

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2015-2016 Mellon Grand Classics Season

November 13 and 15, 2015

JIRÍ BĚLOHLÁVEC, CONDUCTOR

BEDŘICH SMETANA

Má Vlast (My Country)
Vyšehrad (The High Castle)
Vltava (The Moldau)
Šárka
Z českých luhův a hájův (From Bohemia's Woods
and Meadows)
Tábor
Blaník

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

BEDŘICH SMETANA

Born 2 March 1824 in Leitomischl, Bohemia; died 12 May 1884 in Prague

Má Vlast ("My Country") (1874-1879)

PREMIERE OF *VYŠEHRA*D: Prague, 14 March 1875

PREMIERE OF *THE MOLDAU*: Prague, 4 April 1876

PREMIERE OF *ŠÁRKA* AND *FROM BOHEMIA'S WOODS AND MEADOWS*: Prague, 10 December 1876

PREMIERE OF *TÁBOR* AND *BLANÍK*: Prague, 4 January 1880

PREMIERE OF COMPLETE *MÁ VLAST*: Prague, 5 November 1882; Prague Philharmonic Orchestra; Adolf Čech, conductor

PSO PREMIERE OF COMPLETE *MÁ VLAST*: 21 October 1976; Heinz Hall; Rafael Kubelik, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 72 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings

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.

In a letter to the publisher Frantisek Urbánek in May 1879, Smetana described the movements of *Má Vlast*. He wrote of the opening tone poem, "The harps of the bards begin; a bard sings of the events that have taken place on Vyšehrad, of the glory, splendor, tournaments and battles, and finally its downfall and ruin. The composition ends on a elegiac note." Vyšehrad is the name of a sheer rock precipice that stands above the River Moldau as it flows toward Prague, and of the ancient fortress that surmounts its pinnacle. According to Czech legend, Vyšehrad was built even before the castle that guarded the city of Prague, and was said to be the seat of the earliest Bohemian princes. Smetana chose it as the setting for his patriotic opera *Libuše*, the story of the ninth-century Queen of Bohemia of that name, daughter of the country's founding family, the Přemysl, who is revered in national history as a wise and strong sovereign. (One of her descendents was St. Wenceslaus — "Good King Wenceslaus.") The fortress was more impressive as a ruin than as an architectural structure in Smetana's time, being hemmed in by fortifications erected during the reign of Maria Theresa and then serving only as an arsenal, but the romance of its past still evoked unquenchable patriotic fervor among the composer's countrymen. The tone poem takes as its subject a richly harmonized theme in chorale style first played by the harps as an evocation of Bohemia's legendary bard, Lumír. A complementary motive, in flowing arpeggiated figures, was borrowed from *Libuše*. The movement is in three broad chapters: the first is noble and mythic, evoking the glory of Bohemia's early history; the second, a greatly agitated section that incorporates an ingenious permutation of the opening motive and a heroic marching strain, suggests the violence and

victory of ancient combat; the third, which serves as a formal recapitulation of the opening section, reflects on bygone days.

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. *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. The forest brook, hastening on, becomes the river Moldau. 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, Smetana recalled the theme from the preceding tone poem.] Then it vanishes far beyond the poet's gaze."

Of the third movement of *Má Vlast*, the composer noted, "This poem depicts the story of *Šárka*. It begins with the enraged *Šárka* [one of the girls at the court of the Přemysl, the founding family of Bohemia, who rebelled at being ruled by men after the death of Queen Libuše] swearing vengeance on the whole male race for the infidelity of her lover. From afar is heard the arrival of armed men led by Ctirad, who has come to punish *Šárka* and her rebellious maidens. In the distance, Ctirad hears the feigned cries of a girl (*Šárka*) bound to a tree. On seeing her, he is overcome by her beauty and so inflamed with love that he frees her. By means of a previously prepared potion, she intoxicates Ctirad and his men, who fall asleep. As she sounds her horn (a pre-arranged signal), the rebel maidens, hidden in nearby rocks, rush to commit the bloody deed. The horror of general slaughter and the passion and fury of *Šárka's* fulfilled revenge form the end of the composition." *Šárka*, the most graphically detailed movement of *Má Vlast*, is divided into five continuous, almost cinematic, sequences. The first section (marked "with fire" in the score) portrays the fury of the avowed man-hater. Next comes a swaggering march to accompany the entry of Ctirad and his knights. A solo clarinet intones the duplicitous cry of *Šárka*, to which Ctirad (solo cello) gives an impassioned response as he loosens her bonds. An episode of warmly lyrical music suggests Ctirad's wooing of the cunning maid before a soft, trilled string chord introduces the scherzo-like fourth section, which depicts the drunken revels of the warriors. *Šárka's* philter has its effect, and the festive music dies away as the men fall asleep (the low C's on the bassoon suggest their snoring). *Šárka* sounds her horn and exhorts her followers (another clarinet solo) to undertake the slaughter that fills the last chapter of this dramatic tone poem.

Smetana wrote of *From Bohemia's Woods and Meadows*, "This is a general impression of the feelings aroused on seeing the *Czech countryside*. Here, from all directions, fervently sung songs, some cheerful and others melancholy, resound from the groves and meadows. The woodlands (in solos for the horns), the gay, fertile Elbe lowlands and various other parts besides, are *all* celebrating." The composer himself provided some of the music's poetic details in a conversation with his friend V.V. Zeleny: "The opening resembles the strong impression experienced on going into the countryside; hence the powerful beginning with the emphatic chord of G minor. Then comes G major, as if a naïve country girl were going out. [The following music depicts] the beauty of being in the woods in summer during the middle of the day when the sun is directly overhead. Twilight prevails in the woods, and the sun's bright beams seldom penetrate between the tops of the trees. An ever-present phrase indicates the twittering of birds. [The closing section represents] the harvest, or at least a festival of some kind."

The last two tone poems of *Má Vlast* — *Tábor* and *Blaník* — are related in both subject and musical matter. The city of Tábor, some fifty miles south of Prague, was the center of the Hussite Rebellion, the fifteenth-century political, social and religious movement led by Jan Hus that sought sectarian freedom and Bohemian independence. Smetana based his paired tone poems on the chorale *Ye Who Are God's Warriors*, the principal anthem of the Hussites.

Of *Tábor*, he wrote, "The whole composition is based on this majestic chorale. It was undoubtedly in the town of Tábor, the seat of the Hussites, that this stirring hymn resounded most powerfully and most frequently. The words of the old chorale inflamed the combatants, but spread terror in the ranks of the enemy. The piece depicts the strong will to win battles, and the dogged perseverance of the Táborites. It expresses the glory and renown of the Hussite struggle and the indestructible character of the Hussite

warriors. It was the period of Bohemia's power and greatness." *Tábor* is in two broad sections. The first, stern and rugged, is a musical analogue to the words with which Smetana headed the score: "Their character cannot be broken: firm, constant, determined, persevering, unyielding and stubborn." The second section, more vigorous in style, depicts the Hussites at war.

"*Blaník* begins where the preceding composition ends," Smetana continued. "Following their eventual defeat, the Hussite heroes took refuge in Blaník Mountain [near Tábor], where, in heavy slumber, they wait for the moment they will be called to the aid of their country. Hence, the chorale that was used as the basic motive in *Tábor* is also used as the foundation of this piece. It is on the basis of this melody, the Hussite chorale, that the resurrection of the Czech nation, its future happiness and glory, will develop. With this victorious hymn, written in the form of a march, the composition ends, and with it the whole cycle of *Má Vlast*. As a brief intermezzo, we hear a short idyll, a description of the Blaník region where a little shepherd boy plays a pipe while the echo gently floats back to him." The warriors sleeping in Blaník Mountain are conjured up by the bold reappearance of the Hussite chorale, from which an ingenious and slightly eerie contrapuntal exercise is woven. The peaceful scene of the shepherd is depicted by oboe and clarinet in echo. A turbulent section hints of wars, past and future, before a grand processional march promises the renewed glory of the Czech nation. *Blaník* and *Má Vlast* close with a final reference to the Vyšehrad theme and a brilliant coda of hope and optimism.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda