DVORAK – SYMPHONY #8

Dvorak’s Symphony #8 is one of the great masterpieces of the symphonic repertoire. While it has its share of difficulties of balance, ensemble, and style, it is not nearly as difficult as his seventh symphony, and can be programmed by many community and school orchestras.

Here is a list of ideas based on my experience with this colorful symphony.

FIRST MOVEMENT

The melody at the beginning must be played with warmth and expression. Note that the beginning of the development (Letter F) is identical, except for the fact that the cello is inexplicably (to me, at least) written in tenor clef. The only real difference is the addition of the timpani at measure 141. Note that measure 7 begins pp. I ask the cellos to play measure 12 on the D string. The conductor can take a little time in measure 17 going into the cadence.

I suggest giving a clear cue to the flutist in measure 18, as well as in measure 145, as the first entrance at measure 18 comes 1 measure after the cadence, and the second entrance at measure 145 comes 2 measures after the cadence. The difficulty in this passage is that the high E is in the next harmonic series, so that the flutist needs to adapt technically with the lip to make the legato work smoothly. The exchange of the note “D” between the flute and the piccolo needs to be seamless, which is not easily accomplished. This long d is the only involvement of the piccolo for the entire piece. The piccolo player can take a catch breath when the flute reenters after Letter A. Starting at measure 23, I advocate for warm, full value half notes.

I’ve found that it’s best to go back into 4 at Letter A. It’s possible to continue in 2, but for the sake of the people playing moving notes, conducting in 4 is helpful. Do notice that for violins, the crescendo continues all the way to measure 36. In the Artia score, the trumpets are omitted in measure 36, and need to be added.

At Letter B, the tempo can be broadened slightly, and then resumed in the 4th measure after Letter B. At measure 42, perhaps the timpani can change his note to C, which is the pedal note, rather than play G. Measure 47 is a single forte, building to fortissimo in measure 51. It’s possible to add the first violin pickup notes to the seconds as well in measures 51 and 52. In measure 55, playing the third and fourth 16th note in the second beat on separate bows, rather than slurring all the 16th notes, can produce more clarity. I’m careful at Letter C that the brass players don’t accent their half notes, but rather play with a beautiful and noble sense of chorale.

Note that throughout this movement, the dotted 8th note, 16th note figures can be played differently from the 8th note, 16th rest, 16th note figures. This pattern begins with the clarinets in their pickup to measure 62. Note that the bassoons probably will need to play a “piano soli”, and the violas an expressive pp. Lingering just a bit at measure 66 creates a nice bit of anticipation.

The passage from measure 67 to Letter D will invariably relax a little bit, so it’s possible to resume tempo at Letter D. I ask the string players playing triplets to play slightly off the string; in this passage, the winds need to be encouraged not to drag, and the string players not to rush.

In measure 85, I suggest following the differences in the dotted 8th note and the 8th note, 16th rest. However, note that in the recap at measure 263, the note lengths are inconsistent. I change the note lengths in the recap to match those in the exposition. At measure 95, I have the bassoons start louder and expressively, followed by a diminuendo. At measure 101, even though the violins are marked with an accent, I ask them to sustain through the measure. The brass players must play prudently, bringing out only the melodic passages, such as the trombone parts in measure 105 and 107. At measure 111, the brass must play with a warm and noble sound, embracing the inherent chorale style of playing. The ritardando going into Letter F can be played on the G string, with a crescendo into measure 126, and a diminuendo into measure 127.

The development, which begins at Letter F, is the same as the beginning of the movement, with exception of the tenor clef for the cellos, and addition of the timpani at measure 141, as noted earlier. Also, as previously mentioned, the flute enters a measure later than the first time.

It’s easy for the flute and oboe to be overbalanced in the passage leading to Letter D. There are a few ways to deal with this problem. The violins and violas can delay their crescendo, the flute and the oboe can project their solos more, and the second players can be added two measures before Letter G, if not earlier.

At Letter G, the whole ensemble can foreshorten their whole notes to help the string players start the second measure of Letter G effectively. At 4 measures after Letter G, note that each measure is successively louder. At 8 measures after Letter G, the strings can start softer and crescendo for two measures.

At 4 measures before Letter H, the clarinets and bassoons can do their diminuendo more gradually, with the softest dynamic at the end of 1 measure before Letter H. The bassoons can add forte to the pickup to 3 measures before Letter H.

At Letter H, the violas and clarinets can add cantabile to their melody. The basses can play separate bow, upbow on the eighth notes, and downbow on the quarter notes.

At 6 measures before Letter J, cantabile would be appropriate for the oboes, as earlier in the clarinets and violas. The first violins have various choices, but I would suggest a light brush stroke, adding just a little length to the eighth note. I find the oboes expression marks 4 measures before Letter J to be more effective if across the bar line to the dotted half note, rather than as indicated.

The stretto passages at Letter J can be played marcato, with perhaps exaggerated crescendos for more drama and excitement. At 6 measures before Letter K, the cellos and basses can play downbow on the eighth notes and dotted quarter, with the resulting space after the half note allowing the canon with the violins to be more effective.

At Letter K, the 3rd and 4th horns and first trombone can play with a little length to the quarter notes.

At measure 207, a suggested bowing for cello/bass would be down, down, down, up down up, with the half note connecting across the bar line. Again, at measure 202, observe the difference between the 8th note, 16th rest and the dotted 8th note. At measure 217, perhaps a slightly softer dynamic with a big crescendo to the measure 219 recap would be effective. All the first violins play on the G string for 6 measures. Note that at measure 215, dotted quarter, 16th, as opposed to eighth, sixteenth rest, with then a crescendo in measure 219, the recapitulation.

At measure 224 and measure 229, all down bow for cello/bass would be effective. Note that the English horn solo is that instrument's only appearance in the entire piece. After the preceding tumultuous music, the contrasting calm passages should be substantially slower, picking up the tempo at tempo primo. The comments from the exposition can also apply to the recapitulation.

Note that the dynamic at the coda is fortissimo, compared to the previous forte, which denotes an increase in intensity. I suggest all down bows for the 1/4 note, 1/8 note figures. At 5 measures after Letter O, the horns and trombones can play more dramatically if they articulate the half notes. At measure 299, an increase in intensity leading to the cadence at measure 301 can be effective. At measure 301, all players playing single notes can start this measure and the following measure softer with a crescendo, which enables the moving voices of the violins, violas, and woodwinds to be heard.

In measures 303, again, observe the difference between the 8th, 16th rest and dotted 8th notes. Note that the woodwinds do not have dotted 1/4 notes at measures 307 to 310; I changed their notes to dotted 1/4 notes to be consistent with measure 304. At measure 311, I have the brass and timpani drop back dynamically, and then crescendo to the cadence at measure 313.