

Antonín Dvorák

Symphony No. 8 in G, Opus 88

First performance: February 2, 1890, Prague, Dvorák cond. *First BSO performance:* February 1892 (American premiere), Arthur Nikisch cond. *First Tanglewood performance:* July 30, 1966, Erich Leinsdorf cond. *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* July 13, 2003, Kurt Masur cond.

Dvorák's fame at home had begun with the performance in 1873 of his patriotic cantata *Heirs of the White Mountain*. (The defeat of the Bohemians by the Austrians at the battle of the White Mountain just outside Prague in 1620 led to the absorption of Bohemia into the Habsburg empire, a condition that obtained until October 28, 1918.) An international reputation was made for him by the first series of Slavonic Dances of 1878 and also by his *Stabat Mater*. The success in England of the latter work was nothing less than sensational, and Dvorák became a beloved and revered figure there, particularly in the world of choir festivals, much as Mendelssohn had been in the century's second quarter (but see George Bernard Shaw's reviews of Dvorák's sacred works).

In the 1890s, this humble man, who had picked up the first rudiments of music in his father's combination of butcher shop and pub, played the fiddle at village weddings, and sat for years among the violas in the pit of the opera house in Prague (he was there for the first performance of Smetana's *Bartered Bride*), would conquer America as well, even serving for a while as director of the National conservatory in New York. Johannes Brahms was an essential figure in Dvorák's rise, providing musical inspiration, but also helping his younger colleague to obtain government stipends that gave him something more like the financial independence he needed, and, perhaps most crucially, persuading his own publisher Simrock to take him on. Next to talent, nothing matters so much to a young composer as having a responsible and energetic publisher to get the music into circulation, a subject many a composer today could address eloquently.

Unlike Haydn and Beethoven, Dvorák never sold the same work to two different publishers, but on a few occasions, and in clear breach of contract, he fled the Simrock stable, succumbing to the willingness of the London firm of Novello to outbid their competition in Berlin. One of these works was the G major symphony, published in a handsomely printed full-size score by Novello, Ewer, and Co. of London and New York, copyright 1892, and priced at thirty shillings. Dvorák's other Novello publications were vocal works, including his great dramatic cantata *The Specter's Bride*, the oratorio *Saint Ludmilla*, the Mass in D, and the *Requiem*. Given the English passion for Dvorák engendered by his *Stabat Mater* in 1883, it is no wonder that Novello was willing to bid high.

Simrock primarily wanted piano pieces, songs, chamber music, and, above all, more and more Slavonic Dances—in other words, quick sellers—while Dvorák, for his part, accused Simrock of not wanting to pay the high fees that large works like symphonies merited. (Simrock, having paid 3000 marks for the Symphony No. 7, offers a mere and insulting 1000 for No. 8.) Yet Dvorák was not just interested in money, though as someone who had grown up in poverty he was not indifferent to comfort. He had grand goals as a composer of symphony and opera—not just to do those things, but to do them, especially symphony, in as original a way as he was capable. Understandably, therefore, and in full awareness of the value of Simrock's initial support, he resented a publisher who showed some reserve about endorsing his most ambitious undertakings. I also suspect that another factor in these occasional infidelities of Dvorák's was his unabated irritation with Simrock for his insistence on printing his name as German "Anton" rather than Czech "Antonín." They eventually compromised on "Ant." Novello was willing to go with "Antonín."

It had been four years since Dvorák's last symphony, the magnificent—and very Brahmsian—No. 7 in D minor. During those four years, Dvorák had made yet another attempt at opera (this time with a political-romantic work called *The Jacobin*, full of superb music), revised the Violin Concerto into its present form, written a second and even finer series of Slavonic Dances, and composed two of his most loved and admired pieces of chamber music, the A major piano quintet and the piano quartet in E-flat. He felt thoroughly ready to tackle another symphony, and as he got to work in the seclusion of his country house, each page of freshly covered manuscript paper bore witness to how well-founded was his faith in himself and his ability to write something that, as he said, would be "different from other symphonies, with individual thoughts worked out in a new way."

The new symphony opens strikingly with an introduction in tempo, notated in G major like the main part of the movement, but actually in G minor. This melody, which sounds gloriously rich in cellos, clarinets, bassoons, and horns, was actually an afterthought of Dvorák's, and he figured out how to bring it back most splendidly at crucial points during the movement. The Adagio also begins on a harmonic slant. Those first rapturous phrases for strings are—or seem to be—in E-flat major, and it is only in the eighth measure that the music settles into its real key, C minor. Now we sense the long shadow cast by Beethoven's *Eroica*, because the moment C minor is established, the music concentrates on gestures that are unmistakably those of a funeral march. A radiant C major middle section, introduced by a characteristic triple upbeat, makes the *Eroica* reference even more unmistakable, and rises to a

magnificently sonorous climax. After some moments of calm, the music becomes more impassioned than ever and finally subsides into a coda that is both elegiac and tender. It is also, like most of this symphony, a marvel of imaginative scoring.

By way of a scherzo, Dvorák gives us a leisurely dance in G minor. The Trio, in G major, is one of his most enchanting pages. The main section of the movement returns in the usual way, after which Dvorák gives us a quick coda which is the Trio transformed, music he actually borrowed from his 1874 comic opera *The Stubborn Lovers*. After this strong taste of national flavor, Dvorák becomes more Czech than ever in the finale, which one might describe as sort of footloose variations, and which is full of delightful orchestral effects, the virtuosic flute variation and the mad, high trilling of the horns from time to time being perhaps the most remarkable of these.

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