

Program Notes

Serenade for Winds in D Minor, Op. 44

Antonin Dvořák (1840 – 1904)

*“A more lovely, refreshing impression of real, rich
and charming creative talent you can't easily have.....
I think it must be a pleasure for the wind players.”
(Johannes Brahms)*

Antonin Dvořák was one of the few musicians in history whose parents did not oppose their child's desire to becoming a composer and pursue a career in music. His musical talent was evident at a very young age and took music lessons from Anton Liehmann. In 1857, he entered Prague's Organ School and continued his studies on the organ with Josef Foerster, singing with Josef Zvonar and music theory with Frantisek Blazek.

Dvořák was born in Nelahozeves, Prague, to Frantisek and Anna Dvořák. He was the first of fourteen children and was baptized Roman Catholic at St. Andrew's Church. His father urged him to become a professional organist so that he could make a decent living as a musician. He also held many other positions throughout his career such as a violist in numerous local bands and orchestras (e.g. St. Cecilia's Society). In addition, he gave private piano and theory lessons to supplement his income. His experience in the orchestra also provided him the opportunity to listen to the music of Wagner and other leading composers in Europe at the time.

Dvořák first love was Josefina Cermakova, a former piano student of his. But unfortunately, she rejected him and married someone else. He later married her sister Anna in 1873 and had nine children together. To this day, you can still find descendants of Dvořák living in various parts of Czech Republic.

Dvořák's early success came when he submitted his compositions for the second time for the Austrian State prize and won in 1874. Brahms was one of the members of the jury and recognized Dvořák's talent and immediately became a champion of his music. Brahms introduced Dvořák to his publisher, Simrock, and persuaded him to publish his music.

Dvořák moved to the United States in 1892 and became the Director of the National Conservatory in New York City until 1895. The founder of the conservatory, Jeannette Thurber, was a wealthy philanthropist and paid Dvořák a huge salary of \$15,000 U.S./year. His responsibilities included teaching composition/theory and conducting the orchestra. Unfortunately, a severe economic downturn in 1893 resulted in his salary cut in half.

During his stay in New York, Dvořák wrote his most famous symphony “*From the New World*”, Op. 95, commissioned by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 102. However, Dvořák became very homesick and decided to return to his homeland after only spending three years in America.

Dvořák passed away on May 1, 1904 due to an unknown illness at the age of 62. He was cremated and his ashes were interred in the Vyschrad Cemetery in Prague.

The musical style of Dvořák's music has always been considered as "nationalistic". He frequently incorporated Czech folk tunes in his music to express his feelings towards the political climate of the time. It was his way of reminding his people of their sufferings and their longing for liberation.

Major compositions of Dvořák include the Violin Concerto in A Minor, Nine Symphonies, Stabat Mater, "Dumky" Trio, "American" String Quartet, Slavonic Dances (Op. 46 and Op. 72), Te Deum and his famous opera "Rusalka".

Serenade for Winds was completed in January of 1870 and was premiered by the Prague Orchestra of the Provisional Theatre in November of the same year at a concert featuring an all Dvořák's program, conducted by Dvořák himself. The work consists of four movements and is scored for two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three French horns. Dvořák added the cello and double bass later to reinforce the bass line. But since the double bassoon was not easily accessible back in those days, Dvořák opted its part as "ad lib", i.e. use it whenever it is available.

The opening movement set the tone for the entire work. It begins with march-like rhythms and the unusual combination of instruments creates a very unique timbre. Interesting counterpoint dominates the middle section before the main theme returns and brings the entire movement to an end. The Minuetto section is based on a Czech dance called *sousedská* and the energetic Trio section is based on another Czech dance, *furiant*. The music for most of the third movement, Andante con moto, is both lyrical and idyllic except for a few bars in the middle section where the music becomes quite intense. The music then returns back to the opening mood of the movement and gradually brings it to a close. One might wonder if Dvořák was trying to use the movement to paint a picture of his beloved Czech countryside. The finale is extremely lively and is technically challenging for the entire ensemble. Although the musical materials are new here, Dvořák brought back the opening theme of the first movement towards the end to help bring the entire work to a satisfying conclusion.

Serenade for Strings in C Major, Op. 48

P. I. Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893)

*"I wrote from inner compulsion. This is a piece from the heart,
And so, I venture to hope that this work is not without artistic qualities."*

(P. I. Tchaikovsky's letter to Madam von Meck)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893) was a Russian composer of the Romantic era. He was born in Votkinsk, a small town in present-day Udmurtia. His father, Ilya Petrovich, was the son of a government mining engineer, of Ukrainian descent. His mother, Alexandra, was a Russian woman of partial French ancestry and the second of Ilya's three wives. Pyotr's older brother was dramatist, librettist, and translator Modest Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Tchaikovsky began piano lessons at age four with a local woman and could read music as well as his teacher within three years. However, his parents' passions for his musical talent soon subsided. The family then sent Tchaikovsky to the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg in 1850 in order to secure for him a career as a civil servant. He graduated on May 25, 1859 with the rank of titular counsellor, the lowest rank of the civil service ladder. He began working at the Ministry of Justice the same year and six months later, he became a junior assistant to his department; two months after that, a senior assistant. Tchaikovsky remained there for the rest of his three-year civil service career. During this time, he also attended classes in music theory, harmony, counterpoint and fugue taught by Nikolai Zaremba through the Russian Musical Society (RMS); Anton Rubinstein, director and founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, taught him orchestration and composition. He was very impressed by Tchaikovsky's

musical talent. Soon after, Tchaikovsky quit his job with the government and began a career as a full time musician/composer.

Serenade for Strings was completed in 1880 and premiered on October 30, 1881 in St. Petersburg, conducted by Eduard Napravnik. It was dedicated to Karl Albrecht, a cellist and examiner at the Moscow Conservatory. The work was so well received that the orchestra played the second movement again as the encore. The original manuscript and the piano arrangement can be found in the Glinka Museum Consortium of Musical Culture in Moscow.

Tchaikovsky was working on both the 1812 Overture and the Serenade for Strings in the fall of 1880. Although he did not enjoy much in writing the overture, it became one of his most popular pieces. On the other hand, he showed tremendous passion in composing the Serenade for Strings as he had confided in his patron Madam von Meck during one of their correspondence. It is also considered as one of the master pieces in the string repertoire.

The first movement, *Pezzo in forma di sonatina*, is written in sonata-form and Tchaikovsky specifically mentioned that he used this movement to pay homage to Mozart. The majestic opening has a very thick texture, similar to the style of the Bach chorales. The middle section is lively and feels very much like a dance. The movement comes to an end when the opening theme returns. The second movement is a waltz; Tchaikovsky seemed to have a special talent in writing beautiful waltzes, e.g. the waltzes in his ballets and the Sixth symphony. The main melody of the movement is shared by all instruments and one can easily picture couples dancing to it during its performance. Then comes the expressive *Elegia*, a movement that has beautiful counterpoint and harmony. The *Finale* (*Tema Russo*) consists of two Russian folksongs. The opening introduction is based on the Russian folksong “On the Green Meadow” and the main theme of the *Allegro* section is based on another Russian folksong “Under the Green Apple Tree”. The main theme of the first movement returns just before the entire work comes to an end.

Program notes written by Eric Fahn.