Cheyenne
Symphony
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Masterpiece 4 – Bohemian Rhapsodies **March 11, 2023**

Prelude to *Hansel and Gretel,* EHWV 93.3 – Engelbert Humperdinck

While some folks may remember the pop star of the 1960s who appropriated what he apparently thought was a cute name for those eccentric times, this is the real Engelbert Humperdinck. In the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century he was a well-known and respected composer, who circulated in the highest echelons of music circles. Friend and colleague of such music luminaries as Wagner, Brahms, Mahler, Puccini, and Richard Strauss, he was a prolific composer of works primarily for the dramatic stage, as well as an impressive number of songs. He traveled throughout Europe, had success with his operas in New York at the Metropolitan Opera, conducted with approbation, and taught at prestigious conservatories. Kurt Weil was one of his students (as was the father of a distinguished retired actor of Fort Collins!).

Born in Germany into a family not particularly musically talented, he was pushed early on into studying architecture. That didn't last long, though, and his assiduous studies led him to two outstanding conservatories. As a young journeyman he drew the attention of Wagner, who enlisted his help in the preparations for the first production of *Parsifal*. That led to a long and distinguished career, primarily in opera. While today, his is not a household name in America, it is telling that in 1910 in New York, his opera *Königskinder* completely "outshone" Puccini's opera, *La fanciulla del West*, then playing, conducted by Toscanini. So, while he composed many well-received works for the stage, today, not unlike so many in the arts, he is remembered primarily for one evergreen, popular work: his Christmas opera, *Hansel and Gretel*.

Its genesis lay in his sister Adelheid's Christmas story of the eponymous children, for which she asked her brother to composer a few songs. He did so, and it led to his composing many more, which he then assembled into a *Singspiel* (a kind of German opera with spoken dialogue). That led to its transformation into a traditional opera, sung throughout. The eminent composer Richard Strauss conducted the first performance two days before Christmas in 1893 in Weimar. Its success is indicated by a performance the next year being conducted by Mahler, and a subsequent production directed by Cosima Wagner, Richard's widow. In 1895 it enjoyed its American première at the Metropolitan Opera, where it has remained a holiday favorite ever since.

As is traditional, the *Prelude* (overture) is comprised of memorable elements of the opera, itself. And none of them is more successful and cherished than the *Dream Pantomime* that ends Act II. It is, of course, the revered Advent *Evening Hymn,* "When I Go to Sleep at Night." The music accompanies the emergence of fourteen angels, who come out to surround the sleeping children to protect them. A luminous glow surrounds them all as the curtain falls on the beatific scene. The sumptuous, uplifting music and the staging make for an unforgettable operatic experience. That music opens and closes the *Prelude.* The contrasting middle section, announced by the solo trumpet, makes use of various spritely dances from the opera. The reprise of the opening which ends the work,

is not just a simple restatement, but in the best Wagnerian tradition (think of *Die Meistersinger)* brings together many of the major musical themes in a magisterial weft that soars to an almost unequaled happy conclusion. The reassuring beauty of the music and the sleeping children secures its popularity.

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, op. 37 – Ludwig van Beethoven

It is Mozart, of course, to whom we owe the creation of the mature, symphonic piano concerto. Beethoven wrote five works in this genre; the first two in the 1790s and they owe much to the example of Mozart. The third, in C minor, begun around 1800, was completed in 1803, about the time of his second symphony, and it is a far darker and impassioned work than the previous concertos. It is a remarkable early document of the personality of the composer that later came to be so familiar, and stands in clear contrast to the more or less sunny C major concerto that immediately preceded it. And of course now we understand clearly the reasons for that: the years 1801-02 marked the nadir of Beethoven's emotional life, as he grappled with the reality of his increasing and permanent deafness. His despair was total, and the prospect of suicide is clearly implied in the documentary evidence. Tumultuous and bitter family feuding entered into this cruel time, but the famous "Heiligenstadt Testament" records his final triumph over the depression and his resolve to live and compose. He soon received an engagement to compose an opera, and a concert of his compositions ensued shortly thereafter. It featured his oratorio, *Christ on the Mount of Olives,* the First and Second Symphonies, and the Third Piano Concerto (with the composer at the piano).

The first movement is suitably stormy and impassioned, marked by the strong accents and driving rhythm that we have come to associate with the composer. While this, of course, is a piano concerto, the orchestra seems to carry the brunt of working over the themes. The second important theme may be recognized by its first entrance in the clarinet. After a development of the themes and a re-summary that would almost do justice to the contemporary "Eroica" symphony, a significant cadenza for the piano signals the imminent coda. The cadenza, while perhaps not as impressive as the one that the composer would have actually improvised on the spot, is nevertheless forceful, but ends softly as the orchestra enters and "heads for the barn." The elegiac slow movement is in the strikingly fresh (and somewhat distant, for the time) key of E major. Its dreamy and deeply reflective mood is strong evidence of approaching musical Romanticism, and contains beautifully sensitive passages, such as the duet for flute and bassoon accompanied by pizzicato strings and piano arpeggios. The last movement is the typical scamper of the times, characterized by sections that come back from time to time, interspersed by contrasting ones. The careful listener might spot Beethoven's unusual short turn into the distant key of the slow movement in the midst of the fun. But after a last gasp in the minor mode, the movement ends triumphantly in C major, having won out over the darkness in typical Beethoven fashion.

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, op. 88, B. 163 – Antonín Dvořák

Dvořák is the preëminent Czech composer of the nineteenth century, and perhaps of all of his successors, as well. This is no small achievement, considering the number of

great musicians--Mozart, for example—who thought of Bohemia as the most musical country in Europe. Even today, one can hardly get on a streetcar in Prague without stepping around a double bass. Americans today, if they think of Czech music at all, other than two works by Smetana, it is of the music of Dvořák. They know little of the other composers of the incredible musical wealth of Bohemia—including Fibich, Ostrčil, Janáček, Foerster, Hába, and Martinů—just to name a few. Dvořák is merely "first among equals" in the history of Czech music, and many more of the compositions of "the conservatory of Europe" need to reach our own concert stages. Dvořák owed his initial recognition to Johannes Brahms, who encountered his music somewhat early in Dvořák's career, and saw to it that he was enabled to spend time in Vienna for further study. While Dvořák's fundamental stylistic orientation is similar to the older composer in its classical restraint and dedication to traditional forms and procedures, his compositions are unmistakably Czech in myriad subtle ways. Turns of harmony, melody, and rhythm firmly establish Dvořák's ethnicity, even within the disciplined tradition of musical composition leading back to, say, Beethoven. Like Brahms, Dvořák wrote stunningly well in the genres of string quartets, sonatas, and symphonies. But unlike Brahms, he also wrote tone poems, and was an active and successful opera composer, although only his *Rusalka* is widely known in this country. He was interested in almost every genre, and few of his contemporaries composed successfully in as many different ones as did Dvořák.

He clearly thought of himself as a champion of Czech music, and he incorporated significant Czech musical, literary, and historical elements into his works. His *Slavonic Rhapsodies*, tone poems, operas, and songs—the list goes on and on—all are heavily infused with Czech melodies, linguistic inflections and characteristic rhythms, and national legends and stories. And it must be admitted that these essential elements of his artistic voice are near the core of his attractiveness to audiences worldwide—not just in his homeland. Yet, to focus inordinately on these elements would miss the mark in understanding the most important aspect of the nature of his music. As deeply rooted as he is in the Czech musical tradition, it would be a mistake to consign him primarily to the category of "nationalist" composers. For Dvořák was a clear adherent of the artistic thinking of those composers of the nineteenth century who were firmly rooted in the tradition of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven (and later, Mendelssohn and Brahms) as a fundamental way of composing. That is, they favored classical forms and designs, integrated development of musical ideas, and in general, a restrained and balanced expression that placed strong emphasis on music as an abstract art. Generally speaking not for them were the "stories" and programs of folks like Liszt and Wagner, and their followers. And in mastery of the resilience of this style, the symphonies of Dvořák--as well as those of Tchaikovsky--pretty much have come to dominate the symphonic music from those times that are favored today by concert audiences.

Dvořák wrote nine symphonies, but Americans are most familiar with Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, "From the New World." His first four symphonies were not published in his lifetime, nor were they generally recognized until the 1950s. But, his sixth, seventh, and eighth symphonies are beginning to catch up in popularity in this country with the beloved ninth. It was the sixth (1880) that first brought him international recognition and acclaim as a symphonist; but it is the eighth that has come to take a place of "second to

none," in popularity. It's a work of genial warmth, and suffused throughout with the color and melodious qualities so associated with Dvořák.

The first movement opens with a wonderfully melancholy theme in G minor played by the cello section; it's not the main theme, however, but little matter. Dvořák full well knows it value, and it marks off each of the three main sections of the movement. The end of it concludes with an ingratiating move to G major, carried by warm brasses. The main theme is now here, and it's a little "chirpy" birdlike theme, first heard in the flute. By and by other important material comes to fore, but not in the traditional key for these later ideas, but in the increasingly popular key with the romantic composers, two steps higher. It too, is in a minor key, and you'll hear it first in the woodwinds. Dvořák brings in a few other concluding ideas, and then the melancholy theme from the opening announces the development, which, though appropriately stormy and fragmented, as these things tend to be, always bears the clarity and tunefulness typical of the composer. Powerful trumpets and trombones again intone the opening idea to mark the recap, followed shortly by the main theme. We heard it first in the flute, but this time it's played by the English horn, making its only appearance in the symphony. The second theme gets a good going over as this shortened reprise burns to an uplifting conclusion.

The second movement is most easily heard as an ingratiating series of variegated moods, musical ideas, and instrumental color. It's usually foolish to read too much into abstract music, but there is no doubt here, of the evocation of "Czech" local color in the beautiful episodes that seem to explore the rural life, stunning natural beauty, and the indigenous musical life of Dvořák's homeland.

Dances are what we expect usually in third movements, and Dvořák provides two: a pensive, melancholic waltz, playing bookends for a warm folkdance in the middle, in the same waltz time. After the return of the first waltz, a short, cheerful coda built around the second tune, but now in duple, not waltz time, takes us gently to the end.

There's no mistaking the beginning of the last movement—a brilliant fanfare in the trumpets leads to the theme. First heard in the cellos, it is a broad, sonorous melody derived from the theme that we heard way back in the first movement in the flute. It's based upon the three notes of the G major triad, and Dvořák shows us the master he is, by wringing every possible use out of it. The movement is a series of marvelously creative variations on this simple theme. After the leisurely announcement by the cello section, and further restatements in the strings...Bam! The tempo takes off in a fury, driven by hysterical trills in the horns, followed by virtuoso filigree in the solo flute. Soon the next variation appears, a rather heavy marching affair that sounds vaguely like Janissary music (eighteenth-century Turkish effects found in Mozart, Beethoven, and others). After some allusions to the opening fanfare, the strings revert back to the peaceful statement of the main theme, enhanced by a little Rossinian flute obbligato, and the mood continues—teasing us by building up the "calm before the storm" that everyone in the house knows is going to burst out at any moment. On and on the teasing goes, softer and softer—then: the hysterical horn trills burst in, and we're off to the races, faster and faster, and an apotheosis of Czech dancing fury that has few equals in the literature. It's easy to see why this great symphony—from the "Old World," as it were--is the favorite Dvořák symphony of many.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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