

PROGRAM NOTES

Antonín Dvořák – Scherzo capriccioso

Antonín Dvořák

Born September 8, 1841, Mühldhausen, Bohemia (now Nelahozeves, Czech Republic).

Died May 1, 1904, Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Scherzo capriccioso, Op. 66

Theodore Thomas, who later founded the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, met Antonín Dvořák in Berlin in May of 1867, following a performance of *Fidelio*. In the diary of his European trip that spring, Thomas says simply: “The opera itself made a great impression on me. Met Dvořák afterwards.” At the time, Thomas was thirty-one and had only recently established the Theodore Thomas Orchestra that would quickly become a staple of American concert life. Dvořák was just twenty-five, and had not yet written any of the music for which he is famous today.

Eventually, Thomas would follow Dvořák’s career very closely, performing many of his works soon after they were written and introducing several important scores to the United States. His championship of Dvořák in this country—as with Wagner, Brahms, and Richard Strauss—helped to make his works a standard part of the American orchestral repertory while they were, in fact, still new. The first of Dvořák’s compositions that Thomas premiered in the U.S. was the A-flat major Slavonic Rhapsody, which he conducted in Cincinnati in February 1880, followed by the D major symphony (the one we know as no. 6), in New York City, in January 1883. The next year, Thomas introduced this Scherzo capriccioso in Brooklyn, on November 8—a year and a half after the first performance in Prague. (The *New York Times* review mistakenly called it a Rondo capriccioso—or perhaps it was actually billed that way at the time.) Before moving to Chicago, Thomas gave several more U.S. premieres of Dvořák’s music, including the great D minor symphony (no. 7).

In Chicago, Thomas programmed the Scherzo capriccioso for the first season of Chicago Symphony concerts. Written less than a decade earlier, it is one of the pieces that quickly established Dvořák’s fame as a composer of brilliance and panache, with a flair of rhythmic lilt and melodic charm. Particularly because of its masterful orchestral effects—including the harp, a rare visitor in the Dvořák orchestra—the Scherzo capriccioso captures Dvořák at his most colorful. It is this aspect of his abundant talent that first won audiences’ favor, even if it suggests little of the depth of the later music. The Scherzo capriccioso was beloved from the start—it was among the pieces suggested by audience members for the Orchestra’s “Popular (Request) Programs” as early as 1894. It appeared on eleven of the first twenty-five Chicago subscription seasons, and then continued to be a staple of the Orchestra’s so-called Popular Concerts until the 1960s.

Then, like a number of other dazzling orchestral showpieces that once reigned supreme, it slipped from the repertory. These are the first Chicago Symphony performance of the Scherzo capriccioso in Orchestra Hall in more than forty years and the first subscription concert performances in nearly seven decades.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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