

## An Interpretation of Dvorak's *Humoresque* From Music Perspective

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### Abstract

Antonin Dvorak, the famous folk music composer of the Czech Republic, has created numerous music works in his life. His works inherit the excellent folk culture of the nation and absorb classical and romantic nutrition, integrate the other cultures and his own into one, and innovate to present a new emotional implication and personality tag. His *Humoresque* was originally the 7<sup>th</sup> piece in the piano collection *8 Humoresques* created in 1984. The relaxed, humorous, happy collection fully reflects the composer's aspiration for quiet rural lifestyle and delighted mood for the lifestyle. Whether in the structural layout, harmony technique or selection of music material, the work is characterized by the strong personality of the composer.

**Key words:** Piano music; Folk music; *Humoresque*; Dvorak

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### 1. BRIEFING OF THE COMPOSER AND HIS CREATIONS

Antonin Dvorak, the famous folk music composer of the Czech Republic born in Nelahozeves, Bohemia's in 1841, has shown an extraordinary musical talent in his childhood. He has studied viola, organ, piano and other instruments and the basic theory of composition such as

counterpoint. During the eight years after 1866, he has served as a viola player in the Prague National Opera Orchestra led by another famous Czech folk music conductor and composer Smetana. During this period, he has also created some works, but due to the lack of mastery of composition skills, he was not satisfied with most of them. After that he further learned and explored composition theory and technique, and absorbed nutrition from the creations of senior composers. His first opera *Alfred* (1870), for example, was deeply influenced by Wagner. In 1873, the composer's Cantata *Hymnus* has received great success, which gave him a strong confidence in composition, so he quit the job in the orchestra and concentrated on composition. In the next few years he has received many awards, such as the Austrian National Award, and obtained Brahms and other famous composer's appreciation. The creation of *Slavonic Rhapsody* has brought him a growing reputation. Since then, he has had a growing social influence and people have invited him to produce new works.

In 1884 during his first visit to the United Kingdom, UK gave a warm and enduring welcome to his creation and conducting. After that, he has accepted the invitation of the founder of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, Mrs Jeannette Thurber, to work as the president of the Conservatory. During the period in the United States, his musical talent was fully manifested, and some important works in his career were born in this period, such as the *Symphony No.9 In E minor* "From The New World", *Cello Concerto in B minor*, *Cello Concerto* and so on. In 1895, he returned to Prague to teach and served as dean of the Prague Conservatory of Music in 1901. In his later years he devoted himself into the creation of symphonic poems and operas (Kennedy & Bourne, 2002, p.336).

Dvorak's musical works are numerous and diverse, covering opera, symphony, orchestra - symphonic poem,

solo and band, chamber music, chorus, song, piano, piano duo and many other art forms. The era of Dvorak is the era of the national renaissance of the Czechs, and he has always insisted on the inheritance of the Czech folk music. His creations have always been associated with the history, folklore, language, folk music of the Czechs. Wagner, Brahms and other senior composers and folk music have given him a great influence on his creation. His works have beautiful melodies, unique and precise understanding and interpretation of instruments. His musical styles, harmonies and counterpoints are extremely delicate, showing a deep composition skill. He is very creative to integrate the passion of nationalism with rigorousness of classicalism, and is good at using the rich Czech folk music materials for creation. In 1904, Dvorak died in Prague, after the death of the Czech government held a grand burial for him.

## 2. THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF DVORAK'S HUMORESQUE

Dvorak's *Humoresque* was originally the seventh piece of the piano collection *8 Humoresques* created in 1894. The relaxed, humorous, happy collection fully reflects the composer's aspiration for quiet rural lifestyle and delighted mood for the lifestyle. In the 8 pieces, *Humoresque* is the most popular and most widely spread. The piece has been adapted for orchestra, cello, violin, clarinet and other instruments. The adaptation of the new works has differences in tonality and playing method to original piano music, but the basic music mood does not change much.

The work is: *Poco lento e grazioso*. The whole work consists of 56 measures in complex trilogy with repetition,  $b^bG$  major, and has the typical features of humoresque (Li & Ren, 2013, p.79). The analysis is as follows:

### Complex trilogy

First level structure	The first part		Trio		The part of repetition	
Second level structure	A	B	A	C	C	A B
Start-stop	1~8	9~16	17~24	25~32	33~40	41~48 49~56
Third level structure	a a	b b	a a	c c	c c	a a b b
Number of measures	4 4	4 4	4 4	4 4	4 4	4 4 4 4
Tonality	$b^bG$ :		A: $\sharp f$ : A: $\sharp f$ : $b^bG$ :			

This piece is a complex trilogy. The first part is the repetition of single trilogy, the middle part is an open repeated variation and the last repetition is a reduced repetition of the first two measures of the single trilogy.

The first part (measures 1-24) is a single trilogy of repetition with single tonality on  $b^bG$  major.

Passage A (Measures 1 - 8) consists of two 4 + 4 parallel phrases with one repetition. The theme and motive is based

on the conjunct double stops, the melody is smooth and beautiful characterized by obvious five-tone scale. The short rests interspersed in the notes result in a similar effect of dotted rhythm which is in contrast to the smooth melody, bringing a lively and humorous color to the music (see Notation 1). From the harmony development point of view, the former phrase is open with dominant chord, and the later phrase is closed with the tonic chord.

Notation 1: Dvorak's *Humoresque* Measures 1-8

Passage B (Measures 9-16) Similar to Passage A, this passage is also composed of two 4 + 4 parallel phrases. Although the music character is similar to Passage A, each phrase goes with the eight-degree jump, diatonic scale running down and homophonic repetition, as well

as changing connections, different combinations of rhythms, tremolos, arpeggios and changes of textures (see Notation 2). From the harmony development point of view, the former phrase starts with tonic chord, and the later phrase is open with the dominant chord.

Notation 2: Dvorak's *Humoresque* Measures 9-16



Passage A repetition (Measures 17-24) is the simple repetition of Passage A with only a change in the end.

The trio (measures 25-40) is composed of two open passages of repeated variation. Passage C (measures 25-32) consists of two 4+4 parallel phrases, whose tonality changes from <sup>b</sup>G major to A major. Because each phrase can be divided into two parallel sections, having a double parallel structure of phrase and section. From the harmony

development point of view, the former phrase ends in A major and the later phrase changes to <sup>#</sup>f minor in the 31<sup>st</sup> measure, open for the dominant chord. Passage C variation (measures 33-40) is the repeated variation of Passage C. The former phrase's bass changes from crotchet to quaver, and is superimposed with an octave parallel part; On this basis, the later phrase thickens the octaves (See Notation 3).

Notation 3: Dvorak's *Humoresque* Measures 33-40



Repetition part (Measures 41-56) is a reduced repetition of the first part. It repeats Passage A and Passage B, and changes only a few notes at the end of <sup>b</sup>G major.

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### 3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

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#### 3.1 The Tonality Arrangement of the Work

The tonality arrangement of the work is rather simple. The first part starts with the main tune of <sup>b</sup>G major, the middle part changes into A major, and the repetition part returns to <sup>b</sup>G major. On the surface, the tonality of the work is quite regular without new ideas, but the composer's excellent tonality design talent can be found after a detailed analysis of the middle part. The tonality of the middle part is basically on A major, but the polyphonic tonality characteristics can be found after a further analysis of the double tone accompaniment texture: the main tune is in A major, but the bass is in <sup>#</sup>f minor. If not take the progression of harmony into consideration, this part can be completely regarded as in <sup>#</sup>f minor. If so, then the whole tonality of the work can be considered as in <sup>b</sup>G major - <sup>#</sup>f minor - <sup>b</sup>G major, and also because <sup>#</sup>f minor can be regarded as <sup>b</sup>g minor, then the tonality can be concluded as starting with the <sup>b</sup>G major, then <sup>b</sup>g minor, and finally returns to <sup>b</sup>G major.

#### 3.2 The Harmony Characteristics of the Work

The harmony at the key structure of the work is clear or regular, but there are also a lot of highlights, such as the progressive downward harmony from <sup>b</sup>2 to <sup>f</sup>1 in Measures 9-11 in Passage B of the first part, and the progressive upward four series and three series which can be found everywhere. At the end of Passage B, the composer introduces the dominant seventh chord of <sup>b</sup>E major and diminished seventh chord of E major, and in the 23<sup>rd</sup> measure of Passage A repetition in the first part introduces the main tune of DD<sub>7</sub> chord<sup>1</sup>. These secondary dominants form a contrast to the main tune in the color.

#### 3.3 The Structural Characteristics of the Work

The middle part of the work consists of passages, and the repetition part shows an asymmetric structure with some characteristics of rondo ABACA (B) due to the reduction. There are two principles to distinguish the structure: The first is to determine the length of Passages B and C, then determine the degree of contrast between Passages BC and Passage A (Li & Ren, 2013, p.140). If the structures of Passages BC are roughly equal and the degree of comparison to Passage A is similar, it can be judged as a rondo. The reasons are as follows: In a complex trilogy, the three passages ABA belong to the first part, and the contrast between A and B is internal

and weak compared to the middle Passage C, but the contrast between Passage A and C is external and strong. In addition, if it is a rondo, then Passages B and C should have roughly the same structure as episodes. As for this work, the tonalities of Passages A and B are consistent, but there is a significant tonality adjustment between Passages A and C. In addition, Passage C has a doubling scale compared with Passage B due to repeated variation. Therefore, it is more reasonable to judge this work as a reduced and repeated complex trilogy rather than a rondo.

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### CONCLUSION

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The birth of national music is a historical necessity, which is closely related to the historical situations of the countries in Eastern Europe and Northern Europe, and is the product of their specific environments (Yu, 2012). In the late romantic period, spontaneous nationalist sentiment developed in the fields of literature and music, and soon became the main form of music in Eastern Europe, Northern Europe and Russia. In this background, a large number of composers who have selected the folk music materials for artistic creation, reflected the glorious historical achievements and people's lives and put the composers' sincere feelings for the people into their works have sprung up. Their works have a distinctive national brand, and the characteristics of their music works are mainly manifested in the subject and artistic style (Ren & Li, 2015, p.113). The composers of this period, on the one hand, learn the useful part of romantic music, and on the other hand, are more inclined to reflect the national and folk lives and music of their own nations. Their music creations reflect the national spirits and seek the national character in content, absorb the essences of folk tunes, rhythms and rich orchestration in technique, structure and performance. Their music is the unity of thought, content and form characterized by nationality. With the unremitting efforts of the national music school, after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the national music school has had a variety of ethnic music styles which has added new contents to the romantic music movement (Ren & Li, 2015, p.114).

Dvorak is a spontaneous composer, and as one of the important representatives of the Czech national music, his music creations are inseparable from the national liberation struggle of his motherland. Through the analysis of *Humoresque*, it can be found that this is also reflected in his music creation. His music works reflect the glorious history of the Czechs, the praise of the Czech national heroes as well as their resistances to foreign religious oppression and so on. His musical creations basically follow the path explored by Smetana, but whether in manifestation or artistic connotation, they are the remarkable improvement and enrichment to the

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<sup>1</sup> Achieved by enharmonic conversion.

Czech national music. In addition, his works provide an important reference and guidance for the development of national music in other European countries and regions, which makes Dvorak one of the distinguished composers in the national music school (Ye, 2001, p.415).

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