

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeves, Czechoslovakia; died May 1, 1904 in Prague

Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Opus 70

PREMIERE OF WORK: London, April 22, 1885

London Philharmonic Orchestra

St. James's Hall

Antonín Dvořák, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 38 minutes

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

When Dvořák attended the premiere of the Third Symphony of his friend and mentor Johannes Brahms on December 2, 1883, he was already familiar with the work from a preview Brahms had given him at the piano shortly before. The effect on Dvořák of Brahms' magnificent creation, with its inexorable formal logic and its powerful shifting moods, was profound. Dvořák considered it, quite simply, the greatest symphony of the time, and it served as one of the two emotional seeds from which his D minor Symphony grew. The other, which followed less than two weeks after the premiere of the Third Symphony, was the death of his mother.

Brahms not only encouraged Dvořák in his work, but also convinced his publisher, Simrock, to take on the music of the once little-known Czech composer. Dvořák always respected and was grateful to his benefactor, and when Brahms' Third Symphony appeared he looked upon it as a challenge presented to him to put forth a surpassing effort in his next work in the form. With Brahms' Symphony as the inspiration, and his grief at his mother's passing as the soul, the idea of a new symphony grew within him. He poured some of his sadness into the Piano Trio in F minor, Op. 65, composed early in 1884, but the spark that ignited the actual composition of the Seventh Symphony was not struck until the following summer. Dvořák had been garnering an international success with his music during the preceding years, and his popularity was especially strong in England. As one of the stops on his busy conducting tours through northern Europe, he visited Britain for the first time in the spring of 1884, and on June 13th he was elected an honorary member of the Philharmonic Society and simultaneously requested to provide a new symphony for that organization. It gave him the reason to put the gestating Symphony to paper. Following another English foray in the fall that was even more successful than the earlier one, he set to work on the Symphony in December.

With thoughts of his mother still fresh in his mind and with the example of Brahms always before him ("It must be something respectable for I don't want to let Brahms down," he wrote to Simrock), Dvořák determined to compose a work that would solidify his international reputation and be worthy of those who inspired it. In his study of the composer's work, Otakar Šourek wrote, "Dvořák worked at the D minor Symphony with passionate concentration and in the conscious endeavor to create a work of noble proportions and content, which should surpass not only what he had so far produced in the field of symphonic composition, but which was also designed to occupy an important place in world music." On December 22nd, Dvořák wrote to his friend Antonín Rus, "I am now busy with the new Symphony (for London) and wherever I go I have no thought for anything but my work, which must be such as to move the world — well, God grant that it may be so!" He was so pleased with progress on the piece, even during the busy holiday season, that on New Year's Eve he told another friend, Alois Göbl, "I am again as happy and contented in my work as I have always been up to now and, God grant, I always shall be." The orchestration was undertaken during the winter and the score finished in March, only a month before its premiere in London.

The Symphony begins with an ominous rumble deep in the basses reminiscent of both the introductory measures of Bruckner's symphonies and the beginning of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, another work in D minor and coincidentally also commissioned by the London Philharmonic Society. The haunting main theme is introduced by the violas and cellos, then echoed by the clarinets. Almost immediately, the possibilities for development built into the theme are explored, and the music rapidly grows in intensity until a climax is achieved when the main theme bursts forth in dark splendor from the full orchestra. The tension subsides to allow the flute and clarinet to present the lyrical second theme. The development, woven from the thematic components of the exposition, is compact and concentrated. The recapitulation is swept in on an enormous wave of sound that is capped by the re-entry of the timpani. The main theme is abandoned quickly, and the repeat of the flowing second

theme is entrusted to two clarinets in a rich setting. The main theme returns, at times with considerable vehemence, to form the coda to this magnificent movement.

The second movement opens with a chorale of an almost otherworldly serenity that had been little portrayed in music since the late works of Beethoven. A complementary thematic idea with wide leaps of pathetic beauty is heard from the strings. The unusual form of the movement, part variations, part sonata, is perhaps best heard as the struggle between the beatific grace of the opening and the various states of musical and emotional tension that militate against it. It is likely that Dvořák intended this expressive music as the heart of the Symphony, as a cathartic portrayal of the feelings that had troubled him since the death of his mother.

The *Scherzo* is the greatest dance movement among Dvořák's symphonies. It is at once graceful and compelling, airy and forceful. Its bounding syncopations give it an irresistible vivacity set in a glowing, burnished orchestral sonority. Though the trio is more lyrical, it has an incessant rhythmic background in the strings that lends it an unsettled quality.

The finale, which continues the brooding mood of the preceding movements, is large in scale and assured in expression. Unlike many minor-mode symphonies of the 19th century, this one does not end in an apotheosis of optimism, but, wrote Otakar Šourek, "rises to a glorious climax of manly, honorable and triumphant resolve." It is a moving climax to one of Dvořák's greatest creations.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda