

Crafton Beck

Lima Symphony
Orchestra conductor



When cultures collide

This is a story of an unlikely pair: a young African-American boy named Harry Burleigh and a famous composer from Eastern Europe named Antonin Dvorak.

As a boy, Burleigh often walked the streets of Erie, Pa., at dusk with his grandfather, lighting the streetlamps. Before Burleigh's grandfather was a lamplighter, he was a slave. Burleigh, who was born in 1866, would go to college. What a difference a couple generations made.

Burleigh inherited his grandfather's love of music. Just as his grandfather had sung the songs of his own upbringing as he went about his task of lamplighting, so young Burleigh began to sing. He became a member of the St. Paul's Boys Choir and was a popular soloist at

various churches and synagogues. At the age of 22, he traveled to New York City and auditioned for a new National Conservatory of Music, which offered free tuition to talented African-Americans.

It was a time when "American music" was coming into its own. The year was 1890 and there was no country-western, no jazz and no "Gershwin" — yet. A group of wealthy Americans in New York City had enticed one of Europe's greatest living composers to come to America "to found an American music." That famous composer was Dvorak.

What brought Dvorak and Burleigh together at the National Conservatory of Music was not only a shared love of music, but also shared backgrounds: both had come from pretty much nothing. When they first met, Burleigh sang

spirituals, work songs, field songs and "the blues." Dvorak was captivated by what he heard, and he instantly asked Burleigh to become his assistant at the conservatory.

With Burleigh, Dvorak began to discover that "an American music" did not need to be created: it just needed to be discovered.

Chicago contributed ragtime, minstrel shows saw African-American singers singing and playing guitar, Appalachians created bluegrass, the West offered melancholy cowboy songs, Creoles in Louisiana produced Dixieland, and New England Protestants created their own brand of hymns.

Meanwhile, Dvorak became fascinated with the most authentic of new world cultures — the music and dance of the Native Americans.

New York City must have been a fantastic place for any immigrant coming

to this country from Eastern Europe in 1890. There were bustling city streets, elevated trains, skyscrapers, busy wharves and, of course, marvels like the Statue of Liberty and Brooklyn Bridge.

All of this fermented in the creative brain of Dvorak, along with Burleigh's spirituals and slave songs. Everything Dvorak had taken in "from the new world" influenced the output of his great "New World Symphony."

First performed to wild fanfare and acclaim in New York City in 1893, today it is his most famous work and one of the most famous symphonies ever written. It is a symphony of melodies and the vigor of a new nation. It is not to be missed, and it will be performed by the Lima Symphony Orchestra Saturday evening at Veterans Memorial Civic Center.