Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Riccardo Muti Zell Music Director
Yo-Yo Ma Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

Thursday, May 18, 2017, at 8:00
Friday, May 19, 2017, at 1:30
Saturday, May 20, 2017, at 8:00

Jakub Hrůša Conductor

Music by Bedřich Smetana

Má vlast
Vyšehrad
Vltava (Moldau)
Šárka
Z českých luhů a hájů (From Bohemian Fields and Groves)
Tábor
Blaník

There will be no intermission.

Friday afternoon’s performance honors the memory of Elizabeth Hoffman and her generous endowment gift.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra is grateful to 93XRT FM for its generous support as media sponsor of the Classic Encounter series.

The program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.
Bedřich Smetana
Born March 2, 1824; Leitomischl, Bohemia
Died May 12, 1884; Prague, Bohemia

Má vlast

Although his name came to symbolize the Czech music spirit, Bedřich Smetana spent most of his early career outside his native country. “Prague did not wish to acknowledge me, so I left it,” he wrote to his parents from Sweden in December 1856. But in 1860, after returning to Prague for a vacation, he admitted the complexity of his decision:

It is sad that I am forced to seek my living in foreign lands, far from my home, which I love so dearly and where I would so gladly live. . . . My heart is heavy as I take leave of these places. Be happy, my homeland, which I love above all, my beautiful, my great, my only homeland . . . your soil is sacred to me.

The following year, Smetana moved back to Prague for good.

With The Bartered Bride, the opera he began in 1862, Smetana revealed that his patriotic feelings went far beyond mere homesickness. Still incensed by the offhand remark made by the second-rate conductor Johannes von Herbeck that Czechs made good performers but were not capable of writing significant music, Smetana was determined to create a national style of composition. Má vlast (My country), a cycle of six symphonic poems, is the ultimate fruit of Smetana’s mission, testament to his intense national pride and the brilliant success he achieved. “I am the creator of the Czech style in the dramatic as well as the symphonic field,” he wrote in 1882, the year the complete Má vlast was performed for the first time, and by then few could argue with him.

Smetana was attracted to the symphonic poem largely through his acquaintance with Liszt’s defining works in the form—most of them written in the 1850s and published shortly thereafter—and by his friendship with Liszt himself. In 1856, Liszt dedicated his score to Tasso, the first of his symphonic poems to appear in print, to Smetana. Smetana visited Liszt at Weimar the following year and heard performances of the Faust Symphony and Die Ideale, which recalibrated his outlook as a composer. Within a few years, the one-movement symphonic poem became Smetana’s form of choice, beginning with scores based on dramas by Shakespeare and Schiller. (He did not at first call them symphonic poems; his Richard III, he said, was “neither an overture nor a symphony: in short something still to be named,” and he later referred to it simply as a fantasy for large orchestra.) In the 1860s, Smetana was mostly occupied with the world of opera, composing a series of works in his native language that proved so enduring and characteristic of his homeland that he is known as the father of Czech opera. It was only when he began to plan Má vlast in 1872 that he was able to turn his attention to the kind of descriptive symphonic music that was the natural form for expressing his deepest artistic thoughts.

Smetana began concentrated work on the opening pair of the cycle’s symphonic poems in late September 1874: Vyšehrad, the old citadel in Prague, and Vltava, the river Moldau that runs through the city. But in October, he went completely deaf (he had begun to have trouble with his hearing that summer). Like Beethoven before him, he now wrote music constantly, almost defiantly. In November 1877, he remarked that “in these three years of deafness I have completed more music than I had otherwise done in ten.” The bounty included an opera, a string quartet he called From My Life—a chilling
personal record of his difficulties—and the first four parts of Má vlast—he had added Šárka, named for the female warrior of Czech legend, and Z českých luhů a hájů, which we know as From Bohemian Fields and Groves. At the time, this appeared to be all that Smetana would write of Má vlast, and each of the four pieces was performed independently with great success. But then in 1878 and 1879, Smetana returned to the project and added two more parts—Tábor, named for an ancient stronghold, and Blaník, a kind of Czech Valhalla where Czech warriors waited to come to the rescue of the homeland—which apparently had been part of his plan all along. The work was finished on March 9, 1879. When the complete Má vlast was performed for the first time in 1882, Smetana could not hear the music or the triumphant reception.

Smetana did not make a rough sketch of the programmatic content of Má vlast until his publisher asked for one in 1879, in anticipation of the publication of the work, first in a reduction for piano, four hands, and then as a full orchestral score. Smetana settled on the final version of his title, Má vlast—before he had simply referred to it as Vlast—only at the very last, the addition of the single word Má giving it a tellingly personal—and arguably possessive—touch.

In a letter to his publisher, František Urbánek, in May 1879, Smetana described the opening tone poem, Vyšehrad, named for the rock precipice that towers above the River Moldau as it flows toward Prague, and of the old fortress that sits at its pinnacle. “The harps of the bards begin; a bard sings of the events that have taken place on Vyšehrad, of the glory, splendor, tournaments, and battles, and finally its downfall and ruin. The composition ends on an elegiac note.” The second tone poem, Vltava, has always been the most popular of the six pieces, and it is one of music’s greatest landscape paintings. Smetana’s friend, the conductor Mori Anger, said the music came to the composer one day when
Second music director Frederick Stock’s score to Tábor, used for the Orchestra’s first complete performance of Má vlast, given on November 18, 1931, in Orchestra Hall
the two of them went out into the countryside, looking for the spot where two rivers join: “within him sounded the first chords of the two motifs which intertwine and increase and later grow and swell into a mighty melodic stream.” Later Smetana explained how that idea blossomed into a detailed, full-color portrait of the Moldau:

The composition depicts the course of the river, from its beginning where two brooks, one cold, the other warm, join a stream, running through forests and meadows and a lovely countryside where merry feasts are celebrated; water-sprites dance in the moonlight; on nearby rocks can be seen the outline of ruined castles, proudly soaring into the sky. Vltava swirls through the Saint John Rapids and flows in a broad stream toward Prague. It passes Vyšehrad and disappears majestically into the distance, where it joins the Labe.

Šárka tells the tale of one of the daughters of the founding family of Bohemia, who rebels against the rule of men. As Smetana wrote,

... it begins with the enraged Šárka swearing vengeance on the whole male race for the infidelity of her lover. From afar is heard the arrival of armed men led by Ctirad, who has come to punish Šárka and her rebellious maidens. In the distance, Ctirad hears the feigned cries of a girl [Šárka] bound to a tree. On seeing her, he is overcome by her beauty and so inflamed with love that he frees her.

By means of a previously prepared potion, she intoxicates Ctirad and his men, who fall asleep. As she sounds her horn (a prearranged signal), the rebel maidens, hidden in nearby rocks, rush to commit the bloody deed. The horror of general slaughter and the passion and fury of Šárka’s fulfilled revenge form the end of the composition.

Smetana composed From Bohemian Fields and Groves while staying with his daughter and son-in-law in the village of Jabkenice. “This is a general description of the feelings which the sight of the Czech countryside conjures up,” he wrote.

From nearly all sides a song both gay and melancholic rings out full of fervor, from
Chicago audiences were first introduced to music from Smetana’s *Má vlast* by the Chicago Orchestra’s founder and first music director, Theodore Thomas: *Vltava* in January 1894, *Šárka* in October 1895, and *Vyšehrad* in April 1896. Thomas and his successor Frederick Stock regularly included these three symphonic poems on their concerts, but it wasn’t until the Orchestra’s forty-first season that Stock programmed the complete cycle for a special concert on November 18, 1931, honoring Chicago’s rich Czech heritage.

On November 15, Edward Moore, writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, happily reported that he was able to hear the work a few days before the performance. The headline read, “Records give preview of new musical event: Critic hears Smetana’s music, *Má vlast*, on phonographic disks.” Moore wrote that, courtesy of Dr. J.E.S. Vojan, president of the Bohemian Arts Club of Chicago (which would sponsor the concert), “through the medium of disk and needle, I have been enabled to hear it in advance of the concert audience.”

(The recording most likely was the one made by the Czech Philharmonic in 1929, under the baton of its chief conductor, Václav Talich, who later taught Karel Ančerl and Charles Mackerras. This not only was the ensemble’s first commercial recording but also the first complete recording of Smetana’s cycle of tone poems. It was released on ten twelve-inch 78-rpm discs—just under eighty minutes of music—by His Master’s Voice.)

“Through a course of years, Mr. Stock [along with Thomas before him] and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra have made *Vltava* or the *Moldau* popular with Chicago audiences,” Moore continued. “They have played *Vyšehrad* a number of times, and *Šárka* less frequently. The other three are to come as a first performance next Wednesday.”

Following the November 18 concert, Eugene Stinson in the *Daily News* wrote, “Through these six works there sweeps the refreshing fragrance of a national spirit. Smetana was not merely the father of a national Bohemian music and the teacher of Dvořák. He was one of the first composers in any land to see the possibilities of such a music, founded on characteristic themes and breathing out the soul of a race.”

“History, legend, national songs, tonal description of nature, and a poetic imagination to transfigure them all, are in it,” added Moore in his review for the *Tribune*. “When one considers that Smetana wrote it under the most tragic infliction that may visit a musician, total deafness, it becomes not only one of the masterpieces of the world but the act of one of the world’s great heroes.”

“Here is melody, melody so simple, so tender, so touching; melody so poetic, so passionate, so spontaneous that one listens happily, without the need of indulgence, excuse, or partiality. But beneath all this simplicity, one hears and senses the mastermind of the great orchestral technician.”

Devries also noted that several musicians in the Orchestra that evening were of Bohemian descent, including John Weicher (a member of the violin section from 1923 until 1969; he became concertmaster in 1937), Vaclav Jiskra (principal bass, 1908–49), Rudolph Fiala (viola, 1922–52), Joseph Houdek (bass, 1914–44), and the Hyna brothers: Otto, Edward, and Henri.

The Hyna brothers—natives of Bohemia—all served as members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s string section. Otto (1886–1951) was in the bass section from 1930 until 1950, Edward (1897–1958) served as a violinist from 1929 until 1943, and Henri (1901–1955) also was a violinist from 1928 until 1932.

Frank Villella is the director of the Rosenthal Archives. An extended version of this article also appears on csosoundsandstories.org.
the groves and the meadows. The woodlands—horn solos—and the gay, fertile lowlands of the Elbe and many, many other parts, everything is remembered in a hymn of praise. Everyone may imagine what he chooses when hearing this work—the poet has the field open to him; all he has to do is follow the composition in detail.

In conversation with a friend, he spoke more specifically of the joy of being in the woods in summer at midday, when the sun is directly overhead, and of the magic of twilight, when the sun’s rays fall behind the trees. The ending, he said, represents a festival.

The last two symphonic poems are linked by subject and musical material, with the Hussite chorale, “Kdoz jste bozi bojovnici” (Those who are warriors of God) as the centerpiece of both. The city of Tábor, south of Prague, was the center of the Hussite Rebellion, the fifteenth-century political and religious movement dedicated to Bohemian independence. “The whole composition,” Smetana wrote, . . . is based on this majestic chorale. It was undoubtedly in the town of Tábor, the seat of the Hussites, that this stirring hymn resounded most powerfully and most frequently. The words of the old chorale inflamed the combatants, but spread terror in the ranks of the enemy. The piece depicts the strong will to win battles, and the dogged perseverance of the Táborites. It expresses the glory and renown of the Hussite struggle and the indestructible character of the Hussite warriors. It was the period of Bohemia’s power and greatness.

“Blaník begins where the preceding composition ends,” Smetana said.

Following their eventual defeat, the Hussite heroes took refuge in Blaník Mountain, where, in heavy slumber, they wait for the moment they will be called to the aid of their country. Hence, the chorale that was used as the basic motive in Tábor is also used as the foundation of this piece. It is on the basis of this melody, the Hussite chorale, that the resurrection of the Czech nation, its future happiness and glory, will develop.

With this victorious hymn, written in the form of a march, the composition ends, and with it the whole cycle of Má vlast. As a brief intermezzo, we hear a short idyll, a description of the Blaník region, where a little shepherd boy plays a pipe while the echo gently floats back to him.

A footnote. Encouraged by the success of Má vlast, Smetana began a new symphonic cycle in 1883, based on Czech dances, but he completed only the first section, the introduction and polonaise, before he died.

Phillip Huscher has been the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1987.