

Symphony No. 8 in G major, Op. 88

Antonín Dvořák

As a child, Antonín Dvořák revealed nothing resembling precocious musical talent. Although his family was poor, Dvořák did study music with the local schoolmaster and, later, with an organist in a nearby town. In 1857 he entered the Prague Organ School, where he received a thorough academic grounding in theory and performance, and soon he secured a spot as violist in a dance orchestra. The group prospered, and in 1862 its members became the founding core of the Provisional Theatre orchestra. Dvořák would play principal viola in the group for nine years, in which capacity he sat directly beneath the batons of such conductors as Bedřich Smetana and Richard Wagner.

During these early years Dvořák also honed his skills as a composer, and by 1871 he felt compelled to leave the orchestra and devote himself to composing full time. This entailed considerable financial risk, but the aspiring composer eked out a living by giving piano lessons and (beginning in 1873) playing the organ at St. Adalbert's Church in Prague. This turned out to be a happy choice, since he fell in love with one of his piano students, Anna Čermáková, whom he married in 1873.

The following year he received his first real break as a composer: he was awarded the Austrian State Stipendium, a grant newly created by the Ministry of Education to assist young, poor, gifted musicians — which exactly defined Dvořák's status at the time. That he received the award again in 1876 and 1877 underscores how his financial situation was improving slowly, if at all, in the mid-1870s, up to the time when the critic Eduard Hanslick noticed his work and alerted Johannes Brahms, who recommended Dvořák to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock. If Dvořák had not received this critical

support at the eleventh hour he might well have given up trying to be a composer. The world came precariously close to never hearing his mature masterpieces, such as his great chamber works and his last four symphonies.

Even so, these late pieces were slow to make their way into the international repertoire. Except for the *New World* Symphony, *Carnival*, and the Slavonic Dances, Dvořák remained rather little played outside his native land until practically the middle of the 20th century. In the Czech lands, however, he finally enjoyed the respect he deserved by the time he got around to his Eighth Symphony, and in 1890 he dedicated it “for my installation as a member of the Czech Academy of the Emperor Franz Joseph for Sciences, Literature, and Arts,” which inducted him two months after the premiere.

The publisher Simrock had paid Dvořák 3,000 marks for his Symphony No. 7 in 1885.

IN SHORT

Born: September 8, 1841, in Mühlhausen (Nelahozeves), Bohemia (today the Czech Republic)

Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague

Work composed: August 26–November 8, 1889, in Prague; dedicated to the Czech Academy of the Emperor Franz Joseph for Sciences, Literature, and Arts

World premiere: February 2, 1890, by the National Theatre Orchestra in Prague, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 12, 1892, Anton Seidl, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 26, 2016, Iván Fischer, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 38 minutes

When the composer finished his Eighth Symphony, which occupied him for about two and a half months during the late summer and fall of 1889, the firm offered him only 1,000 marks. The fact is that large-scale works like symphonies were expensive to publish and hard to market, and Simrock was understandably more interested in acquiring smaller-scale pieces, like piano collections or songs. Nonetheless, Dvořák

considered Simrock's offer a huge insult. Negotiations went back and forth for a year, and when they stalled at a point Dvořák deemed unsatisfactory, the famously pious composer dropped his publisher a note in mid-October 1890:

I shall simply do what beloved God tells me to do. That will surely be the best thing.

Views and Reviews

In his informed and approachable 1984 biography *Dvořák*, the German conductor and musicologist Hans-Hubert Schönzeler offers some precise insights into the Symphony No. 8:

This G major Symphony (Op. 88) is certainly the most intimate and original within the whole canon of Dvořák's nine. ... [Dvořák] himself has said that he wanted to write a work different from the other symphonies, "with individual force worked out in a new way," and in this he certainly succeeded, even though perhaps in the finale his Bohemian temperament got the better of him. It may lack some of those characteristics which we are accustomed to associate with the term "symphony," and ... it is surprising that people who love giving works descriptive tags have not called [it] the "Idyllic." ... When one walks in those forests surrounding Dvořák's country home on a sunny summer's day, with the birds singing and the leaves of trees rustling in a gentle breeze, one can virtually hear the music. ... [The] last movement just blossoms out, and I shall never forget [the conductor] Rafael Kubelík in a rehearsal when it came to the opening trumpet fanfare, say to the orchestra: "Gentlemen, in Bohemia the trumpets never call to battle — they always call to the dance!"

Dvořák's country home at Vysoka, around the time he composed his Symphony No. 8



What God apparently told Dvořák to do was to have the symphony published instead by the London firm of Novello, notwithstanding the fact that doing so was a flagrant breach of his contract with Simrock (at least so Simrock insisted). Eventually they reconciled and Dvořák returned to Simrock's fold. The circumstances of the publication gave rise to the fact that dusty volumes occasionally refer to this symphony as the "English," since it appeared

on the imprint of a firm in London. It is a bizarrely inappropriate nickname for a work so audibly drenched in what, thanks in large part to Dvořák, can be heard as incontrovertibly Czech.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Listen for . . . a Joyful Bird Call

Compared to Dvořák's somber Seventh Symphony (in D minor), the Eighth (in G major) is decidedly genial and upbeat. And yet, listening carefully, one may be surprised but how much minor-key music actually inhabits this major-key symphony, beginning with the richly scored, rather mournful introduction in G minor, which the composer added as an afterthought. But even here joyful premonitions intrude, thanks to the birdcall of the solo flute. This develops into the ebullient principal theme of the movement; and yet, the mournful music of the introduction keeps returning as the movement progresses.

