

Concert 5

April 28, 2018

The Moldau (Vltava)--Bedřich Smetana

Smetana is the first great Czech composer of the nineteenth century, and—owing to the general trend towards nationalism during the late romantic period—the first significant Czech composer to integrate indigenous folk elements into his musical style. He is known the world over for having composed what is more or less the Czech national opera, *The Bartered Bride*, as well as a wealth of other works. He exerted a significant influence on his younger colleague, Antonín Dvořák, and along with the latter, is honored with his own museum in present-day Prague. The tone poem for orchestra, a distinctive creation of the progressive wing of composers during the nineteenth century, may be said to be the brainchild of Franz Liszt, and in 1857 Smetana visited Liszt in Weimar, and took his ideas to heart. The Czechs and Russians really adopted Liszt's tone poem ideas with much greater alacrity than did his countrymen, and consequently, we have numerous examples by Smetana's successors: Dvořák, Fibich, Janáček, Novák, Suk and Ostrčil.

Between the years 1874 and 1880 Smetana wrote a cycle of six tone poems, each depicting some important aspect of Czech history or geography. The whole cycle is entitled, *Má vlast*, or *My Fatherland*; *The Moldau* is the second of the six works, and, unfortunately, the only one of them that is regularly heard in this country. Actually, the real title of the *The Moldau* is *Vltava*, the Czech name for the river, over which spans the bridge in Prague crowded by tourists today. Moldau was the German name for the river, which foreign oppressors used during the long years of Czech domination by German-speaking countries; it was not used by Smetana, nor today by anyone else. It's almost an insensitive insult to contemporary Czechs.

It is easy and pleasing to follow the “story” of this tone poem, for Smetana “painted” the elements in the changing trip down the river most evocatively. Moreover, he left us signposts in his own written notes. The river begins high in the hills as a small mountain stream, heard in the burbling woodwinds and strings. It courses through the forests and meadows, passing along the way a rustic peasant wedding heard through a folk dance. It then moves into darkness, illuminated only by the moon, and we hear mermaids dancing serenely in the night. The famous St. John's Rapids inspire a stormy passage, with swirling whitewater. The music broadens majestically (with the river) as we approach Prague, and Smetana calls upon the brass to paint the imposing crags of the rocks of Vyšehrad—the magnificent overlook in Prague, home of the mythological origin of the Czech people. Incidentally, both Smetana and Dvořák are buried there in Vyšehrad Cemetery, the resting place of the cultural “heroes” of the Czech people. Finally, the music soars to its emotional heights as the river leaves Prague on its way to the (smaller) Elbe and the sea.

Trumpet Concerto—Michael Gilbertson

Gilbertson is a native of Dubuque, Iowa, who at the age of thirty is fast developing a reputation of one America's most respected and successful young composers. Active as a composer while still a youth in high school, his relationship with

the local symphony provided him with ample opportunities to hear and learn from the realizations of his musical imagination. This led to a portfolio of works that took him to the Juilliard School in New York, and then on to Yale University. His composition teachers at those august institutions include such luminaries as John Corigliano, Samuel Adler, Christopher Rouse, and Christopher Theofanidis—all of whom are leading contemporary American composers, familiar to symphony audiences.

There is no dearth of institutions that understand the importance of recognizing and supporting the work of young composers, and accordingly the best of the latter garner awards as they mature, and Gilbertson is no exception. Among the many that he has received are those from the BMI Student Composer Awards, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and five Morton Gould Awards from ASCAP, to just name a few. But, actually receiving support in the form of commissions is far more important, and there, Gilbertson has done very well, indeed. Performances are the lifeblood of composers, and Gilbertson's works have been performed by, among others, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Minnesota Orchestra, the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra, and the Washington National Opera.

While actively composing in a variety of musical genres, he has focused on orchestra and choral music. The former genre exhibits a solid mastery of handling the sound resources of the orchestra, with considerable imagination in orchestration always in the fore. His music tends to be tense and dramatic, often carried along by motoric rhythm and “spikey” accents. And, like so many of his generation, he is often inspired by the music and other cultural artifacts of times past. His remarks about his trumpet concerto reveal his recognition of the varied musical capabilities of the instrument. It is replete with fanfares, and inspiration from the great Renaissance composer, Giovanni Gabrieli. The lyrical middle movement is a crepuscular exploration of jazz-based lyricism, and the last movement is a fast ride in a Russian troika—inspired by Prokofiev's depiction of the same.

The concerto was commissioned by the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra, and tonight's performance is the world première.

Symphony No. 6 in B Minor (“Pathétique”), Op. 74 – Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

This symphony is Tchaikovsky's last work—he died of cholera only nine days after its première—and it is universally hailed as one of his finest. It exhibits all of the characteristic passion and melodic beauty for which the composer justly is known, and is suffused with a dark and tragic essence. Tchaikovsky struggled all of his life with his identity, fears of social rejection, and frustrated relationships with others. By the end of his life these issues had surely come to a head, and the composer freely spoke with his brother of the reflection of his suffering in this final, gripping composition. There was even a recent musicological fight over whether or not he poisoned himself to end his life (under threat of social disgrace), or deliberately drank the un-boiled glass of water during an epidemic. In any case, the circumstances of his life's final struggles are manifest in this beautiful and tragic work. In the event, he had at first actually considered “Tragic” as a subtitle for the symphony, but his brother suggested the Russian for “pathos,” and

the French equivalent, “pathétique,” is the evocative descriptor that we all know. But, be aware of inexact translations--there is nothing pathetic here.

The first movement is conventional in its form, but the mature composer exhibits a sense of tight construction, and weaves the movement with his characteristic contrast of exciting, dynamic motives and delicious lyrical melodies. The mood for the entire symphony is set at the very beginning by the brooding bassoon solo. The second movement is one of the most well known of his symphonic movements, cast as it is in five-four time, an absolutely innovative use of the metre in art music (is it not unknown in Russian folk music). The main theme and its manipulation is so smooth and adroit that it is altogether easy to forget the unusual time signature, and simply experience the music as being some kind of waltz with a “limp.” And remember, no one excelled Tchaikovsky in the waltz. The third movement is an exciting and optimistic march, but the heavy brass and snappy rhythms notwithstanding, it doesn’t seem a military march at all. Rather, it is a march from the world of the ballet—the *Nutcracker* and *Sleeping Beauty* come to my mind. No Shostakovitchian Russian soldiers are goose stepping here! The final movement in many respects is the characteristic movement of the symphony. It is most unusual in that it ends softly—very softly. No Romantic symphony had ever ended that way—they end loud and with a bang. But in this case the agony and beauty of this reflection of the composer’s life and experience terminates in a final expiration that is remarkable for its challenging softness. “This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.”