclusion

Conclusively, in most of Dvořák's compositional life, the piano writing was a marginal activity, under the shadow of his symphonic and chamber music works. His preference rather to small-scale, Romantic character pieces, and technically relatively unchallenging works was apparent. As pillars among his various piano compositions stand the *Theme with Variations*, which demonstrates his change of direction to Classical formal structures, the *Poetic Tone Pictures*, which signals the predominance of programmatic parameter, and the *Humoresques* reflecting his turn from Slavonic folklore to an 'American' style, while the 1880s was the most productive decade for the composer's piano output. In all respects, a gradual, constant evolution of the applied technical effects and devices in his piano writing is not to be detected, as the composer stood throughout his piano production between the modest pianistic writing appropriate for the less advanced pianist, which, besides, pertains to the main part of his piano works, and the more virtuosic one, worthy to attract the attention of the soloistic level.

References:

1. The current paper was delivered in International Conference "Chamber Music 1850-1918", which took place virtually on 10-12 December 2021 in Lucca, Toscana (Italy) on the occasion of the birth anniversaries of Antonín Dvořák and César Franck, organized by Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini (Lucca), Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française (Venice), and National Museum (Prague).
2. Such as F. Chopin, F. Liszt, R. Schumann, F. Mendelssohn, and J. Brahms to name the most significant leading romantic pianist-composers in central Europe during the nineteenth century.
3. Václav Holzkecht mentions in his 1971 biography of Dvořák apropos the composer's instrumental experience: "In his early youth, Dvořák was accustomed to the violin and had a thorough knowledge of the technical possibilities of string instruments". See; Holzkecht, V. *Antonín Dvořák*. Orbis Publishing, 1971, (2nd edition), p. 69.
4. Bazzana, K. 'Dvořák: Complete Works for Solo Piano', (liner notes). In: Brilliant 92606/4 (CD), 2010, p. 2.
5. Murphy, S. *Czech piano music from Smetana to Janacek: style, development, significance*. Ph.D. Diss. Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2009, p. 30.
6. His reputation and establishment as a great symphonist even when working in other genres is evident in the writing of Emanuel Chvála. He notes characteristically: "The whole method of musical thought for Dvořák, when creating instrumental music, is symphonic". See; Chvála, E. 'Symfonické Skladby Dvořákovy [Dvořák's Symphonic Works]'. In: *Antonín Dvořák: Sborník statí o jeho díle a životě [Antonín Dvořák: A Collection of Essays about his Work and Life]*. Edited by Kalenský, B. Prague: Umělecká Beseda, 1912, p. 129.
7. Bazzana, p. 15.
8. Novotný reflects in 1873 - reviewing a recent performance of Dvořák's orchestral composition *Májová Noc* (May Night) - that for the composer "instrumental music is his true home". See;

- Novotny, V. J. 'Zpávy z Prahy a z Venkova: Druhý koncert filharmonického spolku [New from Prague and Rural Areas: The second concert of the Philharmonic Society]'. In: *Dalibor I*, no. 14 (April 4, 1873), p. 113.
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 11. Holzknecht, p. 70.
 12. Beckerman, M. 'In Search of Czechness in Music'. In: *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer, 1986), p. 64.
 13. Murphy, p. 162.
 14. Bazzana, p. 9.
 15. An *eclogue* is a poem in a classical style on a pastoral subject. Poems in the genre are sometimes also called *bucolics*. The form of the word *eclogue* came from Latin *ecloga*, which came initially from Greek *eklogē* (ἐκλογή) in the sense 'selection, literary product'. The term was applied metaphorically to short writings in any genre, including parts of a poetic sequence or poetry book. See; 'Eclogue'. In: *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Fifth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: HarperCollins Publishers, 2022. (www.ahdictionary.com)
 16. In his work *Eclogues*, a cycle including 42 pieces in 7 volumes, composed between 1807 and 1823.
 17. Gahrielnva, J. "Smetanovv 'Listkv do pamatniku' — ke kompozidni nroblematicke skladatelova [Smetana's 'Albumleaves' - Notes on compositional questions]". In: *Musikologie*, volume XVI/3 (1979), pp.246-51.
 18. The folk influence is mainly to be noticed in *Humoreskes*, Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 8.
 19. In his biography of Dvořák, Hans-Hubert Schonzele considers that the piano cycle does not belong "amongst the best of Dvořák's works for piano and do not stand comparison with the earlier Waltzes or the later Humoresques", confining the work's value in its advanced piano-writing. See; Schonzele, H. H. *Dvořák*. London: Marion Boyars, 1984, p. 127.
 20. Bazzana, p. 17.
 21. In his treatise *A pedagogical Analysis of Dvořák's Poetic tone Pictures Op. 85*, Nathan MacAvoy classifies the 13 pieces in ascending technical, artistic, and overall difficulty. Mac Avoy, N. *A pedagogical Analysis of Dvořák's Poetic tone Pictures Op. 85*. Ph.D. Diss. South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 2020, p. 96.
 22. Murphy, p. 174.
 23. See bars 94-105.
 24. Yet, Gervase Hughes states negatively in his biography of Dvořák's life and work: "A good deal of the piano writing in op. 85 was disfigured by tasteless decorations suggesting Liszt at his most vapid". See; Hughes, G. *Dvořák: His Life & Music*. London: Cassell & Company, 1967, p. 135.

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