Bohuslav Martinů
Born December 8, 1890, Polička, eastern Bohemia.
Died August 28, 1959, Liestal, Switzerland.

The Frescoes of Piero della Francesca

Martinu composed The Frescoes of Piero della Francesca in 1954 and 1955. The first performance was given on August 26, 1956, in Salzburg, Austria. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, xylophone, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-one minutes.

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performances of Martinů’s Frescoes of Piero della Francesca.

Bohuslav Martinů was born 193 steps above the ground in a bell tower, where his father served as watchman of the village church. Bohuslav, who lived in the tower overlooking the streets of the tiny Bohemian town of Polička until he was thirteen, was reclusive and shy, with little curiosity about the world beyond his immediate view. All that changed when he heard the new French music by Debussy and Ravel and decided to go to Paris. He left Polička in 1923 on a state grant that would support him for three months, and ended up staying in Paris for seventeen years. (For the rest of his life, however, he carried a postcard of the view from his boyhood home.)

Despite his shyness and difficulty with the French language, Martinů thrived in Paris, then the artistic capital of Europe. He studied with Albert Roussel; made the acquaintance of Serge Koussevitzky, who would later introduce his music to the United States; and began to mingle with members of a wide variety of artistic circles. (Perhaps most unpredictably, he fell in love with the new jazz style that was just taking Paris by storm.) In 1930, he married Charlotte Quennehen, a seamstress, and his life began to fall into place. His music was performed more regularly, both in Europe and in the U.S.

In 1940, Martinů was blacklisted by the Nazis. On June 10, four days before the Germans entered Paris, the Martinůs fled the city, leaving all their possessions behind. For the next several months, they were homeless and often slept on railway platforms. (Despite the hardships, Bohuslav continued to compose.) They finally gained passage on the Exeter, which left Lisbon for Hoboken, New Jersey, on March 21, 1941. (His American visa described him as a “blacklisted intellectual.”) As a kind of welcome gesture, Koussevitzky immediately commissioned Martinů to compose his first symphony, which was premiered in Boston in 1942—the first of six he would write during the twelve years he lived in this country.

“The form of the symphony is one of the great problems of contemporary composers,” Martinů said while he was composing his first. “The past centuries have left us a form well established not only in structure but in content of elevated expression and grandeur.” After Martinů completed his six symphonies, however, he continued to explore the idea of the modern day symphony, in substance and style, if not in name. The Frescoes of Piero della Francesca, an orchestral work in three movements composed two years after his Sixth Symphony, carries on this fascination with the form.
Martinů left the United States in 1952, settling in Nice the following year. In 1954, he made a trip to the Tuscan hill town of Arezzo, where he saw Piero della Francesca’s extraordinary series of fifteenth-century frescoes titled *Legend of the True Cross*. Contemplating the ten iconic images that trace the story of the cross, beginning in the Garden of Eden, Martinů found the idea for a new symphonic work—one that would try to express in music what he found in these aged frescoes: “the kind of solemn, frozen silence and opaque, colored atmosphere which contains a strange, peaceful, and moving poetry.”

Martinů was reluctant to discuss a precise correlation between imagery and music. “If a composer tries to represent a picture in music,” he said, “his work is often considered to be merely descriptive, and somehow outside the range of pure music.” Nonetheless, he did admit that the first movement, a rhapsodic andante, took as its subject the group of wives with the Queen of Sheba, kneeling by the river Siloe, at the moment she realizes that the wood of the bridge over the river was taken from the same tree as that used for the cross. The second movement is based on Piero della Francesca’s depiction of the dream of Constantine, in which an angel reveals the sign of the cross in the heavens that will lead him to victory in battle—an event that is strikingly conveyed with the voice of the solo viola, like the call of a trumpet. The final movement is indebted not to any single fresco, but is, as Martinu said, “a kind of general view of the frescoes, calling attention to two battle scenes and the many fascinating details.”

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