

## Contact, Kevin Puts

(Born 1972, St. Louis, Missouri)

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and a Grammy, Kevin Puts has established himself as one of America's top-flight composers. His works have been commissioned and performed by leading entities such as the Metropolitan Opera and Philadelphia Orchestra. He has collaborated with some of today's finest artists, including Renée Fleming and Yo-Yo Ma. The work we will hear tonight was inspired by our soloists, who reached out to the composer with the idea of composing a concerto for them. After hearing one of their typically wide-ranging, improvisational performances at a pub in New York City (2017), Puts said, "I felt both elated—by the infectious energy and joy they exude as performers—and also rather daunted by the thought. It seemed our musical tastes were so similar that I suggested to them, not at all facetiously, 'Maybe you ought to write your own concerto!'" The spirit of improvisation runs throughout the work's infectious four movements. The opening movement, *The Call*, begins with an open-ended, wordless harmonic progress vocalized by the soloists and then taken up by the orchestra. The second movement, *Codes*, is propulsive and startling. In the third movement, *Contact*, the music turns cold and stark. "I had the image of an abandoned vessel floating inert in the recesses of space," said the composer. The joyous fourth movement, *Convivium*, includes a reprise of the opening theme. The work's title and underlying ideas owe something to the 1997 film *Contact*, in which the lead character, played by Jodie Foster, encounters intelligent extraterrestrial life through radio signals. The isolation of the pandemic years was also an influence. Said Puts, "The word contact has gained new resonance during these years of isolation. It is my hope that this concerto might be heard as an expression of yearning for this fundamental human need."

## Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95

("From the New World"), Antonín Dvořák

(Born Nelahozeves, 1841; died Prague, 1904)

Dvořák was the leading Czech nationalist composer of the latter half of the nineteenth century. His parents recognized his talent early and arranged for him to study music from the age of twelve. Over the next several years he studied violin, piano, organ, and music theory and, what is perhaps more important, did the things that working musicians do. He gave lessons (piano), provided music for church services, played in dance bands and theater orchestras (he was primarily a violist), and participated in any number of civic and social events involving music—all the while making his first forays into composition. Musical life in Prague during the years of Dvořák's apprenticeship was bustling, providing many opportunities for an aspiring composer to experience first-hand the masterworks of Mozart, Weber, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Wagner, and Rossini, among others.

The greater part (and the best) of Dvořák's music is shaped by the idiosyncrasies of Bohemian folk song and dance. With the publication of his *Moravian Duets* in the late 1870s he became a sensation whose every new composition was eagerly anticipated. Dvořák composed prolifically in all the standard genres of his day—symphonies, operas, concertos, chamber music, choral music, songs, and music for piano. He produced a handful of masterpieces and a larger number of sturdy compositions that have remained in the standard repertory. Dvořák was a tireless worker and in some respects a simple man. (His other passion was locomotives.) The peasant honesty of his music is a source of its strength but has also been a cause of derision. The late Romantics expected their great artists to be brilliantly neurotic (think of Mahler and Tchaikovsky). Dvořák had the audacity to enjoy "God, love, and motherland," as he put it, and you can hear that in his music.

In 1892 Dvořák was invited to New York to head up the newly established National Conservatory of Music. The school was the brainchild of Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, the wife of a wealthy food merchant. Mrs. Thurber

# Program Notes

sought the creation of a distinctly American strain of classical music to parallel the musics of European countries. Mrs. Thurber called on Dvořák to show American composers how to do for American music what he had already done for Czech music.

Dvořák went to his task with enthusiasm, convinced that the key to America's musical future lay in the assimilation of its folk music. With the help of African Americans at the National Conservatory, Dvořák examined slave songs and found them to be a promising source of melodic inspiration. "These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American. They are the folk-songs of America, and our composers must turn to them... There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot find a thematic source there." Dvořák also became familiar with Native American music, though only through transcriptions and the commercialized versions performed in traveling minstrel shows. At one

point, he planned (but never completed) an operatic project based on Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, which he had known for many years in Czech translation.

Dvořák promoted his vision of an authentic American music in his teaching and in articles in newspapers and journals. And he put it into practice in his own compositions, especially in his ninth symphony, *From the New World*. Dvořák began the New World Symphony in December of 1892, a few weeks after arriving in the United States, and completed it on 24 May of the following year. It was first performed by the New York Philharmonic on 16 December 1893 under the baton of Dvořák's close friend Anton Seidl. The work was a sensational hit. "The people clapped so much I had to thank them from the box like a king," Dvořák recalled, with some embarrassment.

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