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

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88

Dvořák composed this symphony between August 26 and November 8, 1889, and conducted the first performance on February 2, 1890, in Prague. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-six minutes.

Dvořák himself led the Exposition Orchestra (the Chicago Orchestra augmented to 114 players) in a performance of his Eighth Symphony on a special Bohemian Day concert at the World's Columbian Exposition on August 12, 1893.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Dvořák's Eighth Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on November 15 and 16, 1945, with Hans Lange conducting.

On August 12, 1893, Antonín Dvořák conducted his G major symphony at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. According to the printed booklet prepared for Bohemian Day at the fair, the Exposition Orchestra consisted of the Chicago Orchestra (as it was then known) "enlarged to 114 men." [For more on the composer's visit to Chicago, see "Dvorak in the White City" on page 10.] The G major symphony was listed as no. 4, which is how it was known during the composer's lifetime, although we now number it the eighth of Dvořák's nine symphonies. In fact, to the late nineteenth century, Dvořák was the composer of just five symphonies; only with the publication of his first four symphonies in the 1950s did we begin to use the current numbering. By now, even generations of music lovers who grew up knowing this genial G major symphony as no. 4 have come to accept it as no. 8.

By the time he came to Chicago, Dvořák had already conducted this symphony several times, always to an enthusiastic response—first in Prague and then in London, Frankfurt, and Cambridge, when he received an honorary doctor of music degree there in 1891. ("Nothing but ceremony, and nothing but doctors," he remembered. "All faces were serious, and it seemed to me as if no one knew any other language but Latin.") The Chicago reception, capped by "tremendous outbursts of applause," according to the Tribune, was equally positive.

In the 1880s and 1890s, Dvořák was as popular and successful as any living composer, including Brahms, who had helped promote Dvořák's music early on and had even convinced his own publisher, Simrock, to take on this new composer and to issue his Moravian Duets in 1877. Dvořák proved to be a prudent addition to the catalog, and the Slavonic Dances he wrote the following year at Simrock's request became one of the firm's all-time best sellers. Dvořák was then insulted and outraged, when, in 1890, Simrock offered him only a thousand marks for his G major symphony (particularly since the company had paid three thousand marks for the last one), and he gave the rights to the London firm of Novello instead. (At least he did not follow the greedy example set by Beethoven and sell the same score to two different publishers.)

Dvořák's G major symphony is his most bucolic and idyllic—it is, in effect, his Pastoral—and like Brahms's Second or Mahler's Fourth, it stands apart from his other works in the form. Like the subsequent New World Symphony, composed in a tiny town set in the rolling green hills of northeast Iowa, it was written in the seclusion of the countryside. In the summer of 1889, Dvořák retired to his country home at Vysoká, away from the pressures of urban life and far from the demands of performers and publishers. There he realized that he was ready to tackle a new symphony—it had been four years since his last—and that he
was eager to compose something “different from the other symphonies, with individual thoughts worked out in a new way.”

Composition was remarkably untroubled. “Melodies simply pour out of me,” Dvořák said at the time, and both the unashamedly tuneful nature of this score and the timetable of its progress confirm the composer’s boast. He began his new symphony on August 26; the first movement was finished in two weeks, the second a week later, and the remaining two movements in just a few days apiece. The orchestration took only another six weeks.

The first movement is, as Dvořák predicted, put together in a new way. The opening theme—pointedly in G minor, not the G major promised by the key signature—functions as an introduction, although, significantly, it is in the same tempo as the rest of the movement. It appears, like a signpost, at each of the movement’s crucial junctures—here, before the exposition; later, before the start of the development; and finally, to introduce the recapitulation. Dvořák is particularly generous with melodic ideas in this movement. As Leoš Janáček said of this music: “You’ve scarcely got to know one figure before a second one beckons with a friendly nod, so you’re in a state of constant but pleasurable excitement.”

The second movement, an adagio, alternates C major and C minor, somber and gently merry music, as well as passages for strings and winds. It is a masterful example of complexities and contradictions swept together in one great paragraph. The central climax, with trumpet fanfares over a timpani roll, is thrilling.

The third movement is not a conventional scherzo, but a lilting, radiant waltz marked Allegretto grazioso—the same marking Brahms used for the third movements of his second and third symphonies. The main theme of the trio was rescued from Dvořák’s comic opera The Stubborn Lovers, where Toník worries that his love, Lenka, will be married off to his father.

The finale begins with a trumpet fanfare and continues with a theme and several variations. The theme, introduced by the cellos, is a natural subject of such deceptive simplicity that it cost its normally tuneful composer nine drafts before he was satisfied. The variations, which incorporate everything from a sunny flute solo to a determined march in the minor mode, eventually fade to a gentle farewell before Dvořák adds one last rip-roaring page to ensure the audience enthusiasm that, by 1889, he had grown to expect.

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