Dvořák: Complete Works for solo Piano – Vol 1

Volume 1 (Early Works, 1855-79):

Polka in E Major, B. 3 Two Minuets, Op. 28
Dumka in D Minor, Op. 35
Theme with Variations in A-flat Major, Op. 36
Twelve Silhouettes, Op. 8

History has not been kind to Dvořák’s solo-piano music – or, more accurately, has never paid it much mind. Overshadowed by the great symphonies and other orchestral works, the operas and oratorias, the chamber music, and even the fourhand piano pieces, the solo-piano works have been considered an important part of the Dvořák oeuvre. (It is one of history’s jokes that perhaps the best-known of all his works happens to have been written for solo piano: the Humoresque in G-flat major.) There is no doubt that his piano music is uneven, and includes a little hackwork, that he did not turn to the piano to do his best and most innovative work, that no one of his piano pieces rises to the level of Beethoven or Chopin or Brahms. Yet, the best of his piano works are at his highest level of inspiration, craftsmanship, and personality, and there are a few minor masterpieces in the bunch whose relative neglect by publishers, concert artists, and record companies is difficult to understand.

Dvořák was not really a pianist. His training and early performing experience were largely as a string player, and he never claimed to be a pianist of more than average competence. Still, solo-piano music can claim pride of place in his oeuvre in at least one respect: his very first surviving composition was for the piano, the Forget-me-not Polka in C Major, B.1, composed around 1855-6, when he was in his early teens. (Antonín Liehmann, his teacher at the Prague Organ School, contributed the polka’s Trio).

A second Polka for piano, in E major, dates from February 1860, a time when Dvořák occasionally composed dance music for a band he had joined after graduating from the Organ School. Assuming its authenticity (which some scholars doubt), the E-major polka offers an early glimpse into that mixing of Austro-German and Slavonic idioms that would characterize Dvořák’s music throughout his career.

After these modest youthful essays, Dvořák wrote no more solo-piano music for years, and when he turned to it again it was largely out of convenience. In 1873 and 1875, he published two Potpourris for piano, one from each of the two versions of his comic opera King and Charcoal Burner. The first of them, indeed, was one of his very first publications, and it appeared at a turning point in his life. Now in his early thirties, he had quit working as an orchestral musician, earning treble to inner voices, becoming accompaniments to new themes. Dvořák returns, in the Humoresques, to the short forms in which he usually did his best work at the piano – simple ternary or rondo forms that he enlivens with subtle but telling variations, transitions, and codas (he returns to his favourite device of closing with a hint of a secondary theme, in the tonic key), but now, at this mature stage in his compositional career, he shows a much greater gift for continuous variation and development of his material. Dvořák brings his American style home in the Humoresques, back to the forms and proportions with which he was most comfortable, albeit with a new wisdom, confidence, and assurance.

Working on the Humoresques obviously inspired Dvořák: he no sooner completed the set than he began to work on another, in August and September of 1894. But he completed only two pieces, B. 188, before dropping the project. (He soon turned his attention to the Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 104.) These two pieces would prove to be his last works for solo piano, and, save a couple of songs and a polka arrangement, were his last works to feature the piano in any way. They were published, under the titles “Lullaby” and “Capriccio,” in Berlin. In 1911, as Op. posth. The second piece, incidentally, was marked only “Allegretto” scherzando; “Capriccio” was a title added by the publisher, with the consent of Dvořák’s former pupil (and son-in-law) Josef Suk, who prepared them for publication.

The two pieces maintain the high standards Dvořák set in the Humoresques – and, moreover, reflect a return to his Slavonic roots and away from the American idiom, which he had probably exhausted. The evocative harmonic ambiguities in the “Lullaby,” the subtle transitions and variations of thematic detail in the “Capriccio,” the imagination and technical security demonstrated in both – these suggest what could have been a worthy companion set, a sort of “Slavonic Humoresques.” Whatever the reason Dvořák abandoned the idea, he missed – regrettably, for us – a last change to contribute a major piano work that returned to his native musical idiom.

Kevin Bazzana

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Humoresques, for all eight are steeped in American folk music. As in the Suite, there is a Fixation with pentatonic melodies – sometimes rigorously, as in No. 3, other times suggestively through an emphasis on the second and sixth scale degrees. There are hints of non-diatonic modes, like the Aeolian (with its flattened seventh) and the Lydian (with its sharpened fourth). There is an almost tiresome regularity of phrasing, along with short repeated themes and strongly marked rhythms evocative of folk music. There are pedal points and drone-like accompaniments, of the kind associated with folk instruments (see Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 8), even a little melodic ornamentation here and there that seems to mimic folk practice. Several Humoresques feature once again the crude melodies, hammered repeated notes, and swirling figuration of Dvořák in his “Hiawatha” mode – most obviously No. 5, in A minor, which opens with a short, modal theme with five repeated notes, a theme heard more than thirty times, in many different keys, in less than two hundred measures. The gentle No. 4 was based on a theme representing Hiawatha as a child, borrowed from the abandoned opera sketches. More so than the Suite, the Humoresques evoke the Negro spiritual (there are “blue” notes in several pieces), as well as the popular songs of white America – both antiquated songs like “Barbara Allen” and later songs like those of Stephen Foster. The out-sized fame of No. 7 should not obscure the fact that all of the Humoresques are associated with folk instruments (see Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 8), even a little melodic ornamentation here and there that seems to mimic folk practice. Several Humoresques feature once again the crude melodies, hammered repeated notes, and swirling figuration of Dvořák in his “Hiawatha” mode – most obviously No. 5, in A minor, which opens with a short, modal theme with five repeated notes, a theme heard more than thirty times, in many different keys, in less than two hundred measures. The gentle No. 4 was based on a theme representing Hiawatha as a child, borrowed from the abandoned opera sketches. More so than the Suite, the Humoresques evoke the Negro spiritual (there are “blue” notes in several pieces), as well as the popular songs of white America – both antiquated songs like “Barbara Allen” and later songs like those of Stephen Foster.

No. 7 in G-flat major, of course, went on to acquire a special renown of its own. It is the piece everyone knows simply as “Dvořák’s Humoresque,” the one that would appear in countless piano recitals and on countless parlor pianos, the one that would be popularised in arrangements by everyone from Fritz Kreisler to Art Tatum, the one that lent its title to a bad Joan Crawford movie. It is in fact one of the simpler, less sophisticated Humoresques, but with enduring, sentimental melodies and dotted rhythms that suggest a gentle cakewalk, though legend has it that the rhythm imitates the train on which Dvořák supposedly penned the piece.

The out-sized fame of No. 7 should not obscure the fact that all of the Humoresques are beautiful, attractively set pieces of high quality, conceived during a period of particularly fertile creativity. Even more so than the Suite, the Humoresques are a concise, stylised portrait – almost a beautiful, attractively set pieces of high quality, conceived during a period of particularly fertile creativity. Even more so than the Suite, the Humoresques are a concise, stylised portrait – almost a "Barbara Allen" and later songs like those of Stephen Foster.

Dvořák turned much more ambitiously to the piano a few months later, in the fall of 1876, when he began work on the Piano Concerto in G Minor, Op. 33. Though completed and performed and published, the work never entered the mainstream concerto repertory, due largely to a solo part that most pianists find awkward and unrewarding. Dvořák’s lack of professional polish as a pianist shows: the solo part is unusually modest, integrated with the orchestra and giving the pianist few opportunities to shine, and the technical passages are often ungainly, poorly laid out for the hands. Dvořák found much of the musical material attractive, but was unhappy with his piano writing. He never got around to revising it, and today the concerto is often heard – when it is heard at all – in a later revised edition that features a more brilliant piano part. But his work on the concerto had the salutary effect of inspiring him to make a serious foray into solo-piano music, in two works composed in December of 1876: the Dumka in D Minor, Op. 35; and the Theme with Variations in A-flat Major, Op. 36, his first substantial piano piece, and possibly his greatest.

Op. 35 was the first of many works and movements by Dvořák to bear the label “dumka”; there are other important examples in the Slavonic Dances, the Op. 81 piano quintet, and the Dumky...
Dvořák was keenly aware that he stood in Beethoven's very long shadow; we can contact is Variation 3, which in both works is in A-flat minor, with diversions to other flat keys, resemblances); and both feature a similar rhythmic pattern in Variation 1. But the closest point of key; both have a long theme in a moderate 3/8 (the two themes even have a few motivic pacing music in major keys, though the second of these interpolations, in G major, has its own darker core in the minor mode. Dvořák subjects the main theme to melodic variation each time it is reprised (this is typical of dumky, and may mimic folk practice); the final appearance of the theme is dissonances that create an exotic haze, before finally dissolving into the clear light of D major.

Dvořák must have been pleased and inspired by his Dumka, since he immediately embarked on a much more ambitious piano project: the Theme with Variations in A-flat Major, Op. 36. It is important in many respects, not least because it is Dvořák’s only solo-piano work that is neither a short piece nor a set of short pieces: the extended theme and its eight variations are molded into a continuous dramatic structure some twenty minutes in length. The work had a model: Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26 – the so-called “Funeral March” sonata – the first movement of which is, unusually, a theme with (five) variations. Dvořák never explicitly cited Beethoven, but the resemblances between his Op. 36 and the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 26 are too numerous and too fundamental to be coincidental. Both are in the same key; both have a long theme in a moderate 3/8 (the two themes even have a few motivic resemblances); and both feature a similar rhythmic pattern in Variation 1. But the closest point of contact is Variation 3, which in both works is in A-flat minor, with diversions to other flat keys, with a syncopated melody and a similar accompanimental texture. Like every other nineteenth-century composer, Dvořák was keenly aware that he stood in Beethoven’s very long shadow; we can repeated-note motive (the note is usually the dominant), accompanied by busy – sometimes wildly swirling – figuration, usually in a minor key with strong modal inflections. (Listen to the contrasting middle sections of the first and third movements, and to the wilder principal themes in the second and fifth) even the slow movement the word “dumka” down from the Czech and Polish words meaning “to ponder”; the plural form is “dumky.”) Many nineteenth-century Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian composers, including Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky, and Balakirev, wrote dumky, but the genre came to be associated most closely with Bohemians – Dvořák most prominent among them. For a composer whose nationalism was so insistently pan-Slavonic as Dvořák’s – he borrowed generously from all Slavic cultures – the dumka was an ideal genre. In his Op. 35, Dvořák’s gift for creating a stylized synthesis of folk and art musics is now matched by a new level of skill in piano writing: the melancholy mood of the opening section is enhanced by the unobtrusive canonic textures, and the secure handling of chromatic harmony. The piece is in a simple rondo form, the secondary themes offering relief from the prevailing melancholy with faster-paced music in major keys, though the second of these interpolations, in G major, has its own darker core in the minor mode. Dvořák subjects the main theme to melodic variation each time it is reprised (this is typical of dumky, and may mimic folk practice); the final appearance of the theme is a more ornate and grandiose, though the work ends in with a long tonic pedal sprinkled with unpolished, sometimes awkward American folk idiom. Dvořák in 1894 was, after all, a celebrated and accomplished composer in his fifties who, the year before, had declared that he would now compose only for his own pleasure, and who had no need to churn out potboilers that did not meet his standards. As it turns out, he was fond enough to the Suite to offer it to his “official” publisher, Simrock, and to orchestrate it a year later, though that version, which many listeners now prefer, was not published until 1911, seven years after his death.

While still in America, Dvořák had begun jotting down ideas for what he though would be a set of “New Scottish Dances,” as he called them, but he found that his musical ideas were too varied in character for such a project, so he adopted instead the title Humoresques, a term that implies caprice or fantasy or geniality more than outright humour. (It is interesting to recall that in 1880 he had also begun work on a projected new series of Scottish Dances, which eventually evolved into the Op. 56 mazurkas. Considering how modest were his original Scottish Dances, Op. 41 composed in 1877, his apparent attachment to them is surprising.) To his “Scottish” sketches Dvořák incorporated others – one for a funeral march (which evolved into No. 1), another for the scherzo of an unfinished symphony in B minor (which evolved into No. 8) – when he returned home for his summer holiday in 1894, completing eight Humoresques by the end of August.

It is difficult to see what Dvořák could possibly have considered Scottish about these...
York, in October of 1892. Dvořák was lionized in America, where his music had been popular since the time of his first set of Slavonic Dances, in 1878, and he travelled widely outside of New York – to Boston, Chicago, Iowa, Omaha, St. Paul, Buffalo, Niagara Falls. He was inspired creatively by his contact with the United States the Negro, native-Indian, and other folk and popular music he heard there appealed to him, and were absorbed into his compositional arsenal, manifested famously in subsequent works like the Symphony No. 9 (From the New World); the String Quartet, Op. 96, and the String Quintet, Op. 97, both nicknamed “The American”; and the Sonatina for violin and piano, Op. 100. Mrs. Thurber urged him to write an opera on the traditional American subject of Hiawatha, the enlightened fifteenth-century Onondaga tribal chief celebrated in Longfellow’s long poem Song of Hiawatha (1855); Dvořák got no farther than making some preliminary sketches, however. In April 1894, he signed a new two-year contract with Mrs. Thurber before leaving for a summer holiday in Bohemia. He returned to America in November, but a decline in his patron’s financial fortunes nullified their contract, and after a few months he returned home.

The Suite and the Humoresques, both of which he worked on before leaving New York in the spring of 1894, are imbued throughout with the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic features of his highly personal and stylised conception of musical Americanism, so distinct from his usual Slavonic style. The Suite, composed in February and March, is the closest equivalent in Dvořák’s piano music to a multi-movement sonata-type work. (In fact, while in America he had sketched a theme that he thought appropriate for a piano sonata, but he abandoned the idea.) More than even his programmatically unified sets of short pieces, or the Op. 52 pieces, the Suite is a coherent cycle of movements; a fast movement, a scherzo, an easygoing march, a slow movement, and a boisterous finale. The last movement even ends with a grandiose restatement of the theme with which the first movement began, making the cycle explicit. Unlike the simpler sets aimed at the amateur market, the Suite seems intended for concert performance by a professional virtuoso.

Trademark features of Dvořák’s “American style” recur in all five movements. Curiously there is little evocation of the Negro music that he loved, and that he drew on so memorably in the New World Symphony. Only in the last movement, in the second theme in A major, do we here a melody (albeit a fairly fast one) with some of the character of a spiritual, though in the third movement we might also hear the tongue-in-cheek strut of the cakewalk, a popular dance in America in the 1890s. For the most part, however, Dvořák dwells on his “Indian style,” used most famously in the scherzo of the New World Symphony. (Is the “Indian” character of the Suite a holdover from his tentative work on the Hiawatha opera?) All four of the faster movements feature a distinctive, hammered
He may have used it in Op. 36 only because he was influenced by his Beethoven model, and in Op. 78 only because he had used it in Op. 36. Yet it was clearly a form that he had mastered.

Then Dvořák next turned to the piano in a serious way it was with immense consequences for his career: in the spring of 1878, he produced his first set of Slavonic Dances, for four-hand piano (his orchestral version followed soon after). The Dances were a hit, and earned him – and the strain of Bohemian nationalism he presented – a new and enthusiastic international audience. It was a dream come true for his publishers, who were now eager to bring out all of his music, old and new, particularly music – like piano solos – that would appeal to the amateur market. In fact, the two Minuets, the Dumka, and the Theme with Variations, all from 1876, were published only in 1879, after the success of the Slavonic Dances, as were two other earlier works: the Scotch Dances, Op. 41, and the two Furtianty, Op. 42.

The first piano music that Dvořák wrote especially to satisfy this new demand was the set of twelve short pieces he called Silhouettes, Op. 8 composed in the fall of 1879. The artificially low opus number reveals a slight deception on Dvořák’s part. The Silhouettes were not written for his principal publisher of major new works, Simrock of Berlin, but for a publisher in Leipzig, who wanted to bring out his older music. Dvořák had no more old piano music to offer, so passed off the Silhouettes as early works by giving them a low opus number. In his defence, the first drafts for the Slavonic Dances, as were two other earlier works: the Scotch Dances, Op. 41, and the two Furtianty, Op. 42.

The isolated Humoresque in F-sharp Major, B. 138, should not be confused with the later, more famous Humoresque Op. 101/No. 7, which was written in G-flat major but which, in some editions, has been notated in F-sharp. Dvořák wrote the F-sharp-major Humoresque in 1884, for the first volume of a collection of pieces published that same year, in Prague, by F.A. Urbánek. It is not a sophisticated piece, and its unprepared shifts between themes and keys are hardly subtle, though it has a lovely principal theme, simply but attractively set. The Two Little Pears, B. 156, are easy, crudely descriptive dance pieces, composed, probably in December of 1887, for The Young Czech Pianist, another Urbánek collection, published in Prague in 1888.

Neither work represent Dvořák at his highest level of inspiration, and he seems to have thought so himself. He gave the pair an artificially low opus number, passing it off as an early work, and withheld it form Simrock of Berlin, the publisher to whom he assigned the new music he thought merited the highest. Dvořák was not a sophisticated piece, and its unprepared shifts between themes and keys are hardly subtle, though it has a lovely principal theme, simply but attractively set. The Two Little Pears, B. 156, are easy, crudely descriptive dance pieces, composed, probably in December of 1887, for The Young Czech Pianist, another Urbánek collection, published in Prague in 1888.

The Album Leaf in E-flat Major, B. 158 was composed on 21 July 1888, written into the autograph album of a certain “K.H.,” at Pisek, and was not published until Editio Supraphon’s critical edition of the complete works of Dvořák, begun in 1955. Around 1891, Dvořák composed a theme, B. 303, apparently intended to serve as the subject of variations. It is a tantalizing suggestion that, at the height of his creative powers, he considered making another rare foray into a form he had used with such singular success fifteen years before, in his Theme with Variations in F-flat Major, Op. 36. But it was not to be, and the theme was published alone, in Prague, in 1894.

Dvořák’s last two substantial piano works – the Suite in A Major, Op. 98, and the Humoresques, Op. 101 – were among the last products of his busy, fertile few years in the United States. In June of 1891, he had been invited by a wealthy American woman, Mrs. Jeannette Thurber, to become director of the National Conservatory of Music, in New York. After some negotiation, he agreed. For most of the early months of 1892, he made a farewell tour of Bohemia and Moravia, appearing as a pianist in some forty chamber-music concerts, the featured work being his new post in New...
favoured is expanded with great skill and imagination into a seamless drama of more than three
hundred measures, one that never wears out its welcome or betrays a moment’s drop in inspiration.
Listen, in the first hundred measures, to how Dvořák builds up his main theme from the stark
timpani strokes of the opening measures, then extends and develops that theme with new motives
and every-changing textures, harmonic sideslips and cross-rhythms, before allowing the theme to
dissolve as mysteriously as it began, and lead seamlessly into the C-major trio. The music of the trio
he builds up and develops no less skilfully, no less seamlessly, for more than a hundred measures,
and the return of the opening section is almost Haydnesque in its clever reinterpretation of material.
The best of Poetic Tone Pictures, like the “Bacchanalia,” show the mature Dvořák reinterpreting his
cherished short forms in light of his experience in larger instrumental forms, the proportions and
keyboard settings growing correspondingly more ambitious in order to contain the wealth of ideas.
Dvořák, in 1889, was no longer under a compulsion to produce piano music for the domestic
market, and his turn here to a more ambitious kind of programmatic piano music, after an unusual
creative dry spell, can only be explained by personal creative desire. The result was some of his most
impressive music for the piano.
Kevin Bazzana

The Complete Works for Solo Piano - Volume 5
Volume 5 (late Works, 1884-94):

Dumka and Furiant, Op. 12 Humoresque in F# Major, B. 138
Two Little Pearls, B. 156 Album Leaf in E-flat Major, B. 158
Theme, for variations, B. 303 Suite in A Major, Op. 98
Eight Humoresques, Op. 101 Two Pieces, B. 188

The last decade of Dvořák’s piano writing included major sets but also isolated short works, some
written for particular occasions. The Dumka in C Minor and the Furiant in G Minor, both probably
composed in September 1884, around the time of his second visit to England, were published
together the next year, in Prague, as Op. 12. The pairing of these two contrasting folk-music forms—
melancholy dumka and ebullient furiant – was a common practice (see, for example, the slow
movement and scherzo of Dvořák’s Op. 81 piano quintet), though these two particular pieces may
not have been conceived as a set. The furiant was in fact first published alone, in London, in the
Christmas 1884 supplement of the Magazine of Music.

They may qualify as bagatelles for another reason. The first Silhouette, with a tender middle
section framed by short, fast, turbulent bursts of music, unmistakably calls to mind the last
bagatelle of Beethoven: Op. 126/No. 6, in E-flat major. This was, after all, Dvořák’s first set of
short pieces, and perhaps he intended, in the opening piece, to acknowledge his illustrious
predecessor, and so to take his place within a tradition. Perhaps, too, he intended to take up
Beethoven’s idea of the bagatelle set as a musical cycle – in this case, a less abstract, more
programmatic cycle, for the themes he chose for the Silhouettes must have reminded him of his
unrequited love, years earlier, for his pupil Josefinna Cermáková, which had inspired the Cypresses
cycle. It is tempting to interpret the first Silhouette as representing the dejected lover, and tempting
to find programmatic explanations for Dvořák’s use of the two themes of that first piece later on (as
in No. 5), and especially for his inspired idea of developing, in the last Silhouette, the turbulent
theme so harshly abbreviated in No. 1. But Dvořák left no clues to any intended programme – or,
for that matter, to any intended reference to Beethoven – so he must have intended the cycle to
stand alone as “pure music.”

There are interesting ideas here, and the simplicity of the music is often charming, but the
Silhouettes as a whole do not show off the best of Dvořák at the piano, and it is not too cynical to
attribute their weaknesses to the rush to appease demanding publishers. No. 4, for example, is a
kind of furiant followed by what sounds like a contrasting Trio in the relative major, but in lieu of
an expected reprise of the main theme, or some kind of development of the material, the piece
simply ends – or rather stops – with a perfunctory return to the main key, F-sharp minor.

Yes there are gems here, too, like the tender No. 2, just fifteen measures long yet a perfect little
drama complete with modulation, variation, recapitulation, and even a brief wisp of Chopinesque
cadenza. In the end, the Silhouettes are perhaps less important in themselves than in marking the
beginning of an upsurge in Dvořák’s interest in the solo piano – an upsurge inspired, perhaps, by
practical demands, but one that, in the next few years, in sets like the Op. 52 pieces and the Op. 54
waltzes and the Op. 56 mazurkas, resulted in some piano works of undisputed successes.
Two Furiant, Op. 42 Eight Waltzes, Op. 54
Four Eclogues, Op. 56 Scottish Dances, Op. 41

The two minor works on this program date from just before Dvořák’s breakthrough to international fame in 1878, with his first series of Slavonic Dances for four-hand piano (later orchestrated). The Scottish Dances, Op. 41, were composed around the end 1877, at a turning point in his career. In November, he won an Austrian State Stipendium, worth 600 gulden (he had been entering compositions in this competition, usually successfully, since 1874). More important than the money, he attracted the attention of Johannes Brahms, who was so impressed with Dvořák’s Moravian Duets for voices and piano that he recommended them – and Dvořák – to his own publisher, Simrock of Berlin. As a result, Simrock, hoping to repeat the success of Brahms’s own Hungarian Dances, Op. 41 is a series of fifteen simple, stylised contredanses in 2/4 time, in the eossasime style of Beethoven or Schubert, each in a different key and consisting of two repeated eight-measure strains, played one after the other at the same tempo to form a single extended movement. A few tunes are repeated; most notably, the first and last dances use the same theme in the same key. D minor, though the piece cannot be said to be “in D minor” in any meaningful sense. The title is mere convention, and there is little in the music that sounds authentically Scottish. The melodies and rhythms, the harmonic sideslips and modal inflections – this is all pure Dvořák in his simples Slavonic style, in rehearsal for the Slavonic Dances.

The two Furiants, Op. 42, from 1878, were written shortly after the completion of the Slavonic Dances. (Do they perhaps recycle ideas considered but rejected for the Dances?) The furiant, an exuberant, whirling Bohemian “swaggerer’s dance,” was one of Dvořák’s favourite genres – like the dumka, with which it was often paired and contrasted. (The middle movements – the slow movement and scherzo – of the Op. 81 piano quintet are a dumka and furiant.) The Op. 42 Furiant is less characteristic than most: they are rather virtuosic in character, obviously meant for concert performance, and they do not make much use of alternating duple and triple meters, so typical of the furiant, though accented weak beats in some phrases do hint at cross-rhythms. The first furiant is much superior of the two. Both its principal idea and contrasting middle section are typical of the furiant, though accented weak beats in some phrases do hint at cross-rhythms. The second furiant, by contrast, closes with a first furiant is much superior of the two. Both its principal idea and contrasting middle section are typical of the furiant, though accented weak beats in some phrases do hint at cross-rhythms. The concert performance, and they do not make much use of alternating duple and triple meters, so

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extended movement. A few tunes are repeated; most notably, the first and last dances use the same theme in the same key. D minor, though the piece cannot be said to be “in D minor” in any meaningful sense. The title is mere convention, and there is little in the music that sounds authentically Scottish. The melodies and rhythms, the harmonic sideslips and modal inflections – this is all pure Dvořák in his simples Slavonic style, in rehearsal for the Slavonic Dances.

The two Furiants, Op. 42, from 1878, were written shortly after the completion of the Slavonic Dances. (Do they perhaps recycle ideas considered but rejected for the Dances?) The furiant, an exuberant, whirling Bohemian “swaggerer’s dance,” was one of Dvořák’s favourite genres – like the dumka, with which it was often paired and contrasted. (The middle movements – the slow movement and scherzo – of the Op. 81 piano quintet are a dumka and furiant.) The Op. 42 Furiant is less characteristic than most: they are rather virtuosic in character, obviously meant for concert performance, and they do not make much use of alternating duple and triple meters, so typical of the furiant, though accented weak beats in some phrases do hint at cross-rhythms. The first furiant is much superior of the two. Both its principal idea and contrasting middle section are typical of the furiant, though accented weak beats in some phrases do hint at cross-rhythms. The second furiant, by contrast, closes with a first furiant is much superior of the two. Both its principal idea and contrasting middle section are typical of the furiant, though accented weak beats in some phrases do hint at cross-rhythms. The concert performance, and they do not make much use of alternating duple and triple meters, so typical of the furiant, though accented weak beats in some phrases do hint at cross-rhythms. The second furiant, by contrast, closes with a
Bohemian life is evoked in him. Rather, he looked at what he had written and titled it based on what images and feelings about the general idea of subject matter in mind, was not writing to a detailed, pre-established programme, but only after they had been composed. In other words, Dvořák, though he undoubtedly had some Schumann sense,” Dvořák was alluding to Schumann’s practice of giving titles to descriptive pieces in poetry, wherein there was an outpouring of imagination and intuition. He must point out at once that they don’t sound Schumannesque..” By programme music “in the manner of the program-a-dimensional, programmatic style” Dvořák was undoubtedly inspired by the programmatic subject of the Poetic Tone Pictures, one of his most popular works for solo piano, some of them published, though significantly none by his principal publisher, Simrock of Berlin, and only two of them assigned an opus number: the Dumka in C Minor and the Furiant G Minor, both composed around September of 1884 and published together, in 1885, as Op. 12. All of which says something about the relative importance of the piano to Dvořák the composer: once the first flush of success after the Slavonic Dances had passed, once he had offered several piano works to appease his publishers, once he had enough authority to set his own agenda, he longer seemed interested in the piano.

This means, however, that when he did return to solo-piano music, it was because he wanted to, because he had something he wanted to say at the piano. When he turned to the piano in the spring of 1889, in fact, it was to break an uncharacteristic creative lull that had lasted several months (around this time he was involved in rehearsals for the premiere of his opera The Jacobin, Op. 84). The result would prove to be his largest single piano work: an hour-long set of thirteen titled descriptive pieces called Poetic Tone Pictures, Op. 85, composed from April to June of 1889, and published later that year by Simrock. The work represents a kind of apotheosis for Dvořák as a composer for the piano: though it is an anthology of short pieces, the individual pieces are of a size and depth greater than those of his earlier of later sets, and the piano writing, while lacking the mastery – the insider’s insight – of a Chopin or a Liszt, is of a significantly higher order.

Dvořák was undoubtedly inspired by the programmatic subject of the Poetic Tone Pictures, one of profound personal meaning for him: his beloved Bohemia. As in From the Bohemian Forest, give years earlier, he sought to depict the Bohemian countryside and its inhabitants from many different angles, and he worked hard at it. In a letter to Simrock, he wrote, “I imagine the pieces will be sure to please you, because I took great pains when working on them. …Every piece will have a title and will express something, in some respects like programme music, but in the Schumann sense; still I must point out at once that they don’t sound Schumanessque.” By programme music “in the Schumann sense,” Dvořák was alluding to Schumann’s practice of giving titles to descriptive pieces only after they had been composed. In other words, Dvořák, though he undoubtedly had some programmatic ideas of subject matter in mind, was not writing to a detailed, pre-established programme. Rather, he looked at what he had written and titled it based on what images and feelings about Bohemian life is evoked in him.

rich in four-hand piano music: the ten Legends, Op. 39, from 1880-81, which Dvořák wrote with “special affection”; the six programmatic pieces under the title From the Bohemian Forest, Op. 68, from 1883-4; and the second series of eight Slavonic Dances, Op. 72, from 1886. But in the years preceding the Mazurek in E Minor and the Poetic Tone Pictures of 1880 and the Poetic Tone Pictures of 1889, he composed only nine works for solo piano, some of them published, though significantly none by his principal publisher, Simrock of Berlin, and only two of them assigned an opus number: the Dumka in C Minor and the Furiant G Minor, both composed around September of 1884 and published together, in 1885, as Op. 12. All of which says something about the relative importance of the piano to Dvořák the composer: once the first flush of success after the Slavonic Dances had passed, once he had offered several piano works to appease his publishers, once he had enough authority to set his own agenda, he longer seemed interested in the piano.

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After the great experiment of the Theme with Variations in A-flat Major, Op. 36, Dvořák never again wrote a solo-piano work on such a scale. The commercial success of the Slavonic Dances must have encouraged him to think about the popular market, and the importance piano works that followed would be sets of short pieces relatively simple in form but with a strong Slavonic character. Oscar Wilde once referred to Dvořák’s piano pieces, rather mysteriously, as “curiously coloured scarlet music,” and it does seem to be the case that Dvořák – at the piano, at least – was more comfortable writing characteristic pieces than intensely worked out structures in the manner of, say, Brahms. He had a special talent for writing fetching melodies, with pointed folk-inspired rhythms and inventive harmonizations, for making subtle variations and developments within deceptively simple forms and textures, for conveying sentiments and moods and pictures in a direct, unaffected way, on an intimate scale, drawing on characteristic musical tropes from various Slavic cultures.

When his publishers encouraged Dvořák to bring out new works for piano, to capitalize on the fame of the Slavonic Dances and to satisfy the large amateur market, he responded with the Silhouettes. Op. 8, in 1879, his first set of short pieces. It was an uneven work, but it inspired in him an upsurge of creative interest in the piano. The result, around 1880, was a fertile period in which he produced several outstanding sets for both solo and four-hand piano. Writing for amateur pianists in no way compromised Dvořák’s art. He was relatively unconvincing as a composer of virtuosic piano music; his Piano Concerto, Op. 33, from 1876, had taught him that. But when asked to write music for modest talents and domestic performance, he could work on the intimate scale in which his particular talents as a piano composer shone brightest. Indeed, since we no longer enjoy the tradition of domestic music-making that existed in Dvořák’s day, we might argue that a recording project like the present one, rather than a concert performance, offers the most effective the second time around.

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inspired by his original conception of stylised waltzes. Reconceiving his sketches for the solo piano, he composed, between December 1879 and January 1880, a set of eight waltzes, which were quickly published by Simrock.

These waltzes are a product of Dvořák's publishing practices in these first years of new celebrity. His best piano works – the Dumka, the Theme with Variations, the two Furiant, the Op. 54 waltzes, the Op. 56 mazurkas – were offered to Simrock, his principal publisher of new works. To other publishers, in Leipzig and Prague, he offered piano works of lesser quality – the two Minuets, the Scottish Dances, the Silhouettes, the Op. 52 pieces, the Impromptu in D Minor, the arrangements of orchestral pieces – sometimes passing them off as older works with low opus numbers. We can assess Dvořák's opinion of a work by the publisher to whom he offered it; he seems to have distinguished between piano music inspired by his own creative desires and that which was just for the marketing mill. The Op. 54 waltzes, uncommissioned works of high quality, clearly belong in the first category.

In a letter to Simrock dated 2 February 1880, Dvořák wrote, “I expect the Waltzes to be quite a success.” Simrock thought so, too, and eager to capitalize on the popularity of Czech music, he wanted to call them “Czech Waltzes,” or “Slavonic Waltzes.” Dvořák declined, pointing to the Germanic origin of the genre. And it is true that, in his piano music, he seems to have drawn more inspiration from his Austro-German predecessors than from, say, Chopin or Liszt, in technique and texture as well as in form. In the Waltzes, and in contemporary works like the Mazurkas, we hear relatively little of the urbanity, sophisticated stylization, and salon style of Chopin, but rather the forms and sentiments of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms. Still, we cannot make a hard-and-fast distinction, for the Waltzes reveal a mishmash of influences. No. 5, for example, seems Brahmsian in carriage, but also recalls Schubert in his Viennese mode, not to mention the cross-rhythms that Chopin explored in his so-called “2/4 Waltz” in A-flat major, Op. 42 (No. 8 features cross-rhythms, too, in an even more Chopinesque setting.) And at least one of the Waltzes seems to have been intended as a nod to Chopin. No. 4, in the key of D-flat major and at a fast tempo, begins, with the right hand alone, with a hint of a trill and figuration turning around the dominant note A-flat, before the oom-pah left hand enters – and if this all sounds familiar it is because I have just described the opening of Chopin’s “Minute” Waltz.

Still, Simrock may have been right; “Slavonic Waltzes” would have been an appropriate title. In the end, all of the influences Dvořák absorbed were subsumed by the unmistakable pan-Slavonic character that a great composer must have. Those cross-rhythms, so dear to the heart of a composer like Dvořák, were not need for him to flatter the expectations of a virtuoso soloist. He seems to have found it more rewarding to write for four hands than for two: he could think more like a symphonist than a pianist. And some of his most attractive piano writing is found in his chamber music, where he could indulge in his gift for orchestration, weaving the piano in and out of the strings in colourful and innovative ways. What one critic called Dvořák’s “almost pathological attraction to the upper register of the keyboard,” for example, could be tiresome in solo works, yet often paid big dividends in chamber music, as in the delightful Scherzo of his Op. 81 piano quintet. In any event, Dvořák’s modesty as a pianist and piano composer were pronounced enough that his few forays into larger, more virtuosic textures – most impressively, in the thirteen Poetic Tone Pictures, Op. 85 – are worthy of special note.

The composition of the Op. 56 Mazurkas marked the end of Dvořák’s great upsurge of piano writing around 1880 – and upsurge initially spawned by commercial concerns, to be sure, but one that nonetheless inspired him to create several sets of pieces of high quality. The next few years were
with modal and rhythmical inflections that seems more authentically folk-based. If the textures are less saturated with chromatic spice than Chopin’s, we still find Dvořák’s trademark harmonic sidesteps, usually sudden shifts between keys a third apart (from A-flat to E major in the first part of No. 1, from C to A major in the first part of No. 2). His interpretation of mazurka rhythm is generally less ambiguous than Chopin’s. In No. 2, for example, which has perhaps the strongest mazurka flavour, the accented weak beat is invariably the second; Chopin was less predictable.

Dvořák’s Mazurkas are more reflective than virtuosic, relatively simple settings in which subtle variations and developments have great meaning. Schubert seems like a more relevant predecessor than Chopin: a mazurka like No. 3, with its gentle, waltz-like carriage and sweet hints of melancholy, recalls the Schubert of the Moments musicaux, tapping deep feelings through deceptively modest means.

Dvořák produced a few other isolated piano pieces around this time, some of them perhaps attempts at sets that went nowhere. The four untitled Album Leaves, B. 109, from 1880, were never published in his lifetime – again, presumably, due to his strong self-editing instinct. The first and third Album Leaves, in D major and F major, testify to his fondness for frequent and sudden modulations to distant keys; the second, in F-sharp minor, is a simple, lovely bagatelle in F-sharp minor. The fourth, marked Allegretto, is equal in quality to any of his short pieces. It is curiously ambivalent, both tonally and rhythmically: nominally in G major, it insistently pivots towards E minor. The fourth, marked Allegretto, is equal in quality to any of his short pieces. It is curiously ambivalent, both tonally and rhythmically: nominally in G major, it insistently pivots towards E minor, closing in that key, and the rhythm is frequently syncopated; the result is a strangely elusive miniature.

Dvořák wrote an untitled piece in 1881, B.116 that is usually referred to as the Moderato in A major, but while it opens in that tempo and key, both soon change, and the bulk of the piece is a fast peasant dance in D minor. (Dvořák left it unpublished.) The Impromptu in D Minor, B. 129, was composed on 16 January 1883 and published that same year in Prague, in a musical supplement to the magazine Humoristické listy. It is a more substantial work musically, richer and more varied in harmony and texture, with a lovely central episode in D major, closing in that key, and the rhythm is frequently syncopated; the result is a strangely elusive miniature.

When he published his Mazurkas in 1880, he gave them the opus number 56, since the Eclogues number 56, but they were never published in his lifetime – not until 1921, years after his death. Dvořák’s composed his four Eclogues in January and February of 1880, and assigned them the opus number 56, but they were never published in his lifetime. He left to future generations the task of sorting out two works with the same opus number.

The term “eclogue” originated in literature, and dates back to the ancient Greeks, but in music it was first used by the Bohemian composer Václav Tomášek (1774-1850), to describe a piano miniature of moderate difficulty that was rustic or pastoral in nature, whether robust or lyrical. Dvořák’s composed his four Eclogues in January and February of 1880, and assigned them the opus number 56, but they were never published in his lifetime – not until 1921, years after his death. When he published his Mazurkas in 1880, he gave them the opus number 56, since the Eclogues remained in manuscript and he had no intention of publishing them. He left to future generations the task of sorting out two works with the same opus number.

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them worthy of publication. He may have been right about the set as a whole, but the first two pieces, at least are accomplished and beautiful, and nicely laid out for the piano, if hardly innovative or well developed. We know he liked the first Eclogue: he reused it as the fifth of his Mazurkas, beautifully recasting it from a lively and rather virtuosic piece also seem to a gentler dance in triple time. His inspiration seems to have dropped somewhat in the last two Eclogues, though he liked two themes in the fourth well enough to reuse them prominently more than six years later, in the first piece of the second cycle of Slavonic Dances. All four Eclogues are unpretentious miniatures in simple ternary form, closing with a literal repeat of the opening section, rather than a subtly varied repeat of the kind that Dvořák usually preferred when he was feeling more inspired.

The Complete Works for Solo Piano - Volume 3

Volume 3 (Middle Period Works, 1880-83):

Four Album Leaves, B. 109
Six Piano Pieces, Op. 52
Six Mazurkas, Op. 56 Moderato in A Major, B. 116
Question, B. 128a
Impromptu in D Minor, B. 129

After the huge success of the Slavonic Dances, in 1878, Dvořák’s publishers were willing and able to sell just about anything that bore his name, though his refusal to publish his four eclogues shows that he would not be pressured into releasing works that he did not think worthy. We can see that same self-critical attitude at work with the set of Piano Pieces. Op 52, that he wrote around June of 1880, a few months after the Eclogues. This time, his effort to produce music on demand without sacrificing his standards was at least partially successful. He wrote six pieces in all, but permitted only four to be published in 1881, under the title “Impromptu, Intermezzo, Gigue, and Eclogue.”

(They were published in Leipzig, not by Simrock of Berlin, to whom he invariably sent the works he considered most successful, like the Waltzes and Mazurkas.) The untitled Allegro molto in C minor does seem to be up to the standards of the four published pieces, but Dvořák probably omitted it from the first edition only because it was too similar in key and mood to the Impromptu; it was published only long after his death, in 1921. The untitled Tempo di Marcia in E-flat major, the first of his unpublished Eclogues, composed a few months earlier and beautifully recast here, in a gentle triple meter, as No. 5 – Dvořák had a set of six dances that he considered worthy of being published immediately by Simrock of Berlin.

Comparison to the great mazurkas of Chopin was and is inevitable, and Dvořák’s efforts, by this yardstick, seem like less in many respects – less ambitious, less stylised, less intensely developed, less interesting in their accompagniments, less pervasively chromatic, less demanding technically, less evocative pianistically, less profound expressively. Yet the comparison misses the point, for Dvořák was not aiming at the sophistication of the concert hall or the urbane salon; he intended a simpler stylisation of the mazurka that stayed closer to its folk roots, and was more accessible to the amateur market. Dvořák’s melodic and harmonic vocabulary here is much simpler and more direct,