

Variations on a Theme #16

from Rich Lynch ★ for SFPA 229 ★ written in August 2002

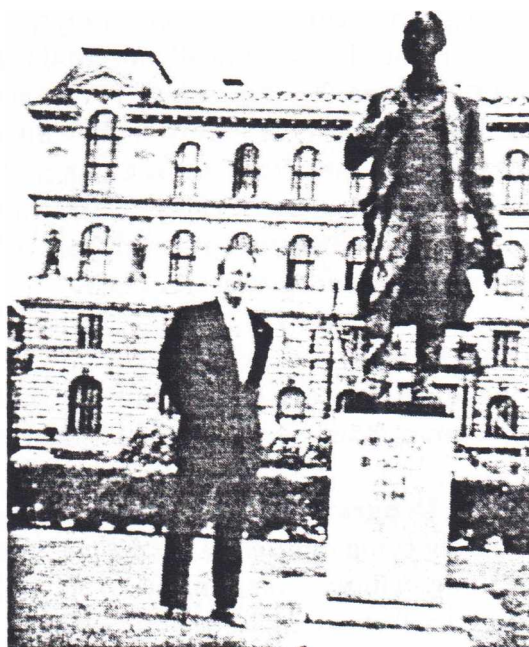
Music, Classical and Otherwise

It's 8pm on Saturday evening, August 10th, and right about now, down at the MCI Center in Washington, Bruce Springsteen should be taking the stage for his one concert in this area during his new tour. The arena only seats about 25,000 at most, I'm guessing, and tickets are a myth – the concert sold out about an hour or so (I heard) after tickets went on sale several weeks ago.

So instead of seeing the Boss, I'm at home listening to classical music on the radio – it's Dvořák's 9th Symphony, definitely worth 45 minutes of my time. Perhaps there's synchronicity here – both the Boss and the symphony are "From the New World" and Springsteen's music certainly is classic – except that Springsteen tickets would have probably cost at least \$75 each. Listening to the radio is pretty much free.

We bought a CD of Bruce's new album "The Rising" today at Borders (on sale for \$12!), but I haven't had a chance to listen to it yet. So, instead, this is probably a good time to say a few words about Dvořák and his "New World" Symphony, as it's certainly one of my favorite classical music compositions.

Antonín Dvořák was unlike many of the great classical music composers, in that he was not born into a family of musicians and composers – his father was a butcher and innkeeper, and his interest in music developed from the local folk songs of the Bohemia countryside. He was also not a child prodigy – at some time in his early life he must have had some music instruction, but it wasn't until he was 16 years old, in 1857, that he left home to enter the Prague Organ School. He eventually gained recognition as a talented violist, playing in the National Theatre Orchestra directed by the famous Czech composer, Bedrich Smetana. Smetana's influence probably also led Dvořák to composing, but once again, Dvořák was not a prodigy – it wasn't until he was 34 years old, in 1875, that one of his compositions attracted the attention of Johannes Brahms, who arranged for publication of some of Dvořák's works by one of the major European publishers. After that, he soon gained worldwide renown for his compositions, and by the early 1890s was so highly regarded that he was offered a position in New York City as Director of the National Conservatory where he taught musical composition. He was in the USA for only three years, but his presence influenced a large number of American composers.



at the Dvořák statue in Prague

Dvořák's best-known composition, his 9th Symphony, came about partly because of homesickness – he had been lured to America because of money (double or triple of what he could make in Europe), but it caused him to be away from friends and family for an extended time. At one of his low moments, his sponsor, Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, suggested he involve himself in writing a new symphony, and he did, incorporating themes influenced by American Indian folk melodies and Negro spirituals. It's a remarkable work, somewhat unlike symphonies of the 1700s and early 1800s in that themes introduced in the first and second movement reappear, sometimes almost subliminally, in the final movement. The main melodies of the second and last movement will be familiar to almost everybody, and the ending is understated. I have several recordings of it, and two that I can recommend are the one on the Sony Essential Classics label (SBK 46331), which also includes the Serenade for Strings (one of the best works ever composed for string orchestra) and the one on the DG Musikfest label (415 915-2), which also has the splendid Scherzo Capriccioso on that disk. I've probably listened to this symphony a hundred times, and I've never grown tired of it. I doubt I ever will.

Mailing Comments – SFPA 227

TKFW Reinhardt

On classical music: "I can finally go through all my grandparents' classical albums and sort the stuff I want." Last time I was out to visit Harry Warner, he had a couple hundred classical and opera LPs he'd gotten at some library sale, and it included some really good stuff – Deutsche Gramophone recordings and the like. I'm still looking for a compatible turntable for our stereo system, so I don't think such a treasure trove would be so useful for me.

Ned Brooks

On global warming: "A recent program on the Discovery Channel seemed to say that carbon dioxide in the air is continually lost to the oceans, and that the only thing that keeps up the level of CO₂ in the earth's atmosphere is vulcanism." No doubt true about the oceans being a CO₂ sink, because sea water is very slightly alkaline. On the other hand, nobody knows for sure what the capacity of the oceans are as a CO₂ sink: plant life (rainforests and ocean algae) seem to have a greater (and also faster) capacity for removal. Vulcanism is a contributor of not only CO₂ but also SO₂, but combustion of fossil fuels is probably greater still. Like you, I'd also like to see some accurate numbers on all of this.

Arthur Hlavaty

On Lunacon: Nice to see that Kage Baker makes convention appearances from time to time. I've recommended her as a guest for the local convention here, but the chairman had other ideas.

Richard Dengrove

On me being referred to as "the most well-known American energy expert in Slovakia": "Don't toy with the compliment." I'm not, but I don't really believe it; I'm not there often enough for that remark to be very accurate.

On the 2004 election: "If Dubya wins in 2004, it will be luck." Nah, it will be PR. The Republicans have always been much better than the Democrats at spin control.

David Schlosser

On my postcard diaries: "I may have missed it, but I don't think you said why that might be your last postcard diary." It's because a postcard diary is not needed anymore. I started doing these diaries because it was too expensive to call home every evening (I was getting ready to leave on a 3-4 week trip). In the past few years, Internet cafés have sprouted like weeds in almost every city, so I can stay in contact easier, faster, and not have a limit on the number of words available.

Tom Feller

On televised science fiction: "Anita and I watched the original British version of *Max Headroom*." I remember that – it played on one of the pay cable channels back when I was in Tennessee. I thought the British original ("20 Minutes Into the Future") was probably a bit better than the American series (which wasn't bad).

Gary Brown

On the possible cost of a SFPA website: "What would it take to get a Web site up and running? What type of initial effort would it require and weekly or monthly maintenance? And the cost?" Well, it would require less than \$50 to get started – we'd have to pay for a domain name and some web space, and typically web providers bundle the cost for these. Depending on how much space is needed, the monthly cost can be as low as \$15 – what Nicki and I are paying (to Yahoo, which bought out Simplenet). Somebody would have to be the webmaster – create the web pages and make changes as necessary, but if there's not too many frequent changes, it shouldn't require too much time or effort. Now then, what the heck do we need a web site for?

On my trip to Florida: "Where in Florida was the Lynch Family Reunion? I take it in the Tampa or Orlando areas, from the spring training games you mention." Tampa area, just a mile or so from the USF campus. (We got a good deal from the Marriott Residence Inn there, which was looking for any business it could find not long after September 11th.)

On being at a baseball game: "Catching a foul ball is a neat experience." True. This is the second one I've ever gotten, or helped get. The other one was back in the mid-1980s, at Candlestick Park, and it was during batting practice, not an actual game. Just a case of being in the right spot at the right time. I've also had several near-misses, the most memorable being at another game in San Francisco, when a foul ball that was headed right at me was nabbed in a spectacular one-handed grab by this guy in front of me. What made it even more amazing was that as he was catching the ball with one hand, he was dumping the large container of beer he was carrying in the other hand down the front of him. Everybody applauded, of course, but I'm not sure for what part of his act.

Jeff Copeland

On origins of words: "I was going to settle this in the traditional way, dictionaries at ten paces, but the OED doesn't list 'fanzine'." I guess I should find that surprising, but maybe I'm assuming too much, from the word's common usage within the SF genre. At any rate, I can document its introduction into fandom – October 1940, by Louis Russell Chauvenet. It's all in my files upstairs (somewhere).

On the economics of baseball: "How does killing off the Twins and Expos get more money for the other teams? Since TV revenue goes to the home team ... it seems that contraction will have no effect at all." Are you talking about the local broadcasting money? If so, I agree. But there's also a national television package, or packages – ESPN, for instance, pays hundreds of millions of dollars for a multi-year package. This is supposed to be split equally, regardless of what teams ESPN chooses to televise. And, let's not forget that killing off the weakest, most economically crippled teams will head off any possibility of revenue sharing, something that the rich teams, like the Dodgers and Yankees, are dead set against.

Eve Ackerman

On not seeing Washington: "Raphi didn't get to see more of DC on his December trip because the group he was traveling with was under extremely tight security. I think they didn't want to let the kids out at all." No disrespect intended, but that seems excessively paranoid. Washington is most emphatically not a dangerous city for tourists; there are bad parts of the city, no doubt about that (and you can say the same for most other large cities), but they are places no tourist would want to go to. So why come all the way to Washington, then stay sequestered in a hotel? Might as well save the money and have the conference or whatever it was much closer to home.

Steve Hughes

On 9/11 hindsight: "What if Bush had been told that terrorists would attack US airlines .. and the information was from a good source? What could he have done?" Well, more than what *was* done, for sure. You mention putting armed guards on all flights as a possible deterrent; I believe that alone would have prevented 9/11. Something else that probably would have prevented it would have been to warn the airlines, specifically instructing them to do whatever is necessary to prevent cockpit intrusions (like parking a beverage cart in front of the cockpit door, for instance).

mike weber

On poor vision: "To read without correction, I have to hold the material about three inches from my face and close one eye." Yipes, that doesn't sound like any fun at all. My current vision problem is that the bifocal eyeglasses I was wearing were not very good for sitting in front of the computer, which is about 90% of my work day. It became so bad that it was agony to try to do any work at all at the computer, so I had my eyes examined and got **two** new prescriptions. The bifocals were updated, and now I have another eyeglasses (single lens) for midrange, which I only use for computer work. It was a bit expensive to get the second one, but worth it.

On pop music that uses classical music melodies: "'Whiter Shade of Pale' using [Bach's] Air on the G String [from the 3rd Orchestral Suite]" Yes, good example; there's definitely a strong similarity of the melodies. At least the Bach composition was unequivocally out of copyright! Another example is Neil Diamond's "Song Sung Blue" whose melody is very similar to the Adagio (middle) movement of Mozart's 21st piano concerto. Again, no copyright problems to contend with. But Eric Carmen made a *big* mistake in lifting his melody for "All By Myself" from Rachmaninoff, who died in 1943.

Janice Gelb

On movies: "There was only one DVD [in Australia] that I wanted to buy there: an Australia-only edition of *The Dish*." So how is that different from the version of the movie that was shown here in the USA? (Actually, I'd like to see the movie – I missed it in the week or two it was in release here, and it's gotten nothing but good reviews.)

On Episode 2: "After hearing people say that it is miles better than *Phantom Menace*, I'm glad I didn't waste money on the first one!" Actually, it's not that much better, which is a point in favor of Episode 1, not a point against Episode 2. I didn't think either of those movies deserved quite the amount of pummeling they've received, but on the other hand, I also didn't think that Episodes 4, 5, and 6 deserved all the acclaim. (Especially Episode 4, the original *Star Wars*.)

Guy Lillian

On movies: "[*Reign of Fire* is] something we can nominate without shame, fo' sho'" Never saw it; it got some horrible reviews which kind of put me off wanting to see it. But as for the five movies most likely to make the Hugo ballot, I think they'll be *The Two Towers*, *Minority Report*, *MIB2*, the new *Star Trek* movie, and the next *Harry Potter* movie. Some others, such as *Lilo and Stich* and the upcoming *Solaris* (which I know very little about) can't be outright dismissed, either.

On the photo of Bruce, Harry, and Peggy Rae: "Kind of strange to see Hagerstown hermit Harry in the company of others." It happens once in a while. That picture was from the 1994 FanHistoricon, which was held in Hagerstown. Harry would not come to the convention, so the convention, in groups of 3 at a time, went to see him at his house. Whenever a DUFF or TAFF representative passes through, I'll usually take him or her out to see Harry, too (though this won't happen for Julian Warner because his short visit to Washington happens after we've already left for California).

Gary Robe

On convention traditions: "On Sunday morning [of Midwestcon] we decided we needed one meal of Cincinnati chili [but] to our horror we discovered that the Skyline Chili is closed on Sunday." We avoided that dilemma by going to the Skyline Chili restaurant about an hour after we arrived at the Midwestcon hotel (I'm not a fan of chili, but Nicki loves it). We figured that other meals would be fan gatherings, so getting the chili expedition out of the way as soon as possible was the Right Thing to Do.

On latter-day classical music: "My opinion of most 20th century music is that you would have a better result by throwing two cats in a feed sack." I'm not *quite* so negative on it, but I do agree that it does not hold up against music from the previous two centuries. There have been some excellent compositions from the 1900s, though: Copland's ballet suite "Appalachian Spring" (which you mention), Rachmaninoff's 2nd and 3rd piano concertos and also his final composition for piano and orchestra "Rhapsody on Theme by Paganini," Maurice Ravel's "Bolero," all of George Gershwin's works, including "Rhapsody in Blue" and "An American in Paris," Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana," Aram Khachaturian's "Adagio," Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings," Shostakovich's Jazz Suites, Prokofiev's music from "Romeo and Juliet"... There

actually were some pretty good 20th Century compositions, but they are far overshadowed by earlier works.

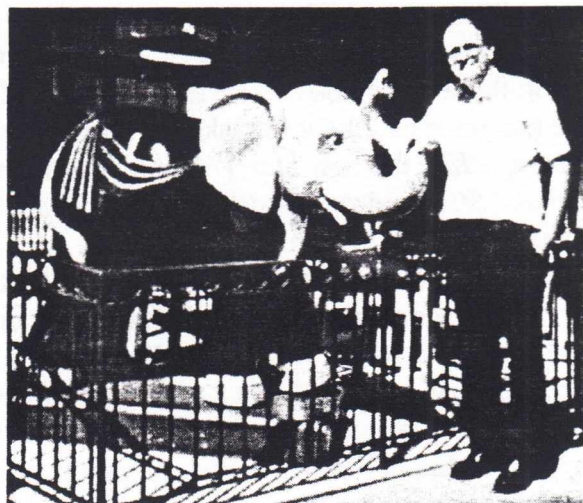
On classical banjo: Thanks for the recommendation on Bela Fleck. I'll check out his CD "Perpetual Motion." He was recently at Wolftrap here in the DC area, and the concert got very favorable reviews.

More about the 'Party Animals'

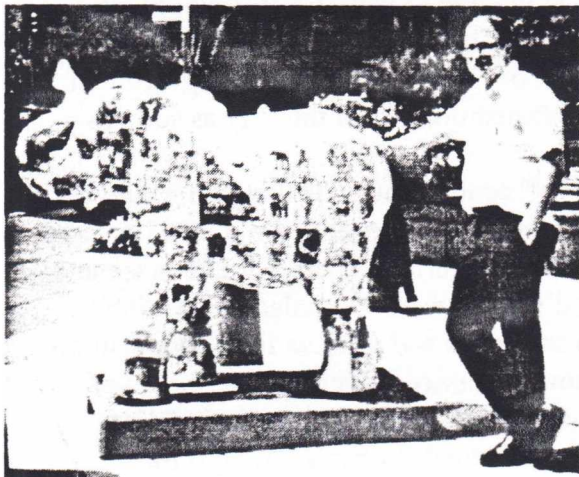
About a week ago I took an afternoon to go 'on safari' to locate some of the 200 Party Animals located here and there throughout the city. They weren't hard to find because of the map online at a web site. But because there are so many of them, I was only able to find about 30 or so in the three hours I was out on the streets, on a very hot day. Here are a few photos:



"The Divine Miss Donkey"



"Elephantom of the Opera"



"Periodic Table of the Elephants"



"Just Visiting"