

Passion Has A Sound

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

***Vltava (the Moldau)* from "Má vlast" (My Fatherland)**

We remember Bedřich Smetana as one of the great figures of Czech nationalism, the composer of numerous operas (of which *The Bartered Bride* surfaces regularly) and, most famously, of the group of six symphonic poems known as *Má vlast* (My Fatherland).

Smetana was a prodigy who turned heads as a promising pianist by the time he was six and confounded his early teachers by always seeming to be a step or two ahead of them. By the time he graduated from school, he had achieved considerable musical prowess; still, he knew



that his native musical talent left technical gaps that only rigorous training could fill. He therefore entered into a three-year appointment in Prague as live-in piano teacher for a wealthy family, and used his earnings to finance further study of harmony, counterpoint, and composition. By 1851, thanks to a kind word from Liszt, Smetana could take pride in

seeing one of his compositions accepted by a publisher. Finally he had hope of being a professional composer.

However, civil war had broken out in many areas of the Hapsburg Empire, including in Bohemia, and as a result of its repressive regime, among other things, Smetana left his homeland in 1856. He went to Sweden, where he remained for five years, but success eluded him. When he returned to Prague, in 1862, he set about promoting his work in a more consistent way, and within a few years he occupied a place of prominence in the Czech musical world as a conductor, a critic, and, increasingly, as a composer. In 1866 he was named principal conductor of the Provisional Theatre, where he would build an orchestra that included among its ranks the violist and fledgling composer – Antonin Dvořák.

Smetana's life was not happy in all respects. His first wife died young, and three of his four daughters did not survive to adulthood. In 1874 he began losing his hearing and soon became substantially deaf. He had to withdraw from conducting and plunged more deeply into composing the cycle *Má vlast* (My Fatherland).

Each of the work's sections follows the general idea of the symphonic poem as set forth by Liszt in the 1850's, meaning that the piece is a self-contained orchestral

composition that explicitly depicts a literary description or a clearly delineated scene. *Vltava* (the Moldau) is one of the four symphonic poems that made up Smetana's composition in its original form, completed in 1874-75, and has achieved the status of unofficial musical ambassador for the Czech Lands. Smetana was to expand his cycle later with two further movements.

In an undated letter to his publisher, Smetana provided capsule explanations of the programs behind each of the symphonic poems of *Má vlast*. He wrote about the Moldau – “the composition depicts the course of the river, from its beginning where two brooks – one cold, the other warm – join a stream, running through forests and meadows and a lovely countryside where merry feasts are

celebrated; water-sprites dance in the moonlight; on nearby rocks can be seen the outline of ruined castles, proudly soaring to the sky. The Moldau swirls through the St. John Rapids and flows in a broad stream toward Prague. It passes Vyšehrad and disappears majestically into the distance, where it joins the Elbe.”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Concerto No. 4 in G Major for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 58

Although he was not of noble birth, and despite his temperamental outbursts at even close friends, Beethoven enjoyed in Vienna the encouragement and sponsorship of several high-born music lovers. Historians have suggested that his paradoxical social position was due less to any dawning sense of democratic feeling in aristocratic circles



than to a sincere appreciation for the power of his music. The integrity and passion of his music-making served to combine with the innate nobility of his character to open doors that his quarrelsome personality would otherwise have kept shut.

Among Beethoven's noble supporters who sponsored performances and provided money, commissions, introductions, and even expensive musical instruments, were numerous counts and princes, among them, Archduke Rudolf, the youngest son of the Hapsburg emperor. He began as Beethoven's piano student while in his early teens, and soon was compiling a complete library

THE CZECH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
ProgramNotes
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of the master's works. With Prince Josef Franz Maximilian Lobkowitz and Prince Ferdinand Kinsky, he was part of the agreement that was intended to maintain Beethoven in Vienna with an annuity for life, and he was the only one of the three who managed to live up to his contract.

The Fourth Concerto appeared during one of the most productive periods in Beethoven's creative life. Its first performance was in a private concert at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz in 1807. The public premiere took place during a cold and lengthy concert in December 1808. The audience shivered through four hours of world premieres of modern music, all by the same composer. Such a phenomenon could not occur today, but that tenacious Vienna audience heard the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the concert aria *Ah, perfido!*, portions of the *Missa solemnis*, the *Choral Fantasy*, and the Fourth Piano Concerto.

The Concerto's opening movement, *Allegro moderato*, departs from tradition by beginning with the solo piano - not the first concerto to do so, but the most audacious early example. The piano begins softly, almost conversationally. As though taken aback by this breach of convention, the orchestra begins its introduction by repeating the piano's phrase in a harmonically remote key. Beethoven, despite his unusual opening, does not relegate the orchestra to a secondary role behind the piano. It is a full partner throughout, often stating new themes before the piano takes them up. Beguilingly lyrical, this movement finds the composer in one of his less stormy moods. He dispenses here with the trumpets and timpani, and in the next movement with the rest of the winds as well.

The remarkable *Andante con moto* poses a dialogue between the piano and the string section, the soft voice of reason versus gruff belligerence. Liszt likened this movement to Orpheus taming the wild beasts with the sound of his lyre. By the close of this short movement, the strings have joined the soloist in peaceful accord.

Allowing no pause, the composer launches directly into his finale, a rondo marked *Vivace*. At last the entire orchestra is brought into spirited give and take with the piano, as the concerto moves toward its good-humored conclusion.

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 **"From the New World"**

Dvořák was a highly successful composer who loved the peasant tunes of his native Bohemia and incorporated their rhythms and melodies in his compositions. In 1892 he was offered the directorship of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. Upon arrival in this country, he

instantly fell in love with Black spirituals and Indian folk songs. He considered them to be the true folk music of America and he urged his students to study their melodies and incorporate them into their compositions.

In 1893, following his own advice, Dvořák wrote "From the New World" Symphony. He specifically wished this work to be an example for native American composers to follow. This composition is his best known symphony and has been touted by many as the best known symphony



written in this country by either a resident or visiting composer.

Over the years many scholars have tried to find actual melodies of Black spirituals or Indian folk songs in this composition. In fact, there are none. Dvořák claimed, "I tried to write only in the spirit of those American melodies." Henry T. Burleigh, the Black baritone and arranger and friend of Dvořák, was

quoted as saying, Dvořák "saturated himself in the spirit of those old tunes and then invented his own themes."

The symphony itself is comprised of four movements. The first movement opens with a slow introduction in which the main theme is suggested by lower strings and horns. Burleigh claimed this introduction reminded him of "some of the slave songs I sang" for Dvořák. The second theme, which is introduced by the flute and carried by the violins, has frequently been compared to the Black spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

The Largo movement is one of the most celebrated in all of symphonic music. This movement is built around an elegiac melody for the English horn over harmonies in the strings. During the premiere performance of this symphony, Dvořák was forced to take bow after bow from his seat in an upper-tier box after this second movement. Later one of his students, William Fischer, made a popular choral arrangement of this movement that is known as "Goin' Home."

The first theme of the Scherzo is reminiscent of an Indian ritual dance and filled with gaiety. This theme begins with the flute and oboe and is answered by the clarinet. It also contains a trio in two keys, suggesting the vast expanses of America's plains and prairies.

The powerful finale is full of exultation. The first theme is proclaimed by horns and trumpets, while the second theme is voiced by the clarinet section. In all, this symphony offers the listener enough material for endless speculation on America's promise.