

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

Symphonies

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) composed symphonies from the beginning of his career as composer up to his stay in America – the penultimate creative period of his life, and spent the last period writing symphonic poems and operas. Unlike Johannes Brahms who finished and published his first symphony only in 1877, Dvořák seems to have been unaffected by Richard Wagner's warnings that, after Beethoven, no one can write symphonies.

Symphony No. 1 in C minor 'The Bells of Zlonice', sine op. (B. 9; 1865)

1. *[Allegro]*
2. *Adagio molto*
3. *Allegretto*
4. *Finale: Allegro animato*

Dvořák's *First Symphony* (called *The Bells of Zlonice* by the composer at a time when he considered it lost) was composed in 1865, when its author wrote in the early Romantic style and was inspired by the models of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. His creative outburst of that year is usually ascribed to his falling in love with a young actress in the theatre where he played the viola, Josefina Čermáková, later his sister-in-law. In his works of that time the composer seems to review his past life. It begins with the distant echo of the church bells in Zlonice, the town where he began his musical career, through the vigorous rhythmical motive in the bass instruments, a symbol of the path for which he had been predetermined by fate, to the triumphant finale full of energy and optimism. The keys of the individual movements also tell of the work's inspiration by a gesture analogous to Beethoven's Fifth.

Symphony No. 2 in B flat major, op. 4 (B. 12; 1865, rev. 1887)

1. *Allegro con moto*
2. *Poco adagio*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro con brio*
4. *Finale: Allegro con fuoco*

Shortly after finishing the symphony, Dvořák wrote his first cello concerto in A major and particularly a large song cycle *The Cypresses* from the mood of which it is obvious that his love was not reciprocal. Shortly afterwards (August – early October 1865), he composed his *Second Symphony*. Its initially pastoral character gradually acquiring the charge of fresh energy illustrates the composer's liberation from the hopeless emotional state. The fact that a lyrical theme of the last movement appeared, 35 years later, in his opera *Rusalka* has already been pointed out. There, after the words "For your love ... for your beauty ... you human soul should be pardoned by God!" closing the opera the theme expresses the catharsis of the love relation between the Prince and Rusalka.

Symphony No. 3 in E flat major, op. 10 (B. 34; 1873, rev. 1887/89)

1. *Allegro moderato*
2. *Adagio molto, tempo di Marcia*
3. *Finale: Allegro vivace*

The heroic and dramatic tones of the finale, however, hint at another of Dvořák's operas, *Alfred*, composed in 1870 to the German libretto of Karl Theodor Körner on the theme of national liberation

struggle. It represents Dvořák's second creative period in which he leaned towards Lisztian and Wagnerian neo-Romanticism. In this spirit, he wrote the short patriotic hymn *Heirs of the White Mountain*, his first decisive success with the public presented at a concert in Prague in March 1873. In the same spirit (and with a theme echoing the final part of the cantata) Dvořák composed his *Third Symphony*. Its first movement has the same pathos – and is in the same key – as the symphonic poem *Vyšehrad* written by Bedřich Smetana shortly afterwards. It was thanks to Smetana as conductor that the symphony was the first of Dvořák's output in this field played in public in 1874 at a concert of the Philharmonia Society in Prague. The original version of the second movement is unknown because it was reworked by the composer who replaced this part of the autograph by a copy written by his copyist. The third movement, however, had its peculiar experimental character from the very beginning. In it, Dvořák combined – as he did in some chamber music works of that time – the scherzo and finale in an original formation overflowing with joy and excitement. It is there that is discernible the characteristic feature of Dvořák's output, namely giving romantic contents a classical frame.

Symphony No. 4 in D minor, op. 13 (B. 41; 1874, rev. 1887/88)

1. *Allegro*
2. *Andante sostenuto e molto cantabile*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro feroce*
4. *Allegro con brio*

The joy, excitement and optimism characteristic of the third symphony of Dvořák, composed in 1873 shortly after the success of his brief patriotic hymn *Heirs of the White Mountain*, gave way in the composer's following output to works with a darker and more dramatic tone. It was probably due to the failed attempt to stage the first version of the opera *King and Charcoal Burner* and also the opposition of the family of his beloved, Anna (younger sister of the composer's one-time love Josefina Čermáková who had, however, rejected him) to their marriage which the young couple had to fight for hard. An indication of it was the overture *Romeo and Juliet* treating the scene in the monuments and destroyed by the composer, and two string quartets of autumn 1873. It was at that time, it seems, that the *Capriccio* for large orchestra, the germ of a new, *Fourth Symphony* was written in which it then became the scherzo. The relation of its main theme with the piece *In Troubled Times*, part of the later piano duet cycle *From the Bohemian Forest* seems to hint at its content. The symphony is the last one echoing Lisztian and Wagnerian influences characteristic of the composer's second creative period which was then drawing to a close. At the same time, Dvořák's typical tendency to give romantic ideas a classical frame begins to be clearly discernible here. Romantic pathos and vaulted melodies of the strings are balanced by a rhythmical vigour, an occasional expression of Dvořák's typical humour, and a joyous, active resolve which, eventually, prevail. Of the original version, only the scherzo was played at a concert which happened to be Bedřich Smetana's last assignment as conductor. In the late 1880s the composer reworked the symphony and conducted it himself in April 1890 as part of a program of farewell concerts before his departure for America where he was to become director of *The National Conservatory of Music* in New York.

Symphony No. 5 in F major, op. 76 (B. 54; 1875, rev. 1887)

1. *Allegro ma non troppo*
2. *Andante con moto*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro scherzando*
4. *Finale: Allegro molto*

The new version of his opera *King and Charcoal Burner* which had been produced with success at the end of 1874, marked the beginning of Dvořák's third creative period, usually known as

Slavonic. As early as 1875, which was a fruitful year for him, Dvořák wrote his *Fifth*, “Pastoral” *Symphony*. It, however, resembles a pastoral idyll only in the first three parts. The finale, one of Dvořák’s most powerful symphonic movements, is rather a rustic drama, from the initial search for the main key which is established only after more than fifty bars. Hans von Bülow to whom the symphony was dedicated thanked for it in a well-known letter in which he appreciated the dedication “more than a grand cross of a Prince”.

Symphony No. 6 in D major, op. 60 (B. 112; 1880)

1. *Allegro non tanto*
2. *Adagio*
3. *Scherzo (Furiant)*
4. *Finale: Allegro con spirito*

Dvořák’s *Sixth Symphony* was composed five years later. Those five years of his Slavonic period first saw the creation of totally different musical forms – from the *Moravian Duets* to the *Slavonic Rhapsodies* and the first series of *Slavonic Dances*. In late summer 1880 Dvořák began to write his symphony in D major which he finished in October of the same year. Conductor Václav Talich described it as “Czech Christmas symphony”, most probably because of the delicate but very intensive lyricism of the slow movement. Particularly remarkable is the buoyant scherzo in the form of the Czech folk dance *furiant*. The vigour of the final movement occasionally reminds of the humour of Papa Haydn. Viennese conductor Hans Richter who had probably inspired the work and to whom it was dedicated did not conduct its premiere. He conducted it only in 1882 in London, one month after it was produced there under August Manns. The work was first played in Prague in March 1881, at a concert of the Philharmonia society, conducted by Adolf Čech. In the same year, the symphony was published by Simrock as “First”; this false numbering resulted in many subsequent errors in the review of the composer’s development, particularly after the older Fifth Symphony was later published as “Third”. Dvořák’s Sixth is since long ago part of the repertory of many leading orchestras in the world and is a perfect example of the middle period of its authors life.

Symphony No. 7 in D minor, op. 70 (B. 141; 1884-85, rev. 1885)

1. *Allegro maestoso*
2. *Poco adagio*
3. *Scherzo: Vivace*
4. *Finale: Allegro*

In 1883-1885 Dvořák experienced a big, profound, inner struggle. Heady, growing foreign success (chamber music, *Stabat mater*, symphonies, and also opera – the triumph of *The Peasant a Rogue* in Dresden and Hamburg) brought many new artistic and personal contacts, many influences and offers, many disturbing and unsettling problems. Foreign friends told Dvořák that his close attachment to his native soil, his being bound to national cultural traditions was unsuitable for his career, that he should move to Vienna or somewhere to Germany which would provide a better launching pad for his great flight. But even internally, the conversations with the cosmopolitan and world views of different personalities, such as Hanslick or Brahms, had a disturbing and provocative influence on what had been, until then Dvořák’s relatively balanced outlook, one that had not admitted deep problems. And there was also personal pain, the death of his beloved mother, which stirred the composer’s most inner emotions and gave rise to tones in his music never heard before. Signals of the forthcoming struggle were reflected in the Beethoven-like expansive Quartet in C Major of 1880, the storm was in full force in the big Piano Trio in F minor, Dvořák’s Czech stubbornness found expression even in the orchestral *Scherzo capriccioso*, in some parts of the four-hand piano cycle

From the Bohemian Forest, and notably in the striking orchestral *Husitská* dramatic overture. Dvořák discovered one outlet by inclining towards the Erben national tradition in the cantata *The Spectre's Bride*, but the decisive battle was fought in the *Seventh Symphony in D minor*. The external impetus for writing it was a request from the *London Philharmonic Society* which, in June 1884, had made the composer – on the basis of his exceptional and many appearances in England – its honorary member. An important factor in its technical concept was certainly Brahms' Third Symphony in F Major, finished shortly before; but the main inspiration was Dvořák's direct internal and external experience, for instance, the turbulent nationality atmosphere around the ongoing activities of the newly opened National Theatre.

We sense right away the deep inner predisposition in the first, dark beats of the composition:

The ballad-like tone is similar to the works immediately preceding it; the fragmentary, aphoristic entrance of instruments, as though wishing to introduce fateful, conflict views into gloomy thoughts of this "hour of truth"; the atmosphere of the recently completed *Husitská* dramatic overture resounds again and again. In the second movement the country-mother seems to speak to the exhausted fighter.

She shows him what deep sources he can draw on for strength in the new struggles, and the radiant magnificence of life after victory: of the many other themes in this movement let us cite at least one that is breathtakingly beautiful: the fascinating rhythms of the scherzo, a remembrance of some unfinished dance, an unfinished movement of love in life have belonged ever since its London première in April 1885 (under the baton of the composer), to the most supremely enchanting aspects of the work, and the finale's fierce struggle, bringing in the darkly obstinate gesture of the first theme is soon replaced by the manly, wise song of the secondary idea sweeping all in its wake as it hastens towards the end, whose dearly-bought happiness is finally heard in the theme which at first battled in the role of the antagonist. Following this fierce struggle with the angel came the evening-light oratorio *St. Ludmila*, now based on the acquired certainties of a personality who, to date, had not betrayed his ideals but had reached an understanding of them from a far broader and more deeply viewed position regarding the meaning of creation and of life.

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Basking in the glow of this human and artistic height of maturity now came a number of works fully synthesizing Dvořák's inventional proximity to the most profound sources of personal, national and timely typicality, combined with a perfect mastery of the tectonic order. After the second series of *Slavonic Dances*, these included notably the marvellous second Piano Quintet in A Major and the opera *The Jacobin*; there also was a revision of many older, as yet unpublished compositions, on which Dvořák now impressed his full technical mastery.

Symphony No. 8 in G major, op. 88 (B. 163; 1889)

1. *Allegro con brio*

2. *Adagio*

3. *Allegretto grazioso*

4. *Allegro ma non troppo*

The Eighth Symphony in G Major of 1889 is once again the fruit of late summer and early autumn; it is a kind of thanksgiving for the beautiful gift of life, Nature, and the human community. With a wise and mature smile, Dvořák raised a rich gamut of experience to levels of heroism and accompanied its diverse and wide current with the optimistically balanced views of a man standing midway through life.

The richness and variety of moods of Dvořák's Eighth are truly exceptional. However, at the outset of the first movement, which on the whole maintains the classical sonata form, in the introduction of the "superfluous" meditative theme which then proceeds to return twice in the form of divisions in the movement, we find a bright mosaic of impressions, from the pastoral and idyllic, to the hymn-like or fanfare march, from choral concentrations to dramatic turbulence.

Even more variable perhaps is the *Adagio*, according to Otakar Šourek a romantic picture of life at an old castle: it includes tragic pathos and the slightly airy trouvère serenade, knightly glitter and the nostalgia of hazy horizons.

The melancholy waltz of the scherzo finds its counterpart in the intense folk rhythms of the trio – and in the coda even in a *furiant*. In the finale, in the form of variations on a theme introduced by a clear trumpet fanfare, each of its units provides a differently-hued and redrawn picture framed in the gold of imposing animation.

The symphony's first performance was given in 1890 in Prague, in Frankfurt on the Main, and in London. The composer himself conducted it and again won exceptional acclaim. But he had had a disagreement with his main publisher, Simrock, and the work therefore was printed by the London firm of Novello; this, and the fact that the composer performed it on the occasion of being given an honorary degree of Doctor of Music of Cambridge University with the Eighth as his "dissertation", was why it is sometimes known as the *English* symphony. But in reality it is one of Dvořák's most Czech symphonies and it is correct to read into it a deep linkage with Smetana's symphonic poem *From Bohemia's Woods and Fields* from the cycle *My Country*.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor 'From the new World', op. 95 (B. 178; 1893)

1. *Adagio – Allegro molto*
2. *Largo*
3. *Scherzo: Molto vivace*
4. *Allegro con fuoco*

Soon after completion of the Symphony in G Major, Dvořák began working on something else, a still more profound and broader balance sheet of his life and views on the most fundamental questions of life and death in general: he wrote his Requiem not as mass for the dead, but as a compact reply to everything he regarded as significant in fudging the purpose of human existence. And once again – on a somewhat lighter and more specifically illustrative level – he dealt with this theme in a triptych of concert overtures, *In Nature's Realm*, *Carnival* and *Othello* (Nature, Life and Love). He had now decided to take an important step – to move, but not forever, to New York as director of the conservatory, established there by Mrs. Jeanette Thurber.

He prepared seriously for this position; he tried to learn more than what the Czech public knew about the history of this young country and its culture, and he left for the States in 1892 with a gift in hand, his cantata *Te Deum*, to mark the 400th anniversary of America's discovery by Columbus. In this work he incorporated his preconceived ideas about the music of the North American peoples, especially the Native Americans, as he had learned about it in Bohemia from literature and from a folklore appearance by one such travelling troupe.

And Dvořák's first work to be born on this new soil was a symphony – his *Ninth*, and last, for which he finally chose the key of E minor. Although he wanted – as in his *Te Deum* – to lend the atmosphere of the work several characteristic features of North American folkloric groups, this time including also African (in this case influenced in turn by the folk music of the Scots and the Irish), he was unable to write other than spontaneously, that is to say in a way reflecting experience in a milieu

so different from Europe but also showing an increased longing for home, friends and those members of his family who had remained in Bohemia. The thematic material of the work is naturally pure Dvořák; this was no taking over of ready-made folklore themes and incorporating them into a symphonic mosaic. Only the virgin soil of the States, where no basic discussion had yet gone on about the question of nationality in art – something which had occurred in Bohemia 40 years back and was concluded by the ideas and the work of Bedřich Smetana who allowed the direct use of the folk song only in quite exceptional cases – could have become the scene of such confused and almost fruitless debates as to what Dvořák was actually doing. Only one theme – the concluding idea of the first movement of the symphony can be regarded as a citation of part of the Negro spiritual *Swing Low*, but without the original first bar (!). On the contrary, the famous theme of the Largo can be found in the composer's sketchbooks from its birth until its final appearance, produced with the aid of a blue pencil in the hand written score; it is so personal, universally comprehensible and natural that set to the text of *Going Home* it reached the broadest audience as a kind of folk song, and with this erroneous designation it was even played by the Scots military bagpipe ensemble!

Otherwise the main ideas of the work – although several features appear in it of non-Czech folk music, such as the diminished seventh in minor key or the pentatonic scale – have a purely Dvořák character, evident at once in the main themes of the outer movements.

And in the scherzo's trio there are such strong strains of Czech country music and the cooing of doves at Vysoká – one of Dvořák's favourite pastimes was pigeon-fancying – that not even here could one possibly dream of saying he had betrayed his basic credo of a truly national composer.

The enormous success of the première in New York's *Carnegie Hall* in December 1893, began the path of glory of this most frequently played romantic symphony (Anton Seidel conducted the New York Philharmonic), overshadowing the two previous symphonies that were, compositionally speaking, unquestionably more ingenious. In the meantime the composer had been reconciled to the publisher Simrock and so the work was able to appear again in Berlin right afterwards, in the following year. In order to avoid holding up the proofs by sending them across the ocean, the proofreading was done for Simrock by Johannes Brahms, the dedicated editor also of Mozart, Schumann and Chopin, and who in this way put his young friend Dvořák in the company of composers dear to him.

Jarmil Burghauser