Dvořák’s Life and Work from 1857 through 1877
A Preliminary Report on New Findings

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In my ongoing research directed toward a large overall study of the life and work of Antonín Dvořák, supported by the International Research and Exchanges Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities (both in the USA), Bärenreiter Verlag (Germany), and the Czech Science Foundation (Grantová agentura České republiky), I have concentrated so far (i.e. as of September 2007) mainly on the period from his birth through the year 1877. It will be some time yet before my work is complete; I tentatively expect the finished monograph to be published by Bärenreiter (in English) in 2009 or 2010. Some of my findings concerning Dvořák’s childhood and adolescence have already been presented in two earlier issues of Hudební věda: in 4/1995 on Dvořák’s early places of residence (in the Czech language, with an updated English version forthcoming in Vol. 23 of Czech Music, the journal of the Dvořák Society for Czech and Slovak Music of Great Britain), and in 1/2005 on his non-musical education (in English). In the present brief report I shall present additional new discoveries and hypotheses, for the time being only in ‘capsule form’ without elaboration or documentation – I invite readers to contact me for further information. Part of my purpose is to engender fruitful discussion before my study takes its final form.

I am indebted to innumerable friends and colleagues for useful ‘tips’ and opinions communicated personally, and for facilitating access to materials relevant to my work. Let me mention here at least some of those whose help has been directly relevant to the specific findings presented below: Jan Baťa, Zlatuše Brátková, David Brodbeck, Jarmil Burghauser, Iacopo Cividini, Jan Dehner, Petr Dlabač, Jaroslava Dobrinčićová, Antonín Dvořák III, Jana Fojtíková, Jarmila Gabrielová, Jonáš Hájek, Markéta Hallová, Markéta Kabelková, Jakub Michl, Peter Poltun, Hartmut Schick, Karl Stapleton, Martina Sudová, Josef Suk, Václav Štěpán, Jarmila Tauerová, Jana Vojtěšková, and Patricie Zedníčková.

My goal (perhaps audacious) is to create a ‘New Šourek’ – an updated, ‘modernized’ and ‘internationalized’ equivalent in English of the monumental four-volume study Život a dílo Antonína Dvořáka (The Life and Work of Antonín Dvořák) published by Otakar Šourek between 1916 (Vol. 1, 1st ed.) and 1957 (Vol. 4, 2nd ed.). During the course of work on this project my appreciation for Šourek’s pioneering achievement has grown steadily. In particular I should counter the objection sometimes voiced that he was not a trained musicologist, which I feel has no bearing on his qualifications to deal with Dvořák’s music. It is clear that Šourek’s knowledge and understanding of works by this composer and the whole range of Western music literature were broad and deep. Major problems with his
study, however, are frequent failure to cite supporting evidence for his assertions about Dvořák’s life, and a tendency, especially pertaining to the early decades of Dvořák’s career for which documentation is scarce and often unreliable, to state hypotheses as facts without the appropriate qualifying words (‘apparently’, ‘probably’, ‘perhaps’, ‘if we were to judge by...’).

A large part of my research time has been taken up by attempts to track down sources for Šourek’s undocumented assertions – searches which in some cases have yielded no results or scanty results, and have led me to conclude that a ‘fact’ is actually only Šourek’s guess – sometimes not even a very ‘educated guess’. Thus some of my findings are negative: the conclusion that something Šourek asserted is not true or only a possibility.

However, innumerable positive contributions to our knowledge of Dvořák have been published in isolated studies by various researchers following after Šourek. Some of these have been incorporated, most notably, into Klaus Döge’s *Dvořák: Leben, Werke, Dokumente* (Dvořák: Life, Work, Documents), especially in its revised edition of 1997, which however is quite brief compared with Šourek and thus necessarily less thorough. Other contributions, including for example many of the important discoveries made by M. K. Černý in the late 1950s concerning Dvořák’s life and work during the period from ca. 1857 to 1870 – discoveries largely unpublished and found only in his typescript *Dvořákova cesta k realismu […]* (Dvořák’s Path Toward Realism […], Charles University in Prague, ca. 1959) – as well as additional findings of various scholars working within the past decade, have not yet made their way into any comprehensive study of Dvořák’s life and work.

In the present brief report I shall not even attempt to summarize the findings of others, but rather present a selection of those discoveries and hypotheses (both negative and positive) pertaining to the period 1857–1877 which are to my knowledge mainly or entirely my own, and which I have not yet presented in any official forum. I shall arrange them in chronological order according to their relevance to phases of Dvořák’s life and work. References to page numbers in Šourek are, unless otherwise noted, to the third edition (1954) of the first volume of his *Život a dílo Antonína Dvořáka*, which covers the period through 1877.

1. Markéta Hallová and I found evidence that Dvořák himself participated very actively in the creation of Bohuslav Kalenský’s 110-page essay ‘Antonín Dvořák. Jeho mládí, příhody a vývoj k usamostatnění’ (Antonín Dvořák: His Youth, Experiences, and Development Toward Independence), written ca. 1901 and published after considerable delay in *Antonín Dvořák. Sborník statí o jeho díle a životě* (Antonín Dvořák: A Compendium of Essays on His Work and Life, Prague, 1912). Dvořák even insisted (because of his childlike candor, reportedly) that some passages be included in Kalenský’s study which the reader might find strange. Šourek knew (or guessed) that Kalenský relied heavily on information from the composer himself, which he said meant that the essay was unreliable! (See *Život a dílo Antonína Dvořáka* Vol. 4, p. 15.) Perhaps for this reason and/or because he assumed Kalenský’s essay was already easily available to his readers, Šourek ignored most of its content including much highly-interesting testimony found nowhere else.
Kalenský’s essay is indeed fraught with demonstrable errors, especially as concerns dating, but nevertheless must be considered a primary source for Dvořák’s early life, indeed the most important single source.

2. Šourek guessed (p. 33) that Dvořák acquired his second middle name Leopold upon undergoing the rite of church confirmation, though without being able to confirm that he actually underwent this rite. I found the official record of Dvořák’s confirmation, which shows among other things that Šourek’s hypothesis was correct. I have reasons to think that Dvořák may have taken the name Leopold in honor of his teacher Josef Leopold Zvonař.

3. Through comparison of Dvořák’s interview for the *Sunday Times* of London published on 10 May 1885 with biographies of his teacher Josef Krejčí I have been able to deduce that while attending the organ school Dvořák sang in the choir at the church of St. James (svatý Jakub) in Prague’s Old Town.

4. A letter of 1 April 1895 from Dvořák to his mother-in-law and children shows that, contrary to Šourek’s assertion (p. 38), he did have a piano at his residence with the Plíva family during his years at the organ school.

5. I have found no evidence for Šourek’s oft-repeated assertion (p. 36), probably inspired by Jan Květ’s *Mládí Antonína Dvořáka* (The Childhood and Youth of Antonín Dvořák, 2nd ed., Prague 1943), that while a student at the organ school Dvořák performed in almost all Prague concerts involving orchestra other than those of the conservatory and those given at the Estates Theater.

6. Although Šourek mentions Mendelssohn several times among composers to whose music Dvořák was exposed during his early years in Prague, the overwhelming prevalence of Mendelssohn’s works in Dvořák’s musical environment during this period has been understated, probably because Mendelssohn is totally excised from the survey of Prague concert life during Dvořák’s organ school years presented in the second (and most commonly available) edition of Květ’s *Mládí Antonína Dvořáka* – published in Prague in 1943 during the Nazi occupation.

7. Hartmut Schick’s observation in his 1990 book *Studien zu Dvořáks Streichquartetten* (Studies Concerning Dvořák’s String Quartets), pp. 18–24, based on study of the music alone, that Dvořák’s String Quartet in A major has a significant relationship to Mendelssohn’s ‘Scottish’ Symphony including the conspicuous use of pentatonic figures, is well supported by historical circumstances and, indirectly, by Dvořák’s own statements on more than one occasion. Thus this, Dvořák’s first known use of pentatonic ‘flavoring’ and a very significant one, has nothing to do with Czech or American inspirations (as often asserted in connection with later works) but much to do with Scottish traits rendered by a German/Jewish composer.

8. Dvořák’s failure to have any of his music performed or published during the 1860s may be ascribed partly to a rather surprising absence from his output (with only a very few exceptions) of the kind of music demanded by the Czech nationalist movement – kinds of music in which his closest friends
Karel Bendl, Karel Šebor) and mentors (Josef Leopold Zvonař) specialized: Czech-language choruses and simple songs – not like the Cypřiše (Cypresses) songs – and works having explicit patriotic or nationalistic content.

9. Dvořák almost surely did not play in the three concerts conducted by Richard Wagner in Prague in 1863 – not in the one on 8 February as Šourek asserts (pp. 58, 99), let alone in all three of them as most subsequent writers have said without explanation. Regarding this issue I find the arguments of M. K. Černý in his ‘Malá Dvořákiana’ (A Little Dvořákiana), Opus Musicum 2004, No. 3, p. 6 to be fairly persuasive, and can bring to bear additional evidence as well. (However, Dvořák is likely to have attended one or more of Wagner’s 1863 concerts in Prague or at least rehearsals therefore, and his fascination with Wagner at this time as well as earlier and later is well documented.)

10. Dvořák’s trip with Karel Komzák’s orchestra to Hamburg in 1863, to which Šourek devotes only two sentences (p. 58), can be described in much greater detail. It actually extended farther than Hamburg, by only a little but in a significant way, and must surely have been a great adventure for the young and impecunious composer. Some of the facts are presented in M. K. Černý’s Dvořáka cesta k realismu […], pp. 200–201.

11. Dvořák’s first two symphonies, written in 1865, were almost surely influenced in significant ways by Schubert’s ‘Great’ Symphony in C major, including a modeling relationship between two specific passages. Dvořák had an opportunity to hear this work of Schubert performed in Prague in 1864, and probably earlier as well. However, influences from Schubert and (mainly) other composers in Dvořák’s works composed from 1865 through 1871 have generally been over-stressed at the expense of the truly astonishing originality of this music.

12. Dvořák’s first two symphonies both make unusual usage of solo viola in especially significant passages. Considering Dvořák’s employment as a violist at the time, one wonders whether he imagined himself as a sort of ‘protagonist’ in some secret extra-musical ‘program’ in these works.

13. I have searched intensively for evidence that Dvořák was, as Šourek asserts (p. 75 and in many other places), in love with Josefina Čermáková when he composed his songs to poems about frustrated love from Pfleger-Moravský’s Cypřiše (Cypresses) in 1865 – or at any other time – but have found only an indication of what must have been Šourek’s source for the alleged link between Josefina and the late Cello Concerto in B minor: a source that Šourek himself in a private letter seems to have considered to be less than reliable. Having observed the process by which many legends have arisen concerning Dvořák and been gradually accepted as fact, and having explored thoroughly the circumstances of the ‘Josefina’ story, I suspect this may be another one of those legends. Actually we do have reports concerning Dvořák’s ‘love life’ in 1865 that were recorded in writing already during his lifetime – but they do not concern Josefina. These reports have been ignored in Dvořák literature since 1929.
14. A girl named Anna Čermáková (almost certainly the one whom Dvořák married) performed children’s roles in the Provisional Theater while Dvořák was a member of the orchestra there. She is also mentioned as a singer in the Prague musical press both before and after she married Dvořák.

15. I have found interesting information not published anywhere to my knowledge concerning Dvořák’s close friendship during the late 1860s with the composer Karel Šeber.

16. A musician who graduated from the conservatory in Prague in 1870 recalled having played there a string quartet by Dvořák (‘grausam’, he said – i.e. ‘horrible’), which must have been either the one in B flat major, B. 17 or D major, B. 18 – works for which we otherwise have no information regarding who may have played them during Dvořák’s lifetime if anyone at all. This musician also described Dvořák’s attitude toward Smetana at that time, for which we otherwise have no documentation to my knowledge.

17. It has been thought that Dvořák kept his first opera, *Alfred*, a secret. (Šourek, p. 108.) However, I have found evidence that he showed it to Smetana. It was also mentioned several times in the press during Dvořák’s lifetime starting no later than 1874.

18. Šourek’s statement that Dvořák’s departure from the Provisional Theatre in 1871 occurred ‘at the end of the season’ is apparently only his guess, and not a very educated one in this case. The theater had no real season but rather presented performances continuously throughout the year. Based on evidence I have found, we can define the time of his departure only as having been within a certain period of five months.

19. Although Šourek and Burghauser (in his thematic catalog of Dvořák’s works) date all of Dvořák’s *Evening Songs* (B. 61) to 1876, I have several reasons to believe that those published as Op. 3 and Op. 9 were composed about four or five years earlier.

20. There is no mention in the Dvořák literature to my knowledge of his having had contact with the Estates Theater (the German theater) in Prague, but I found a contemporary report that after his first setting of *Král a uhlíř* (King and Charcoal Burner, or King and Collier) was rejected by the Provisional Theater he submitted it to the Estates Theater.

21. The fate of Dvořák’s first setting of *Král a uhlíř* at the Provisional Theater in 1871–1873 became ammunition for František Pivoda in his attacks on Smetana, to which Smetana responded in the press.

22. There are reasons to think that the point in time when Dvořák excluded many of his early works from his series of opus numbers – assigning new, lower numbers to the works retained – may not have been late 1873 as Šourek contends (pp. 109, 156, 179, 189–190) but rather early in 1875. Likewise, Šourek’s assertion that late 1873 was the time when Dvořák destroyed many of his earlier works (pp. 109, 175) seems to be only his guess; in at least one significant case Dvořák must still have had the score of the work in question early in 1875.
23. Perhaps we can apply more broadly an observation made by Hartmut Schick (in Studien zu Dvořák's Streichquartetten, pp. 131–132) of a possible connection between Dvořák’s emotional state after the debacle with Král a uhlíř in the autumn of 1873 and the extraordinary darkness of his stylized ‘waltz’ in his String Quartet in F minor, composed just at that time, as well as the fact that all four of the quartet’s movements are in that minor key. The timing of the opera’s failure was especially unfortunate for Dvořák in view of developments in his personal life, creating stress that was not relieved until the success of his totally-new setting of the same libretto in its premiere on 24 November the following year, and his receipt soon thereafter of a state artist’s grant. During this period we observe a phenomenon rare in the output of any composer, and especially rare for Dvořák, namely that all of the instrumental works he composed (three quartets, a symphony, and an orchestral rhapsody) are in minor keys. Although they end in the parallel major with positive moods of various sorts, their initial and in most cases predominant mood lies somewhere in the range between melancholy and fierce struggle. Only the two operas from this period – besides Král a uhlíř also Tvrdé palice (The Stubborn Lovers) – are in a merrier vein, determined by their comic librettos which Dvořák may have chosen because they were the only ones available, not because he felt inclined toward comedy at this time.

24. I have so far failed to find any evidence to support Šourek’s assertion (p. 178) that Dvořák played in chamber music performances at the villa of Josef Portheim. The published source Šourek mentions contains no such evidence.

25. Dvořák may have gotten the idea of writing his Serenade for Strings in the spring of 1875 from two performances in Prague a few months earlier, hitherto unnoted in the Dvořák literature, of a remarkable Serenade by a composer whose later influence on Dvořák is well documented.

Through the end of 2008, at least, I shall continue my investigations and probably have additional findings, to be reported in a subsequent article and/or in the final monograph.

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