

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2016-2017 Mellon Grand Classics Season

March 10 and 12, 2017

JURAJ VALČUHA, CONDUCTOR
FRANCESCO PIEMONTESE, PIANO

BEDŘICH SMETANA “The Moldau” from *Má Vlast*

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK Concerto in G minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 33
I. Allegro agitato
II. Andante sostenuto
III. Finale: Allegro con fuoco
Mr. Piemontesi

Intermission

WOLFGANG AMADEUS Symphony No. 38 in D major, K. 504, “Prague”
MOZART I. Adagio — Allegro
 II. Andante
 III. Presto

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK *Carnival Overture*, Opus 92

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

BEDŘICH SMETANA

Vltava (“*The Moldau*”) from *Má Vlast* (“*My Country*”) (1874)

Bedřich Smetana was born in Leitomischl, Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic) on March 2, 1824 and died in Prague on May 12, 1884. *The Moldau* is one of six tone poems from Smetana’s larger work *Má Vlast* (*My Country*) composed in 1874. The full work premiered in Prague in 1876 at the Royal Bohemian Provincial Theater, conducted by Adolf Čech. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed *The Moldau* on December 2, 1904 led by Music Director Emil Paur at Carnegie Music Hall. Most recently the Pittsburgh Symphony performed the complete *Má Vlast* on November 15, 2015, conducted by Jiri Belohlavek. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings. **Performance time: approximately 11 minutes.**

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. *Sárka* and *From Bohemia’s Woods and Meadows* date from the following year; *Tábor* was finished in 1878 and *Blaník* in 1879.

The Moldau (“*Vltava*” in Czech) is the principal river of the Czech lands, 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. Their waves, gaily flowing over rocky beds, join and glisten in the rays of the morning sun. The forest brook, hastening on, becomes the river Moldau. Coursing through Bohemia’s valleys, it grows into a mighty stream. 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 main theme of the complete cycle’s preceding tone poem, entirely devoted to depicting the ruined castle and its aura of ancient battles and forgotten bards.] Then it vanishes far beyond the poet’s gaze.”

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Concerto in G minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 33 (1876)

Antonín Dvořák was born in Nelahozeves, Bohemia on September 8, 1841 and died in Prague on May 1, 1904. His Concerto in G minor for Piano and Orchestra was written in 1876 and premiered on March 28, 1878, led by Adolf Čech with soloist Karel von Slavovsky. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the concerto at the Syria Mosque on April 13, 1962, at the Syria Mosque with William Steinberg conducting and Rudolf Firkusny on piano. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed the concerto on October 3, 2005, with Music Director Mariss Jansons and pianist Andras Schiff. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds, horns and trumpets, as well as timpani and strings. **Performance time: approximately 39 minutes.**

In 1874, Antonín Dvořák was a little-known Prague musician whose income from his compositions and as organist at St. Adalbert's Church was so meager that the city officials certified his poverty. That same year he submitted some of his work for consideration to a committee in Vienna awarding government grants to struggling artists whose members were a most distinguished lot — Johann Herbeck, Director of the Court Opera, the renowned critic Eduard Hanslick, and that titan of Viennese music himself, Johannes Brahms. Their report noted that Dvořák possessed "genuine and original gifts" and that his works displayed "an undoubted talent, but in a way which as yet remains formless and unbridled." They deemed his work worthy of encouragement, however, and, on their recommendation, the Minister of Culture, Karl Stremayer, awarded the young musician 400 gulden, the highest stipend bestowed under the program. The distinction represented Dvořák's first recognition outside his homeland and his initial contact with Brahms and Hanslick, who both were to be powerful influences on his career through their example, artistic guidance and professional help. An excited burst of compositional activity followed during the months after Dvořák learned of the award in February 1875: the G major String Quintet, *Moravian Duets* for Soprano and Tenor, B-flat Piano Trio, D major Piano Quartet, Fifth Symphony and Serenade for Strings all appeared with inspired speed.

During that great rush of creativity, Dvořák was urged to undertake a concerto for piano by Karel von Slavovsky (1845-1919), recently the founder of a school of piano playing in Prague and an active soloist, chamber musician and promoter of native composers throughout Bohemia. Dvořák accepted Slavovsky's proposal, and chose as inspiration and models for the new work the concertos of Beethoven and the D minor Concerto of his recent benefactor, Johannes Brahms. The piece, his earliest work in the genre, evidently caused Dvořák much trouble during its composition in the late summer months of 1876: the manuscript shows many corrections and changes; whole pages were re-written and pasted into the score; numerous solo passages were re-worked time and again. The Concerto was politely rather than enthusiastically received at its premiere on March 28, 1878 in Prague by Slavovsky and conductor Adolf Čech. No local publisher evinced any interest in issuing the score, and the work gained little attention until it was published by the German firm of Hainauer in Breslau in 1883, after Dvořák had become internationally famous as author of the *Slavonic Dances*.

The first movement shares its somber mood with the *Stabat Mater*, written at the same time as the Concerto to help assuage Dvořák's grief over the recent loss of his eldest child. It is said that he was particularly fond of the theme that opens the large sonata form of this movement. He worked this sad melody out at some length before allowing the strings to introduce the second theme, a countrified, major-tonality strain of almost Mozartian simplicity. A prolix development of the main theme leads to a recapitulation of the earlier material; the ending is abrupt and grave. The *Andante* is nostalgic in feeling and lyrically rhapsodic in treatment. The finale is built from three themes: the stabbing motive initiated by the solo piano; a phrase of skipping rhythms first played by the piano and then taken over by the violins; and a broad melody decorated with triplet figurations. The movement's structure blends sonata and rondo forms, and ends with a bright, G major flourish incorporating all three themes.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Symphony No. 38 in D major, K. 504, "Prague" (1786)

Mozart was born in Salzburg on January 27, 1756 and died on December 5, 1791 in Vienna. Symphony No. 38 in D major, K. 504, popularly known as the "Prague" Symphony after the city of its premiere, was written in 1786 and first performed on January 19, 1787. Mozart himself conducted the premiere at the Prague Opera House. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the "Prague" Symphony with Music Director Fritz Reiner on January 12, 1940, at the Syria Mosque. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed it on June 6, 2009, with Music Director Manfred Honeck in Heinz Hall. The score calls for flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani and strings. **Performance time: approximately 29 minutes.**

"No work has ever created such a sensation as the Italian opera *The Marriage of Figaro*," reported the Prague *Oberpostamtszeitung* on December 12, 1786. "Connoisseurs who have also seen this opera in Vienna assert that it has been done much better here. Word of this triumph must have reached the ears of Mozart himself, for rumor has it that he will come here in person to see the performance." The rumor proved to be correct — Mozart and his wife, Constanze, left Vienna on January 8, 1787, and arrived in the Bohemian capital three days later. On January 17th, after a week of having been entertained, feted and lionized by the city's nobility, Mozart put in a public appearance at the Prague Opera House for a performance of *Figaro*. "Word of his presence spread through the theater at once," reported the local press, "and as soon as the overture was finished, the whole audience broke into applause, honoring and welcoming him." The response five days later, when he conducted his own opera from the keyboard, was tumultuous. It is not surprising that he told a friend, "Prague is indeed a very beautiful and agreeable place."

As well as being a witness to the performances of *Figaro* in Prague, Mozart also hoped to present a concert of his instrumental music during his stay, so he brought along, among other items, the grand, new symphony he had completed on December 6, 1786. With the help of his host in Prague, Count Johann Josef Thun (for whom he had written the "Linz" Symphony four years before), and the composer Franz Dussek, an acquaintance from his Salzburg days, Mozart was able to organize a program for his own benefit on January 19th at the local opera house. Mozart introduced the new symphony he had brought with him from Vienna, played some concerted works, and offered a half hour of improvisation at the keyboard, but the audience demanded more, so he extemporized a dozen brilliant variations on *Non più andrai* from *Figaro*. "The great artist perfectly fulfilled all that had been expected of him," summarized one reviewer. Mozart stayed in Prague until mid-February, thoroughly enjoying what was one of the happiest times of his life. When he left, he took away not only the unstinting praises of the city and a substantial cache of earnings but also a contract from Pasquale Bondini, impresario of the Prague Opera, to write a new stage work for the fall season — *Don Giovanni*.

The Symphony (No. 38, D major, K. 504) that Mozart premiered at his Prague concert, which has always borne the name of that city as its sobriquet, opens with an extended introduction whose turbulent moods presage the darker pages of *Don Giovanni*. Mozart, one of music's most fecund melodists, is positively profligate with themes in the *Allegro* that comprises the main body of the movement. Musicologist Alfred Einstein counted "almost a dozen" motives that are welded into an expansive sonata form enriched by some of Mozart's most masterful contrapuntal writing. The long-limbed and lyrical *Andante*, another fully developed sonata form, is one of those pieces of Mozart's maturity that exquisitely balance an ineffable serenity with a whole world of pathos and poignant emotions. The quicksilver finale, the third of the Symphony's sonata forms, was a particular delight at its premiere to *Figaro*-mad Prague, since Mozart borrowed the theme for the movement from the opera's Act II duet of Susanna and Cherubino, *Aprite presto*.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Carnival Overture, Opus 92 (1891)

Written in 1891, *Carnival Overture* represents the second in a trilogy of Dvořák overtures about “Nature, Life and Love”. The overture was premiered on by the National Theater Orchestra and Antonín Dvořák on April 28, 1892 at the Rudolfinum in Prague. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed *Carnival Overture* with Music Director Frederic Archer on January 6, 1898 at Carnegie Music Hall. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed it on November 30, 1975, conducted by James Levine. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo and English horn, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings. **Performance time: approximately 9 minutes.**

Like almost every musician of the late 19th century, Dvořák had to come to grips with the astounding phenomenon of Richard Wagner and his music dramas. Around 1890, he undertook a study of this grandiloquent music, as well as that of Wagner’s stylistic ally (and father-in-law) Franz Liszt, and he was rewarded with a heightened awareness of the expressive possibilities of orchestral program music. Several important scores from Dvořák’s last years seem to bear the influence of his study of this so-called “Music of the Future”: the five tone poems of 1896-1897 (*The Water Goblin*, *The Noon Witch*, *The Golden Spinning Wheel*, *The Wild Dove* and *Heroic Song*), *Silent Woods* for Cello and Orchestra, *Poetic Tone Pictures* for solo piano, and the 1892 cycle of three concert overtures: *In Nature’s Realm*, *Carnival* and *Othello*.

In his study of the composer, John Clapham indicated that Dvořák intended the triptych of overtures to represent “three aspects of the life-force’s manifestations, a force which the composer designated ‘Nature,’ and which not only served to create and sustain life, but also, in its negative phase, could destroy it.” More specifically, Otakar Šourek noted that they depicted “the solemn silence of a summer night, a gay whirl of life and living, and the passion of great love.” Dvořák himself said that the *Carnival Overture* was meant to depict “a lonely, contemplative wanderer reaching at twilight a city where a festival is in full swing. On every side is heard the clangor of instruments, mingled with shouts of joy and the unrestrained hilarity of the people giving vent to their feelings in songs and dances.” Dvořák evoked this scene with brilliant music given in the most rousing sonorities of the orchestra. Into the basic sonata plan of the piece, he inserted, at the beginning of the development section, a haunting and wistful paragraph led by the English horn and flute to portray, he said, “a pair of straying lovers,” the wanderer apparently having found a companion. Following this tender, contrasting episode, the festive music returns and mounts to a spirited coda to conclude this joyous, evergreen Overture.