

LIVE
FROM LINCOLN CENTER



LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
September 18, 2007, 8:00 p.m. on PBS
OPENING NIGHT GALA CONCERT
NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
YO-YO MA, GUEST ARTIST

One of the oldest traditions of Live From Lincoln Center is the Gala Opening Concert inaugurating the new season of the New York Philharmonic. September 18 is the date this year, and as usual our cameras and microphones will be in Avery Fisher Hall to bring this stellar event into your homes. Music Director Lorin Maazel has chosen an all-Dvořák's program, and he has invited the renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma to join him and the orchestra for a performance of the composer's Cello Concerto. The other main work will be Dvořák's Seventh Symphony, and the concert will begin in appropriately celebratory fashion with Dvořák's Carnival Overture.

Both the Cello Concerto and Seventh Symphony have New York connections. During the three-year period 1892 to 1895 Dvořák lived in New York as the Director of the National Conservatory of Music. He was a very active member of the city's musical life and provoked some controversy when he suggested that American composers should find their inspiration in Indian, Negro and other folk sources. He also attended many concerts in what was then the brand new Carnegie Hall, home to the New York Philharmonic. At one such concert a young cellist from the orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera was soloist in his own Second Cello Concerto. That cellist was soon to achieve lasting fame as a composer of light operas: his name was Victor Herbert. But Dvořák was much impressed with Herbert's Concerto and began to consider the various musical potentialities that lay in the combination of cello and orchestra.

In November, 1894 Dvořák began work in New York on his own Cello Concerto, which he completed in Prague the following summer. Like much of the music that Dvořák composed or first conceived in the United States, the work has an unmistakable Slavic folk quality. In many of its pages there is a genuine nostalgia which can only be attributed to Dvořák's homesickness for the Bohemian countryside he loved so deeply.

There is a fairly long orchestral introduction which begins with a solo clarinet intoning a gentle theme. When the solo cello does enter, it plays that same theme, only now it is heraldic in nature. And for the balance of the movement cello and orchestra engage in a friendly dialogue. The slow movement has a feeling of subdued repose, and this is followed by a march-like Finale. One unusual feature is the reminiscence of themes from the first two movements; at the very end the contemplative clarinet theme of the very beginning returns, to be followed by a rousing orchestral flourish.

The Dvořák Cello Concerto has long been a signature piece for Yo-Yo Ma, and he has played it with the New York Philharmonic on several previous Live From Lincoln Center presentations. Not content with resting on his laurels, he approaches each performance of the work with new-found insights and discoveries. His performance on the next Live From Lincoln Center is sure to reveal new facets of his ongoing exploration of this, the seminal work in the repertory for cello and orchestra.

Dvořák's Seventh Symphony was composed about a decade before the Cello Concerto, between mid-January and mid-March, 1885. The score was commissioned by the London Philharmonic Society on the occasion of Dvořák's election to honorary membership in the Society. I mentioned earlier that both the Cello Concerto and Seventh Symphony have close associations with the New York Philharmonic. Dvořák himself conducted the premiere of the Seventh Symphony, with the London Philharmonic in April, 1885 (in a concert that was conducted otherwise by Sir Arthur Sullivan). But it was the New York Philharmonic which played the American premiere of the Symphony a few months later.

Tympani, horns and low strings play the mysterious opening of the Symphony. As the movement progresses it goes through various moods, culminating at its end in the same mystery of the opening. The slow movement has a feeling of reverence, with particularly imaginative orchestration. A driving Scherzo, with slashing rhythms and contrasting themes follows, and the Finale caps the entire work in a blaze of heroics.

So, a heady concert of music by Dvořák awaits us on our next Live From Lincoln Center performance, the evening of Tuesday, September 18: Lorin Maazel conducting the New York Philharmonic, with Yo-Yo Ma, cello. I leave you, as usual, with the recommendation that you check your local PBS station for the exact day and time of the telecast in your area.

Enjoy!

MARTIN BOOKSPAN