

Dvorak and the Blizzard of '78

By Betty Hauck

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In January of 1978 after our holiday break, we started working on a piece we had never played before. It was the rarely performed Antonin Dvorak Bass Quintet, composed for string quartet plus bass and perfect for the instrumental configuration of our group at the time. It's a wonderful piece, but very challenging, requiring a lot of rehearsal, which is perhaps why it's not performed very often. This piece has the usual four movements but when Dvorak originally wrote it he included a fifth movement – an exquisite slow movement. Later Dvorak changed his mind and re-wrote the single movement for string orchestra. I had bought a Czech score for us to work from as we rehearsed, and although this extra movement was not in our parts, it was in the score. Robbie had heard it, knew how ravishing it was, and suggested we put it back in. The movement is like a hypnotic trance, a line that seems to spin out forever and breaks only once before the end. I hand copied parts from the score for everyone, which is a labor-intensive task.

We finally got the piece in good shape and we were going to be performing it at Sanders Theater in Memorial Hall at Harvard, which was one of my favorite places to play. If you've never been there, it's worth a visit if you're in the Harvard Square area. It is a beautiful old hall, all dark wood, Gothic-looking, and it's used as a lecture hall for big classes as well as for concerts and speaker events. Leonard Bernstein gave his famous lectures series, *The Unanswered Question*, in Sanders. It was built in memory of the Harvard students and faculty who died in the Civil War, and their names are listed in the entrance hall. When I was in high school in the 60's, the Thursday evening BSO concert series with Charles Munch conducting was always televised live from Sanders.

Anyway, we were supposed to play the Dvorak in Sanders Theater but something unexpected happened and it looked like the concert was going to have to be cancelled. There was a huge snowstorm the day before in Boston – the famous storm of '78 when everything shut down and people got around the major streets on cross country skis. Transportation came to a stand-still, people couldn't get to work, and for a few days everyone was on holiday whether they liked it or not. It took several days to dig out

from under. Since our concert was the next day and no one was allowed to drive on the streets except for emergency vehicles, we assumed the concert would have to be cancelled. There was a Harvard dean named Archie Epps who was our liaison. When we told him we were prepared to cancel he said, "No, no, don't cancel the concert, you have to come! There are all these restless students and trapped people around here with no place to go and nothing to do. We NEED you to play the concert!" He was emphatic. Since it was illegal for us to be on the road he promised to get us an emergency dispensation from Civil Defense. Our friend Larry Carter who was in our original "commune" was living in Cambridge at the time, and he stood on a street corner in Harvard Square and passed out fliers about the concert.

Meanwhile at Apple Hill, we piled ourselves and our instruments into our trusty green van and headed southeast. I'll never forget driving along Route 2 in Belmont and Arlington, usually a busy section of highway coming into Cambridge. It was the weirdest experience because there was no one else on the road. The only other cars were an occasional emergency vehicle, snowplow, or tow truck. People we passed glared at us. (The only other time people on the street had been so irate with us was when we gave a concert in Haifa, Israel on the Sabbath and on the way Orthodox Jews on street corners shook their fists at us as we drove to the concert venue.)

We got to Sanders, piled out of our van with our instruments and music, tromped through the snow, did a sound check, changed into our concert clothes, walked out on stage and played a concert that was so wonderful, so magical, I will never forget the feeling of euphoria we all shared, musicians and audience that night. Archie Epps was right, the hall was packed, we had a great audience, many of our friends and students were there, everyone was in a festive mood, and we played our hearts out.

The concert was recorded by a recording engineer named Peter Storkerson who worked for WGBH. Afterwards Peter told us that he loved the recording he had made, that it was remarkable because it was so perfect it didn't even need editing. He was enthusiastic about releasing it as is as a commercial recording. We loved the idea, but for whatever reason it never happened. The recording stayed in moth balls until many years later when our first violinist, Valeria Vilker Kuchment, a wonderful Russian violinist who now plays in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, had a sponsor who wanted

to underwrite a CD of some of Valeria's performances. So 30 years after the concert much to our delight our recording of the Dvorak Bass Quintet was finally released.

A few Christmases ago I gave a copy of the CD to my friend Lenny Matczynski, the director of Apple Hill. He told me he has listened to it over and over because of how much he loves it. I thought what was really remarkable about this recording is that it really did not need editing. Usually a live performance is so immediate, it has lots of little glitches - mistakes get edited out and things get changed before a recording is released. I know that one of the things that sometimes bothers people about digital recording is that you can make a performance sound so perfect that it is unreal, it's not human - it's not natural and listeners hold these mechanically perfect performances up as a standard to compare to the live performances. Live performances can never be what digitally edited and perfected recordings are and vice versa. However, this concert was one of those live performances that turned out to be the rare exception and close to perfection. Lenny and I agreed that this was just one of those fortunate times when there was a confluence of several different factors, a "perfect storm" that through good fortune came together - the huge snow storm, the fact that we had to get special permission to even give the concert, the fact that people couldn't drive anywhere so normal life was shut down leaving people with the time and concentration to just sit and totally absorb the music, the heightened awareness brought about by being in a lovely old hall surrounded by snow, all together, the sense of communion, and full-heartedly performing a piece that we loved.