

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

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

Symphony No. 8 in G major, Opus 88 (1889)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Prague, 2 February 1890; National Theater; Prague National Theater Orchestra; Antonín Dvořák, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 2 March 1900; Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 36 minutes

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

You would probably have liked Dvořák. He was born a simple (in the best sense) man of the soil who retained a love of country, nature and peasant ways all his life. In his later years he wrote, "In spite of the fact that I have moved about in the great world of music, I shall remain what I have always been — a simple Czech musician." Few passions ruffled his life — music, of course; the rustic pleasures of country living; the company of old friends; caring for his pigeons; and a child-like fascination with railroads. Milton Cross sketched him thus: "To the end of his days he remained shy, uncomfortable in the presence of those he regarded as his social superiors, and frequently remiss in his social behavior. He was never completely at ease in large cities, with the demands they made on him. Actually he had a pathological fear of city streets and hated to cross a busy thoroughfare if a friend was not with him. He was happiest when he was close to the soil, raising pigeons, taking long, solitary walks in the hills and forests of the Bohemia he loved so deeply. Yet he was by no means a recluse. In the company of his intimate friends, particularly after a few beers, he was voluble, gregarious, expansive and good-humored." His music reflected his salubrious nature, and the G major Symphony, in its warm emotionalism and pastoral contentment, mirrors its creator. It was composed during Dvořák's annual summer country retreat at Vysoká, and his happy contentment with his surroundings shines through the music.

Dvořák was absolutely profligate with themes in the opening movement. In the exposition, which comprises the first 126 measures of the work, there are no fewer than eight separate melodies that are tossed out with an ease and speed reminiscent of Mozart's fecundity. The first theme is presented without preamble in the rich hues of trombones, low strings and low woodwinds in the dark coloring of G minor. This tonality soon yields to the chirruping G major of the flute melody, but much of the movement shifts effortlessly between major and minor keys, lending a certain air of nostalgia to the work. The opening melody is recalled to initiate both the development and the recapitulation. In the former, it reappears in its original guise and even, surprisingly, in its original key. The recapitulation begins as this theme is hurled forth by the trumpets in a stentorian setting greatly heightened in emotional weight from its former presentations. The coda is invested with the rhythm and high good spirits of an energetic country dance to bring the movement to its rousing ending.

The second movement contains two kinds of music, one hesitant and somewhat lachrymose, the other stately and smoothly flowing. The first is indefinite in tonality, rhythm and cadence; its theme is a collection of fragments; its texture is sparse. The following section is greatly contrasted: its key is unambiguous; its rhythm and cadence points are clear; its melody is a long, continuous span. These two antitheses alternate, and the form of the movement is created as much by texture and sonority as by the traditional means of melody and tonality. The third movement is a lilting essay in the style of the Austrian folk dance, the *Ländler*. Like the beginning of the Symphony, the movement opens in G minor with a mood of sweet melancholy, but gives way to a languid melody in G major for the central trio. Following the repeat of the scherzo, a vivacious coda in faster tempo paves the way to the finale. The trumpets herald the start of the finale, a theme and variations with a central section resembling a development in character. The bustling second variation returns as a sort of formal mile-marker — it introduces the "development" and begins the coda. The Symphony ends swiftly and resoundingly amid a burst of high spirits and warm-hearted good feelings.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda