Antonín Dvořák - Symphony No. 3

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Born September 8, 1841, Mühlhausen, Bohemia (now Nelahozeves, Czech Republic).
Died May 1, 1904, Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Symphony No. 3

To the late nineteenth century, and for many years after Dvořák’s death, he was known as the composer of five—not nine—symphonies. His first four, never published during his lifetime, were unknown, and so his last, From the New World, spent its first half century as no. 5. Only with the rediscovery of the long-lost First Symphony after the composer’s death, and with the publication of all of Dvořák’s early symphonies in the 1950s, did we begin to use the current numbering. And only after these early works began to appear on concert programs and on recordings—the first complete sets of all nine Dvořák symphonies, including one by former CSO music director Rafael Kubelík, were released in the late 1960s and 1970s—was it possible to understand how Dvořák became the composer we know today.

Dvořák’s path to writing symphonic music was not unusual. He learned to play the violin as a small boy, and he composed marches and waltzes for the village band. In Zlonice, he studied piano, organ, and viola, eventually becoming a decent enough violist to earn a living as an orchestra musician when he couldn’t make any money from his compositions. After he moved to Prague in 1857, he became principal viola in the orchestra for the new Provisional Theater (later the National Theater). For the rest of his life, he treasured the memory of playing a concert there in 1863 under his idol, Richard Wagner, that included the overture to Tannhäuser, the prelude to Tristan and Isolde, and excerpts from Die Meistersinger and Die Walküre. In 1865, he wrote two symphonies, a sudden burst of ambition and bravado—at least compared to Brahms—who had been trying to write his first symphony for more than a decade and wouldn’t finish it for another. In 1871, Dvořák left his orchestra job to devote more time to composition, but he soon realized that he would have to teach to get by. For many years, Frantisek Dvořák doubted the wisdom of his son’s choice of music over the life of a butcher, the long-time family business.

Then in 1873, Dvořák’s fortunes began to turn. The successful premiere of his patriotic cantata Heirs of the White Mountain on March 9 launched his fame in his homeland. In April, Dvořák began work on a new symphony, his third, in E-flat major. The piece was done by the beginning of July. Later that year, he married Anna Cermáková, the sister of the Prague actress Josefina, who had, nearly a decade before, rebuffed his advances. (Like Mozart and Haydn, he married
not his first love, but her sister.) The following March, the new Third Symphony was premiered in Prague under the baton of Bedřich Smetana, who had already achieved a popularity in Bohemia that only Dvořák, among composers, would surpass.

Dvořák’s Third Symphony was the first symphonic work of his maturity—the earliest orchestral score to suggest not just promise but greatness in the competitive make-or-break world of the symphony. A premiere under Smetana was itself a mark of success and an important endorsement. The two composers, seventeen years apart in age, had known each other since 1866, when Smetana became leader of the Provisional Theatre Orchestra, and Dvořák played under him for the next five years.

This is the only one of Dvořák’s symphonies in just three movements, with no scherzo intervening between the slow movement and the finale. From the opening theme, a particularly broad and expansive melody, one senses that Dvořák has become a composer who will make his name writing symphonies. The entire opening movement is drawn almost solely from this material, continually reinvented and rewoven into a paragraph of authoritative symphonic flow.

The second movement, which has the character of a funeral march, unexpectedly echoes music from the first, as if Dvořák had still not exhausted his ideas. Dvořák’s absorption in Wagner’s sound world, nearly obsessive ever since he played under the famous composer a decade before, colors the middle portion of this movement. The finale, an infectious dancelike rondo, is what we now think of as quintessential Dvořák—spirited, down-to-earth, a bit unbuttoned, and irresistible.

In 1875, Johannes Brahms agreed to serve on the Austrian Commission for the State Music Prize. One of the first scores submitted was Dvořák’s Third Symphony. Brahms at once recognized this as the work of a born symphonist, convinced his co-panelists to make a substantial award to the little-known composer, and began a long campaign to support and encourage a composer whose works would one day frequently be compared to his own.

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