

BEDŘICH SMETANA

Composer, Conductor

(Leitomyšl, Bohemia, 1824 — Prague, 1884)

VLTAVA (“THE MOLDAU”) FROM MÁ VLAST (“MY COUNTRY”)

Composed: 1874.

Premiered: April 4, 1876 in Prague, conducted by Adolf Čech

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

Scoring: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, harp and strings

Overview

Bedřich Smetana, “a composer with a genuine Czech heart” according to Franz Liszt, was one of the seminal figures in the music of his native country. He spent the five years after 1856 abroad, in Göteborg, Sweden as conductor of that city’s Philharmonic Society, but returned to Bohemia in 1861 to join the fledgling school of composers that was seeking to establish a national identity for the country’s music by incorporating into their works folk songs and dances, and by writing operas on Czech texts and subjects. In 1862, the National Theater was opened in Prague, and Smetana contributed to its repertory *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* in 1863 and, three years later, *The Bartered Bride*, which was received with immense enthusiasm and quickly became the country’s favorite opera. He served as conductor of the National Theater from 1866 until 1874, and wrote six additional operas for the company. The last years of his tenure, however, were marked by growing criticism, and he resigned in 1874. Free of his duties at the Theater, he turned his attention from the opera to the symphonic poem and produced over the following five years the orchestral works for which he is best known.

Early in 1874, Smetana began to suffer from severe headaches. This symptom came and went, and he noted no other physical problems until October. “One night I listened with great pleasure to Leo Delibes’ *Le Roi l’a dit*,” he reported. “When I returned home after the last act, I sat at the piano and improvised for an hour on whatever came into my head. *The following morning I was stone deaf*.” Smetana was terrified. He wrote to his friend J. Finch Thorne that a ceaseless rushing filled his head: “It is stronger when my brain is active and less noticeable when I am quiet. When I compose it is always in evidence.” He tried many unguents, ointments and treatments during the ensuing months but they brought no relief — Smetana did not hear a sound for the last decade of his life. He continued to compose, but withdrew more and more from the world as he realized he could not be cured, eventually losing his reason (in the margin of score of the 1882 D minor Quartet he scrawled, “Composed in a state of disordered nerves — *the outcome of my deafness*”) and ending his days in a mental ward.

It is one of the great ironies in 19th century music that Smetana conceived the first melody for *Má Vlast* (“*My Country*”), the splendid cycle of six tone poems inspired by the land and lore of his native Bohemia, at the same time that he lost his hearing. Had he not been able to look to the example of the deaf Beethoven, he might well have abandoned this work, but he pressed on and completed *Vyšehrad* by November 1874 and immediately began *The Moldau*, which was finished in less than three weeks, on December 8th. *Šárka* and *From Bohemia’s Woods and*

Meadows date from the following year; *Tábor* was finished in 1878 and *Blaník* in 1879. The first complete performance of *Má Vlast*, on November 2, 1882 in Prague (the cycle is dedicated to the city of Prague), was the occasion for a patriotic rally, and, like Sibelius' great national hymn *Finlandia*, this music has since become an emblem of its country's national pride. *Má Vlast* is the traditional music played every year on May 12th, the anniversary of Smetana's death, to open the Prague Spring Festival.

The Moldau ("Vltava" in Czech) is the principal river of Czechoslovakia, rising in the hills in the south and flowing north through Prague to join with the Elbe. Smetana's tone poem seems to trace its inspiration to a country trip he took along the river in 1870, a junket that included an exhilarating boat ride through the churning waters of the St. John Rapids. He first announced his intention to write a piece about the great river as early as 1872, as soon as he completed the opera *Libuše*, but he undertook another opera instead (*The Two Widows*), and had to postpone the tone poem for two more years. *The Moldau* is disposed in several sections intended to convey both the sense of a journey down the river and some of the sights seen along the way, as Smetana noted in his preface to the score:

"Two springs pour forth in the shade of the Bohemian Forest, one warm and gushing, the other cold and peaceful. Their waves, gaily flowing over rocky beds, join and glisten in the rays of the morning sun. The forest brook, hastening on, becomes the river Moldau. Coursing through Bohemia's valleys, it grows into a mighty stream. Through thick woods it flows, as the gay sounds of the hunt and the notes of the hunter's horn are heard ever nearer. It flows through grass-grown pastures and lowlands where a wedding feast is being celebrated with song and dance. At night, wood and water nymphs revel in its sparkling waves. Reflected on its surface are fortresses and castles — witnesses of bygone days of knightly splendor and the vanished glory of fighting times. At the St. John Rapids, the stream races ahead, winding through the cataracts, hewing out a path with its foaming waves through the rocky chasm into the broad river bed — finally, flowing on in majestic peace toward Prague and welcomed by the time-honored castle Vyšehrad. [At this point, there is a recall of the main theme of the complete cycle's preceding tone poem, entirely devoted to depicting the ruined castle and its aura of ancient battles and forgotten bards.] Then it vanishes far beyond the poet's gaze."

What To Listen For

The sweeping theme with which Smetana portrays the broad river was long thought to have been derived from a Czech folksong. Recent research, however, has shown that the melody is actually the Swedish tune, *Ack, Värmland du sköna* ("Oh, Värmland, you beautiful land") praising the beauties of the countryside north of Göteborg. The song was included in an anthology published in 1816 by Geijer and Afzelius, and incorporated into an 1846 play by the Swedish dramatist F.A. Dahlgren. The play and the song enjoyed a fine local success in Göteborg, and were still popular when Smetana was living there between 1856 and 1861. Indeed, Smetana may even have learned *Ack, Värmland du sköna* from Dahlgren himself, since the two were friends during those years. It is not certain whether Smetana deliberately quoted this song in *The Moldau* or whether it simply bubbled up from his subconscious while he was composing the piece, but his ardent patriotism suggests that it was the latter. Once migrated to Bohemia through Smetana's music, the tune took on a new life as the Czech folksong, *Kočka leze dirou*.

Of *The Moldau* and the other tone poems comprising *Má Vlast*, Paul Stefan wrote, “Smetana’s music sings to us today of the Bohemia of old — its woods and cultivated plains, its villages, its romantic hills and old legends, its great past and even its future. It is all one great pageant of dance and song — dancing to native rhythms of astounding variety, singing to melodies of a unique beauty.”

LEOŠ JANÁČEK

Composer

(Hukvaldy, Moravia, 1854 — Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, 1928)

SINFONIETTA

Composed: 1926.

Premiered: June 29, 1926 in Prague, conducted by Václav Talich

Duration: ca. 24 minutes

Scoring: piccolo, four flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, twelve trumpets, two bass trumpets, four trombones, two tenor tubas, bass tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

Overview

In the summer of 1917, when he was 63, Leoš Janáček fell in love with Kamila Stösslová, the 25-year-old wife of a Jewish antiques dealer from Písek. They first met in a town in central Moravia during the War, but, as he lived in Brno with Zdenka, his wife of 37 years, and she lived with her husband in Písek, they saw each other only infrequently thereafter and remained in touch mostly by letter. The true passion seems to have been entirely on his side (“It is fortunate that only I am infatuated,” he once wrote to her), but Kamila did not reject his company, apparently feeling admiration rather than love for the man who, with the successful staging of his *Jenufa* in Prague in 1915 eleven years after its premiere in Brno, was at that time acquiring an international reputation as a master composer. Whatever the details of their relationship, Kamila’s role as an inspiring muse during the last decade of Janáček’s life was indisputable and beneficent — under the sway of his feelings for her he wrote his greatest music, including the operas *Katya Kabanova*, *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *The Makropoulos Affair*, the song cycle *The Diary of the Young Man Who Disappeared*, the two String Quartets (the second of which he titled “Intimate Letters”), the *Glagolitic Mass* and the *Sinfonietta* for Orchestra.

The conception of the *Sinfonietta* dates to Janáček’s visit with Kamila in Písek during the summer of 1925. “One sunny day,” recounts the composer’s biographer Jaroslav Vogel, “[they] were sitting in the local park listening to a military band concert. The well-rehearsed musicians played, among other things, some fanfares which took Janáček’s fancy not only as such but also by the way in which they were performed. The players — possibly dressed in historical costumes — stood up to play their solos and then sat down again. This refreshing experience, enhanced by the close presence of Kamila and by the park setting, made a deep impression on Janáček, who afterwards referred to it continually in his letters to Kamila.” The following winter, Janáček was

approached by the Czech patriotic and gymnastic society known as Sokol (“Falcon”) to write some fanfares for their quadrennial national jamboree to be held in Prague that summer. Bursting with national pride ever since the freeing of Czechoslovakia from Austro-Hungarian hegemony at the end of the First World War and with the pleasant memory of the Písek band concert still in his mind, he readily agreed to accept the commission. He set about the project early in March 1926, beginning with a stentorian fanfare for brass, but the piece quickly outgrew its rather modest original purpose and blossomed into a full-fledged symphonic essay spread across five movements. The *Sinfonietta*, according to the composer, was meant to express “the contemporary free man, his spiritual beauty and joy, his strength, courage and determination to fight for victory.” Janáček’s immediate reference with these words was to the summer games in Prague, but they also touch on the wider political situation in his beloved homeland — the score was at first dedicated to the Czech Armed Forces. The *Sinfonietta* was introduced during the Sokol festival, on June 29, 1926 in Prague in a performance by Václav Talich and the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, and introduced to both Germany and the United States within a year by Otto Klemperer, one of the composer’s staunchest early champions. It has remained the most popular of Janáček’s orchestral compositions.

What To Listen For

When the *Sinfonietta* was new, Janáček appended to each of its movements a title: *Fanfares, The Castle, The Queen’s Monastery, The Street* and *The Town Hall*. In a journal article of 1927 called “My Town,” Janáček explained that these sobriquets denoted landmarks in Brno, which he remembered as “small and inhospitable” in its Austro-Hungarian days during his youth and early professional life, but which, after gaining its freedom, “underwent a miraculous change. I lost my dislike of the gloomy Town Hall, my hatred of the hill from whose depths so much pain was screaming, my distaste for the street and its throng. As if by a miracle, liberty was conjured up, glowing over the town — the rebirth of 28 October 1918. I saw myself in it. I belonged to it. And the blare of the victorious trumpets, the holy peace of the Queen’s Monastery, the shadows of night, the breath of the green hill and the vision of the growing greatness of the town, of my Brno, were all giving birth to my *Sinfonietta*.” Though the music is devoid of explicit programmatic reference, it churns throughout with an unquenchable vitality and exuberance that undoubtedly grew from Janáček’s ardent nationalism. The music is never far from folk song, which, in its melodic leadings and speech rhythms, served as the springboard for Janáček’s art. Though the movements are mostly constructed in sections, they surge forward with the sort of cumulative structural logic typical of Janáček that is more easily heard than explained. The piece is brought round full circle when the brazen fanfare of the opening movement is recalled in the finale to create a stunning climax to one of the most splendid and innovative masterworks in all of 20th-century music.

On July 11, 1926, just two weeks after the premiere of the *Sinfonietta*, Janáček was honored by the placing of a memorial plaque on the house of his birth in Hukvaldy. In his remarks for the occasion, he said, “I think I succeeded best in getting as close as possible to the mind of the simple man in my latest work, my *Sinfonietta*. I would like to continue on that road.... My latest creative period is also a kind of new sprouting from the soul which has made its peace with the rest of the world and seeks only to be nearest to the ordinary Czech man.”

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Composer, Teacher

(Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841 — Prague, 1904)

CONCERTO FOR CELLO IN B MINOR, OP. 104

Composed: 1894-1895.

Premiered: March 19, 1896 in London, conducted by the composer with Leo Stern as soloist

Duration: ca. 40 minutes

Scoring: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, three horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, strings

Overview

During the three years that Dvořák was teaching at the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, he was subject to the same emotions as most other travelers away from home for a long time: invigoration and homesickness. America served to stir his creative energies, and during his stay from 1892 to 1895 he composed some of his greatest scores: the “New World” Symphony, the Op. 96 String Quartet (“American”), the E-flat major String Quintet and the Cello Concerto. He was keenly aware of the new musical experiences to be discovered in the land far from his beloved Bohemian home when he wrote, “The musician must prick up his ears for music. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or organ grinder. I myself am often so fascinated by these people that I can scarcely tear myself away.” But he missed his home and, while he was composing the Cello Concerto, looked eagerly forward to returning. He opened his heart in a letter to a friend in Prague: “Now I am finishing the finale of the Violoncello Concerto. If I could work as free from cares as at Vysoká [site of his country home], it would have been finished long ago. Oh, if only I were in Vysoká again!” The Concerto might just as well have been written in a Czech café as in an East 17th Street apartment.

Elements of both Dvořák’s American experiences and his longing for home found their way into the Cello Concerto, the last of his works composed in this country. The inspiration to begin what became one of the greatest concertos in the literature was a performance by the New York Philharmonic in March 1894 at which Victor Herbert (*the* Victor Herbert of operetta fame, who was then also teaching at the National Conservatory) played his own Second Cello Concerto. That work convinced Dvořák that the cello was a viable solo instrument, something about which he had been unsure despite the assurances of Hanuš Wihan, cello professor at the Prague Conservatory, who had long been urging his fellow faculty member to write a piece for the instrument. (Apparently Brahms, Dvořák’s friend and mentor, had a similar mistrust of the cello as a solo instrument. When he first saw Dvořák’s score he wondered, “Why on earth didn’t I know that one can write a violoncello concerto like this? If I had only known, I would have written one long ago!”) Dvořák had tried to mollify Wihan in 1891 with two recital numbers — the Rondo in G minor and *Silent Woods*, an arrangement of a piano piece from 1884 — but the cellist continued to pester him for a full-scale concerto until his request finally bore fruit four years later. Dvořák asked Wihan for his comments on the score (which Dvořák largely ignored) and they read through the piece together privately in September 1895, soon after Dvořák had

returned home, but Wihan, despite the composer's pleading, was unable to give either the work's world or Prague premiere because of already-scheduled conflicts. Those privileges fell instead to the young English virtuoso Leo Stern, who introduced the work on March 19, 1896 with the London Philharmonic and gave its first performance in Dvořák's home city three weeks later with the Czech Philharmonic, both conducted by the composer. Wihan first played the Concerto publicly at The Hague in January 1899 and regularly thereafter, including a performance in Budapest under the composer's direction on December 20, 1899.

What To Listen For

With its wealth of melodic ideas, its glowing orchestration and its emotional immediacy, Dvořák's Cello Concerto occupies the pinnacle of the solo literature for the instrument. The opening movement is in sonata form, with both themes presented by the orchestra before the entry of the soloist. The first theme, heard immediately in the clarinets, not only contains the principal melody but also serves to establish the importance given to the wind instruments throughout the work, their tone colors serving as an excellent foil to the rich sonorities of the cello. "One of the most beautiful melodies ever composed for the horn" is how Sir Donald Tovey described the D major second theme. The cello's entrance points up the virtuosic yet songful character of the solo part. The effect of the music for the soloist is enhanced by the use of the instrument's burnished upper register, a technique Dvořák had learned from Victor Herbert's Concerto.

Otakar Šourek, the composer's biographer, described the second movement as a "hymn of deepest spirituality and amazing beauty." It is in three-part form (A–B–A). A poignant bit of autobiography is attached to the composition of this movement. While working on its middle section, Dvořák received news that his beloved sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová, who had aroused in him a secret passion early in his life, was seriously ill. He showed his concern by using one of Josefina's favorite pieces as the theme for the central portion of this *Adagio* — his own song, *Let Me Wander Alone with My Dreams*, Op. 82, No. 1. She died a month after he returned to Prague in April 1895, so he revised the finale to include another reference to the same song in the autumnal slow section just before the end of the work.

The finale is a rondo of dance-like nature. Following the second reprise of the theme, in B major, an *Andante* section recalls both the first theme of the opening movement and Josefina's melody from the second. A brief, rousing restatement of the rondo theme led by the brass closes this majestic Concerto.