

St. Thomas Orchestra Program Notes, Fall Concert, Nov. 18, 2023

PROGRAM

Symphonic poem, *Die Moldau (Vlatava)*

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

Songs to the Dark Virgin

Florence B. Price (1887-1953)

Bachianas Brasilieras No. 5

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

INTERMISSION

Symphony no. 8 in G major, Op. 88

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Allegro con brio

Adagio

Allegretto grazioso

Allegro ma non troppo

PROGRAM NOTES

Joshua Berrett, Ph.D.

Smetana, the founding father of Bohemian musical nationalism, is generally known nowadays for only three works: the overture to his comic opera *The Bartered Bride*, *Die Moldau*, and his first string quartet, “From My Life.” They all reflect a career that rarely saw any lasting success, but rather was undermined by frequent professional frustrations, a volatile political climate, as his homeland struggled to break free of Habsburg rule, and devastating personal losses—of his beloved wife, his daughters, his hearing, and ultimately, the ravages of advanced syphilis, leading to his going insane. His final years, like those of Robert Schumann, were spent in an asylum.

Die Moldau is the German name widely used for the Czech Republic’s national river, *Vlatava*. Smetana’s symphonic poem celebrating the river is the second of six works comprising his epic cycle *Má Vlast* (My Fatherland). Writing to his publisher in May 1879, Smetana described his composition as follows:

The work depicts the course of the river Vlatava, beginning from the two small sources, the cold and warm Vlatava, the joining of both streams into one, then the flow of the Vlatava through forests and across meadows, through the countryside where gay festivals are

just being celebrated; by the light of the moon, a dance of water nymphs; on the nearby cliffs, proud castles, mansions, and ruins rise up; the Vlatva swirls in the St. John's rapids, flows in a broad stream as far as Prague; the Vyšehrad appears, and finally the river disappears in the distance as it flows majestically into the Elbe.

The overall form of the work is a sonata rondo. Two flutes playing interlocked parts, represent the meeting of the two small streams as the music builds towards the presentation of the recurring river theme. This is an expansive soaring melody always given to the strings; part of it has long been associated with the opening phrases of *Hatikvah*, Israel's national anthem. Current research, however, reveals that Smetana himself adapted this melody from disparate pre-existent sources, some going back as many as 600 years. And the opening phrases of *Hatikvah* itself are now traced to a Rumanian folksong known as "Cart and Oxen."

Returning to *Die Moldau*, interpolated contrasting sections feature a polka depicting a wedding dance that transitions to an evocative portion suggesting nymphs dancing in the moonlight. The return of the river theme is followed by an intense developmental passage representing the St. John's Rapids – a soundscape of desperate struggle that brings to mind a movie soundtrack. For one last time, the river theme returns, now in the major, as we pass the iconic Vyšehrad castle on our way north. Like a slow fadeout, the river then disappears in the distance.

African-American composer Florence Price has been enjoying a long overdue revival in recent years. Born in 1887 in Little Rock, Ark., to an upper class family, she displayed special musical gifts early on. She attended the New England Conservatory, one of the very few such institutions admitting African-Americans at the time, where she majored in organ and piano pedagogy while also studying composition with George Chadwick and Frederick Converse. Once back in Little Rock, she found herself devoting most of her time to teaching and raising a family. The year 1927 brought a change for the better, when she moved to Chicago from the oppressive Arkansas Jim Crow environment. Her horizons began to expand.

No longer focused on writing songs and short pieces for children, she now turned her attention to larger symphonic and concerto forms. This won her national attention as an African-American composer and as certainly the first black woman to be so recognized. At the same time, there were daunting challenges for her in a society that tended to define composers as white, male, and dead. Fortunately, she was able to find a champion in Frederick Stock, director of the Chicago Symphony. In 1933 it was he who premiered her First Symphony. But performances by other major ensembles never happened. Often cited is the case of her 1943 letter to Serge Koussevitzky of the Boston Symphony, where she introduced herself as follows:

"To begin with I have two handicaps—those of sex and race. I am a woman, and I have some Negro blood in my veins." Koussevitzky ignored her.

Price's posthumous reputation was given a major boost in 2009 when a treasure trove of her manuscripts, books, and personal papers was discovered in a dilapidated house on the outskirts of St. Anne, Ill. This had been Price's summer home. In the words of Alex Ross writing in *The New Yorker*, "Not only did Price fail to enter the canon; a large quantity of her music came perilously close to obliteration. That run-down house in St. Anne is a potent symbol of how a country can forget its cultural history." Then in November 2018, the publisher G. Schirmer announced that it had acquired worldwide rights to Price's complete catalog.

"Songs to the Dark Virgin," from 1941 is among the 44 art songs and spirituals that Price wrote. It is set to a text of Langston Hughes from his 1926 volume *The Weary Blues*. The plural in the title is explained by the fact that each of the poem's three stanzas is treated as a separate "song." The original, for voice and piano, is being performed this evening in an arrangement for strings, harp and voice by William Eckfeld.

Would
That I were a jewel,
A shattered jewel,
That all my shining brilliants
Might fall at thy feet,
Thou dark one.

Would
That I were a garment,
A shimmering silken garment.
That all my folds
Might wrap about my body,
Absorb thy body,
Hold and hide thy body,
Thou dark one.

Would
That I were a flame,
But one sharp, leaping flame,
To annihilate thy body,
Thou dark one.

Heitor Villa-Lobos is arguably the single most significant creative figure in 20th century Brazilian music. Known for his restlessness and flamboyance, he had an instinctive approach to composition—he had little formal training--leaving behind a huge body of music. There is no definitive number to Villa-Lobos's total output; the numbers range between one or two thousand works. But there can be no doubt about his deep immersion in his country's folkloric elements—

a mix of ingredients Portuguese, African, and Indian. As he once said: “I am folklore; my melodies are just as authentic as those which originate from the souls of the people.” A native of Rio de Janeiro, Villa-Lobos joined a band of *chorões* (serenaders) in his early teens, learning to improvise on sentimental melodies incorporating Afro-Brazilian rhythms. Around that time, his father started him on the cello, which he later studied seriously at the Instituto Nacional de Música. This remained his principal instrument together with the guitar.

To a large extent, Villa-Lobos’s fame rests on the nine works entitled “Bachianas Brasileiras” that he wrote between 1930 and 1945; each of them varies in form and instrumentation. He referred to them as “a genre of composition in homage to Johann Sebastian Bach.” More than that, for him Bach was “the intermediary between all cultures.” At the same time, his approach to Baroque counterpoint can perhaps be best described as a free adaptation.

“Bachianas Brasileiras” no. 5, written for soprano and eight cellos, is by far the best known of the nine, beloved especially for its opening movement, the haunting, unforgettable “Aria” (Cantilena), composed in 1938. This movement is an A-B-Â form modelled after the Baroque da capo aria. The initial A is sung as a vocalise on “ah,” while the much shorter reprise calls for the soprano to hum. The midsection, syllabic and filled with a series of monotones, uses the Portuguese lyrics of Ruth Valadares Correa. They evoke a wondrous moonlit sky as conveyed by such phrases as: “In the infinite the moon rises sweetly, beautifying the evening like a friendly girl who prepares herself and dreamily makes the evening beautiful. A soul, anxious to be pretty, shouts to the sky....”

In 1945, Villa-Lobos added a second movement, the *dansa*, with lyrics by Manuel Bandeira. It is a rapid-fire song expressing nostalgia for the birds of the Cariri Mountains in north-eastern Brazil. The music includes imitation of bird song with phrases like “La! Liá! Liá! Liá! Liá!, ...singing more to keep memory alive.”

On April 18, 1878, a deeply grateful Antonin Dvořák wrote the following letter to Johannes Brahms:

Your last most valued letter I read with the most joyful excitement; your warm encouragement, and the pleasure you seem to find in my work, have moved me deeply, and made me unspeakably happy. I can hardly tell you, esteemed Master, all that is in my heart. I can only say that I shall all my life owe you the deepest gratitude for your good and

noble intentions towards me, which are worthy of a truly great artist and man.

Your ever grateful
Antonin Dvořák

Dvořák was then 36 going on 37. The son of a village innkeeper and butcher, he had been expected to follow in his father's footsteps. Despite some early recognition of his musical gifts, Dvořák, for almost two decades, had to eke out a living as a freelance violist and organist in Prague, playing in church, dance bands, and the opera orchestra. However, his life radically changed after he submitted his works in a competition for the Austrian State Prize; he actually won the prize on three separate occasions between 1875 and 1877. And one of the judges on the adjudicating committee was none other than Johannes Brahms, who began to take a keen interest in Dvořák and strongly recommended him to his publisher Fritz Simrock. Indeed, the subsequent publication of Dvořák's *Moravian Duets* and *Slavonic Dances* caught on like wildfire. He soon became an international sensation, with his music being performed in venues ranging from Moscow, Vienna and London to Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dvořák's Symphony no. 8 was written on the occasion of his election to the Bohemian Academy of Science, Literature and Arts. Composed and orchestrated within the two-and-a-half-month period between August 26 and Nov. 8, 1889, it is for the most part a sunny exuberant work drawing upon folk music that was so close to Dvořák's heart. The symphony's opening 17 measures, while centered in G minor, convey a glowing warmth, with cellos doubled at the unison by first and second horns, first bassoon, and two clarinets. Virtually all source material for this opening sonata-form movement is embedded here. Especially important is what is presented within the first three measures. This is a six-note melody drawing upon just three pitches: d, g, and f. It is, in fact a variant of a universal archetype as heard in such examples as "Song of the Volga Boatmen," Ella Fitzgerald's "A-Tisket, A Tasket," or the children's taunt "Nyah nyah, nyah,nyah,nyah, nyah." The cello passage segues to an airy solo flute, presenting a G major version of our archetype. In the body of the movement there are many dramatic passages, including a stormy development section and transition to the recapitulation. The movement ends with a brief energetic coda.

The second movement involves a fascinating reworking of the archetype, with its fourth and minor third. Many of the movement's phrases are made up of filled-in perfect fourths, as at the very start, or are not filled in at all. In fact, in the course of the movement there is also a recurring falling perfect fourth, which at times becomes very insistent; coupled with it are falling thirds.. Adding drama to the whole is the developmental midsection as well as the key scheme, shifting from C minor to C major.

The third movement is like an intermezzo. Starting in G minor, it has the feel of a warmly bittersweet waltz. The midsection, in G major, is joyous and utterly captivating. Following a da capo, there comes a buoyant G major Molto vivace coda in duple time. Two unison trumpets call us to attention at the start of the finale as festivities are about to begin in the form of a somewhat free theme-and-variations movement. The variations that follow offer a brilliant display of Dvořák's formidable command of orchestral color and texture. An animated coda brings the work to a rousing conclusion.

About the author: A member of the first violin section and STO board member, Dr. Berrett is a professional musicologist and is internationally recognized for his publications in such diverse areas as the history of the symphony and jazz. Dr. Berrett and his wife Lynne are co-founders of the non-profit Ageless Mind Project. Visit them at agelessmindproject.org.

Joshua Berrett © 2023