

Variations on a Theme #23

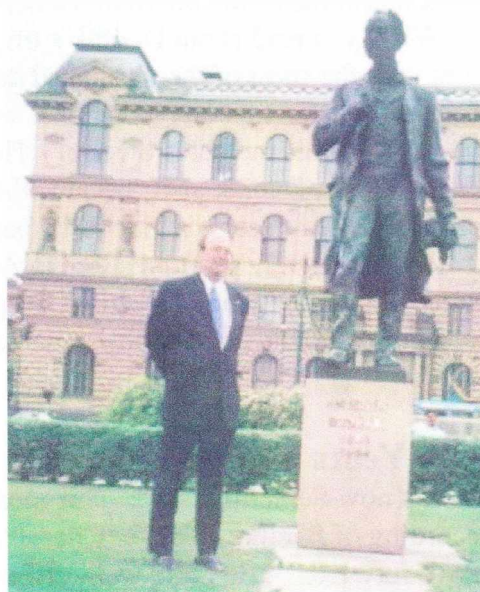
for SFPA 235; written in September 2003 by Rich Lynch

Happy Birthday, from the New World, to a Great Composer

It's September 8th as I'm starting this SFPazine. The great Czech composer Antonín Dvořák was born on this day 162 years ago, and both of the local classical music radio stations have celebrated the day by playing some of his best and most recognizable compositions. The one that was featured at mid-morning is the most recognizable of all – the 9th Symphony, better known as “From the New World.” It's a truly magnificent work, one of the best symphonies ever composed, but if it weren't for an unlikely progression of circumstances it would never have existed at all.

Dvořák was unlike many of the great classical music composers, in that he was not born into a family of musicians and composers – his father was a butcher and innkeeper who wanted his son to have a more worldly trade. Dvořák's interest in music probably developed from the local folk songs and dance music of the Bohemia countryside. Fairly early on he decided he wanted to be a musician and a composer, which apparently did not much please his father, and at age 15 the younger Dvořák tried to change his father's mind by writing a polka for the town band. Unfortunately, the premiere performance was without prior rehearsal; the result was politely described as “not very musical” and the elder Dvořák remained unimpressed by his son's career plans.

Dvořák was not a child prodigy – at some time in his early life he must have had some music instruction, but it wasn't until he was 16 years old, in 1857, that he left home over his father's objection to enter the Prague Organ School. What followed was many years of struggling to make a living – teaching music (he fell in love with and married one of his students), as an organist for a Prague church, and as a violist in a mid-level orchestra. He eventually gained recognition as a talented violist, gaining a position in the National Theatre Orchestra which was then directed by another famous Czech composer, Bedrich Smetana. Smetana's influence probably also led Dvořák to composing, but once again, Dvořák was not a prodigy – it wasn't until he was 34 years old, in 1875, that one of his compositions attracted the attention of the famous Viennese composer Johannes Brahms, who arranged for publication of some of Dvořák's works by one of the major European publishers. After that, Dvořák soon gained worldwide renown for his compositions, and by the early 1890s was so highly regarded that he was offered a position in New York City as Director of the National Conservatory where he taught musical composition. He was in the United States for only about three years, but made a point to see as much of America as he could, traveling as far west as Spillville, Iowa, where a stone monument commemorating his summer-long visit still stands. The



the statue of Dvořák in Prague

three-year sojourn ended when National Conservatory became mired in financial difficulties and could no longer afford to pay his salary. Dvořák then returned home to Prague where he mostly composed operas during the final years of his life.

Dvořák's best-known composition, his 9th Symphony, came about partly because of homesickness – he had been lured to America because of money (double or triple of what he could make in Europe), but it caused him to be away from friends and family for an extended time. At one of his low moments, his sponsor, Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, suggested he involve himself in writing a new symphony, and he did, incorporating themes influenced by American Indian folk melodies and Negro spirituals. It's a remarkable work, somewhat unlike symphonies of the 1700s and early 1800s in that themes introduced in the first and second movement reappear, sometimes almost subliminally, in the final movement. It's also very melodic, as many of his works are, and the main melodies of the second and last movement will be familiar to almost everybody. Many of Dvořák's other compositions are equally excellent. My other personal favorites are his 8th Symphony (as good as the 9th but overshadowed by the more famous work), his violin concerto, his two Serenades (one for strings and one for winds), the "Scherzo Capriccio" and "Prague Waltzes" orchestral compositions, and some of his Slavonic Dances.

When you read about Dvořák's life, you find out pretty quickly that his compositions are thought to capture the spirit of the music and dance of his native Bohemia. And they are also all so very pleasant to listen to – one biographer wrote that "Dvořák's musical inventiveness was bottomless, and the beauty of his melodies unique." That same biographer wrote that from his time spent in the United States, Dvořák also "became the discoverer of values that America had not known of in the least." Now this seems a bit overly exuberant to me, but it's still probably at least partly true – Dvořák's relatively short presence in America certainly did influence a large number of American composers, directly or indirectly. George Gershwin, for example, took composition lessons from a student of Dvořák's, and made no secret of his admiration of Dvořák's music. We still do the same today.

Two Years On

It's now September 11th. This morning one of the local classical music radio stations played a recording of Beethoven's 9th "Choral" Symphony "...to remember, to comfort, to help us heal, and to move forward." I do quite well remember that day two years ago; it was bright and sunny, just like this morning was. Here's how I described it (in *Mimosa* 27):

September 11th was a bright, clear day in Washington. I was at my desk at work that morning, doing web site development and listening to the local classical music station, when the hourly news had a report that an airplane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center buildings in New York City.

I was able to get to the CNN web site before it was overwhelmed by the number of people trying to do the same thing; it had a photo showing much worse damage than I had expected to see; clearly this hadn't been just a terrible error by a pilot of a small plane. The radio station soon carried another breaking news story that the other World Trade Center tower had been hit by another airplane, and then from down the hall there were people saying the Pentagon, just two miles away from us, had been attacked. I went to the office across the hall (my office looks only onto an interior courtyard), and I could see huge billows of dark black smoke coming from across the river. We were told to evacuate the building and go home soon after that; there were reports

of explosions up on Capitol Hill, at the State Department, and at the Old Executive Office Building. All hoaxes or runaway rumors, luckily. There was also a report that the subway was not running, again false -- if it had shut down, I'm not sure how I would have gotten home.

The next few days after that had a feeling of unreality about them, as if I had been stuck in the middle of a Tom Clancy novel, hoping to quickly reach the end and return to the real world. Some of the images from the attacks were terrible to see. I think the most disturbing ones were the shots of people jumping from the upper floors of one of the World Trade Center towers -- there was a couple who held hands just before they jumped, and another of somebody who had transformed his death leap into almost an art form, head first with legs crossed as he fell. And there was a photograph of the upper floors of one of the towers, of people at the windows desperately looking out for the help that would never arrive; the photo was taken just before the tower came down. Nicki and I were relieved to find out that nobody we knew was harmed on September 11th, either in New York or here in the Washington area. The same cannot be said for my sister, though, who used to work at the Pentagon, in the same part of the building where the attack occurred, in fact -- she was moved offsite when that section of the building was scheduled for renovation. Sixteen people she knew, including two fairly close friends, didn't make it.

As for moving forward, I suppose we all have, individually and collectively, even though 'moving forward' isn't always a positive thing. In the two years since the attacks, my workplace was moved from Washington out to the Maryland suburbs and job responsibilities are now different. Friends have changed jobs, or lost their jobs, or died. There have been two wars, neither yet concluded. The economic recovery is still waiting to happen and the person who sits at the desk where the buck is supposed to stop is referring to nine-eleven in practically every speech he makes in order to bolster support for any and all decisions he makes about anything. Some civil liberties have been eroded and more threatened; two years ago I would have thought that impossible.

Beethoven was a great musical artist, and listening to his compositions can make you pensive. The 9th Symphony, in particular, has that effect on me, with a beginning that seems to reflect some inner struggle going on with the composer and eventually progressing to a final movement where everything is gloriously resolved. It would be nice, for once, if life really *did* imitate art.

Torcon 3

I realized earlier this year that it's been a long time since I've been to Canada. The last time had been back in 1994, when the worldcon made it way north to Winnipeg. When we were planning the trip to Toronto for this year's worldcon, Nicki and I tried to think back to the last time we'd been to that part of Canada -- it had been more than 25 years!

Toronto was much closer than Winnipeg was, so we decided to save some money and drive to the convention. We could have made it in a single day, probably, but decided to take an additional day getting there so we could make a stopover in southern New York State. That's where Elmira's most famous resident, Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain, can be found.

Actually, that's where his grave site is -- in the Woodlawn Cemetery on the north side of Elmira, New York. His wife and two of his daughters are also interred there; Clemens' wife was from Elmira and the grave site is of her parents' extended family. It didn't take too long to find the



at Mark Twain's grave site

place, and after a few minutes for a few photos we were back on our way. Visiting Mark Twain's grave was actually something I'd been wanting to do for many years – I'd been to Elmira several times when I was a college student back in the early 1970s, but I'd been totally clueless back then about the 'presence' of Mark Twain. Getting there now took us a bit off the beaten path and we wouldn't have made the detour to Elmira at all if it weren't for its closeness to Corning, where we were spending the night.



glass armadillo at the Corning museum

The reason we wanted to stay over in Corning was so that we could visit the very wonderful Corning Glass Museum. And "very wonderful" is not an understatement, as it's on a par with any of the Smithsonian museums. The museum exceeded my expectations, and not just from all the glass-as-artform artifacts and creations that were on display (and some of them dated back to pre-Roman times). It was also a science museum, with several exhibits devoted to the chemistry and scientific uses of glass (such as in optics). There was also a glassblowing display by two expert 'gaffers' that went way, way beyond the usual county fair stuff – it was an hour and a half of technically difficult crafting, in multiple stages, that resulted in an object of art worthy of display in its own right. I don't know if we'll ever be back to Corning again,

but it's certainly worth going out of one's way to get there. It's a marvelous museum.

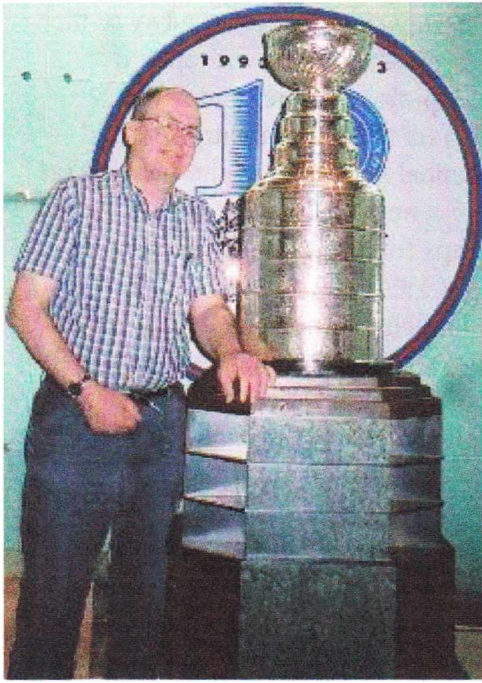
The drive to Toronto the next day took us through the hills of western New York, where the borders for the drainage basins of the Mississippi River, Chesapeake Bay, and the Great Lakes all come together. We crossed into Canada via the Peace Bridge in Buffalo, with Lake Erie off to the left and the Niagara River to the right, and it was an easy 90 minute drive to Toronto after that.

The convention center in Toronto was not far from the lake front and the view out the hotel room window, down to the lake, was dominated by the CN Tower (still the tallest free-standing structure in the world), which stretched upward to infinity, just about. We decided not to take a trip up to the observation deck of the Tower, but there was a microbrewery not far from the Tower and it turned out that they had a visitors center and offered tours, so we spent part of one afternoon learning more about how a commercial brewery works. There was also as much free beer as we could drink (I'm glad I wasn't driving anywhere!) and at the end of the tour, we each received a complimentary beer glass with the brewery's logo. All this for \$2 Canadian apiece! (I got much more than my money's worth in beer alone.)

That wasn't even the biggest bargain of our stay in Toronto. One of our friends, Stephen Boucher from Australia, had a room at the Renaissance SkyDome Hotel, and the room had a big window that looked out onto the baseball playing field. (Stephen was the convention's hotel liaison for the Renaissance, and the hotel had given him a free upgrade to the field-view room.) It came in useful, because on Labor Day afternoon, the New York Yankees were in town for a



the view of the game from the hotel room window



Lord Stanley's cup

game against the Toronto Blue Jays, and we were among the fans Stephen invited over to see the game. It was an interesting perspective, way up high and way out in the outfield. I'd always wanted to see a game at the SkyDome, but didn't imagine it would be from a private sky box of sorts. And it was free! (But if we'd wanted to rent the room on a game night, the usual rate would have been C\$680 per night.)

Anyway, there's a lot to see and do in Toronto, and with five days of convention we unfortunately didn't get to experience all that much of it. One place made sure to see, though, was the Hockey Hall of Fame where I had my photo taken next to the Stanley Cup. (I also got to be a hockey goalie and tried to stop some pucks shot at me in one of the interactive displays, but that's another story.) Toronto is very pleasant, especially when the weather is nice like it was during the convention, and we've been invited by friends here to come back to see the city when there's no distraction like a world-con going on. And we will, after the economy improves.

And speaking of the economy, I only was on three panels during the convention, but the most interesting of them actually

pertained to the economy, sort of. The title was, "The Economics of Innovation," and one of its purposes was to skewer some ideas for new technologies, such as the solar power satellite, which seem reasonable on the surface but which actually make no economic sense whatsoever. It was held at 10am on a Sunday morning, but it drew a crowd of about 150 people! I remember that years ago, it wasn't possible to get any significant audience at a convention much before noon. (Is it because times are changing or that we're just getting older? Both, I guess.)

Times *are* changing, though. It's been more than 21 years since Nicki and I started publishing *Mimosa*, and in that time we've had more than our share of success. *Mimosa* won its sixth Hugo Award at Torcon 3, about two weeks after the 30th and final issue was published. When we accepted the award, we thanked our readers and contributors, and then I read what has become an increasingly long list of contributors we can no longer thank – Martha Beck, Bob Bloch, Vincent Clarke, Dal Coger, Robert "Buck" Coulson, John Foyster, Ian Gunn, Chuck Harris, Lynn Hickman, George "Lan" Laskowski, Joe Mayhew, Bruce Pelz, William Rotsler, Bob Shaw, Walt Willis, and Harry Warner, Jr. They were some of the most creative people I have ever known, but they were also friends, and their friendship was uplifting. We have all been diminished by their passing.



the Torcon 3 Hugo

Having a Hugo in your possession, especially when navigating parties, is like having a key to the city, or maybe even a magic staff. Crowds part for you, and doors to private parties will open if desired. Many of the attendees to Torcon had never seen a Hugo so up-close before, and it was interesting to see the looks on some of their faces when we offered to let them heft the trophy, and even photograph them with it (with their cameras) for their own personal souvenirs of the convention.

For me, though, my personal souvenir of the convention will be a new set of memories I'll add to the ones I have of other worldcons I've been to. Once and perhaps future fanzine publisher Benoit Gerard attended; the last time we'd seen him was back at the 1996 L.A.Con when he was still publishing *The Frozen Frog*. He told us he never goes places much anymore; he told us this was the first time in years he'd spoken so much English (he lives in a suburb of Québec City). John Hertz from Los Angeles was there as well, though he attends every worldcon. This year was special, though, because he was used as an on-stage prop by Dave Kyle during the Big Heart Award presentation during the Hugo Awards Ceremony, only to be astonished that *he* was this year's recipient. There were several SFPA members at the convention – Janice Gelb, Eve Ackerman, Sheila Strickland, and (of course) Guy. Listening to Guy and Rosie describe their Australian adventures from earlier this year was a particular delight, and I'm looking forward to their forthcoming trip report.

And then, on the way home, there was a reunion with an old college friend, Jeff. I hadn't seen him in 30 years, losing track of him a long time ago and only recently locating him with a simple Google search. (Why it took me so long to even try that, I have no good answer, though the link that led me to him turned to be only a year or two old.) He and his family now live in a suburb of Syracuse, and it wasn't at all our of our way to stop by to visit and have dinner with them. We were only there for a few hours, but it seemed much longer and it brought back memories of when we were all so much younger.

So, another year and another worldcon. This was our 21st total and 16th in a row (dating back to the 1988 NolaCon). Noreascon 4 is next, and it will be nice to go back to Boston again (and we haven't been *there* in 15 years). I'm hoping it won't be another two decades before we come back to Toronto. It was a good trip.

Big Storm Coming

It's now September 18th and the entire U.S. Government has closed down in preparation for that big hurricane that's coming ashore south of here today. It will arrive here in the D.C. area sometime this evening and may still have hurricane force winds, but the gusts are expected to be so strong by mid-morning that the Metrorail system and commuter trains will close down for the day. If I hurry, I might be able to get the lawn mowed before the rains begin, so I'll stop here.

We had to have one of our cats put down yesterday. He'd been with us since we got him from a vet clinic back in 1989, but he'd had a series of seizures/strokes of some kind that left him crippled (no use of one of his hind legs). He eventually declined further, to the point where he was no longer interested in food and only marginally was aware what was going on around him. So it was time to let him go. We'll miss him; he was one feisty little animal.

More later, and I hope anybody in the path of the storm manages to stay dry!