

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Slavonic Dance in E minor, Op. 46, No. 2 (1878)

Antonín Dvořák

(Born September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeves, Bohemia;
died May 1, 1904 in Prague)

The eight *Slavonic Dances*, Op. 46, were the first efflorescence of the Czech nationalism that was to become so closely associated with Dvořák's music. On the advice of his mentor Johannes Brahms, he sent them to the noted Berlin publisher Fritz Simrock in May 1878 and was paid 300 marks, the first substantial sum Dvořák had made from any of his works. Though these pieces were originally intended for piano duet (a shrewd marketing strategy by Simrock — there were a lot more piano players than orchestras), Dvořák began the orchestrations even before the keyboard score for all eight dances was completed, and Simrock issued both versions simultaneously in August 1878. Louis Ehlert, the influential critic of the *Berliner Nationalzeitung*, saw an early copy of the *Slavonic Dances*, and wrote admiringly of their "heavenly naturalness" and Dvořák's "real, naturally real talent." The public's interest was aroused, there was a run on the music shops, and Dvořák was suddenly famous (and Simrock was suddenly rich). Eight years later, as part of a deal with Simrock to publish the Symphony No. 7, which the publisher contended would not sell well, Dvořák wrote a second series of *Slavonic Dances* (Op. 72). The fee was 3,000 marks, ten times the amount tendered for the earlier set. Though he did not quote actual folk melodies in this music, as had Brahms in his *Hungarian Dances*, Dvořák was so imbued with the spirit and style of indigenous Slavic music that he was able to create such superb, idealized examples of their genres as the Ukrainian *dumka* in the Slavonic Dance in E minor, Op. 46, No. 2.

Concerto for Violin, Cello and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 102, "Double Concerto" (1887)

Johannes Brahms

(Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg;
died April 3, 1897 in Vienna)

Johannes Brahms first met the violinist Joseph Joachim in 1853. They became close friends and musical allies — the Violin Concerto was not only written for Joachim in 1878 but also benefited from his careful advice in many matters of string technique. Joachim was a faithful champion of Brahms' music, playing it at every possible occasion and doing much to help establish the young composer's reputation across the Continent. In 1880, however, when Joachim was suing his wife for divorce over an alleged infidelity, Brahms took it upon himself to meddle in the family's domestic affairs. He believed that Frau Joachim was innocent of the charges, and sided with her. Joachim was, understandably, enraged, and he broke off his personal relationship with Brahms, though he continued to play his music; the two did not speak for years.

On July 19, 1887, when he was 54, Brahms, a curmudgeonly bachelor who found it difficult to make friends, sent Joachim a terse postcard from Thun, Switzerland, where the composer was summering that year: "I should like to send you some news of an artistic nature which I heartily hope might more or less interest you." Joachim replied immediately: "I hope that you are going to tell me about a new work, for I have read and played your latest works with real delight." Brahms sent his news: "I have been unable to resist the ideas that have been occurring to me for a concerto for *violin and cello*, much as I have tried to talk myself out of it. Now, the only thing that really interests me about this is the question of what your attitude toward it may be. Would you consider trying the work over somewhere with [Robert] Hausmann [the cellist in Joachim's Quartet] and me at the piano?"

Joachim agreed to Brahms' proposals. On July 26th, Brahms sent him the solo parts and asked for his advice. Five days later the violinist replied: "Herewith I am posting you the parts with some proposed minor alterations with which I hope you will agree. It is very playable, generally. What's to be done now? Hausmann and I are most anxious to go on with it." As he had with the Violin Concerto, Brahms accepted only a few of Joachim's suggestions, though he did rework some passages on his own after the violinist had pointed out their difficulties. Brahms had a fair copy of the score and parts made, and arranged to have the formal premiere given by the Gürzenich Orchestra in Cologne in October. The work, Brahms' last for orchestra, was given a cool reception. Concerning the personal relationship between the composer and the violinist, however, the work was an unqualified success. Brahms' dear friend Clara

Schumann noted with pleasure in her diary that “this Concerto was in a way a work of reconciliation — Joachim and Brahms have spoken to each other again after years of silence.”

The opening movement largely follows Classical concerto-sonata form, though it is prefaced with a bold paragraph introducing the soloists. The orchestra’s first attempt at announcing the main theme is brusquely interrupted by a recitative from the cello. The woodwinds then preview the complementary theme, which is taken up by the unaccompanied violin, who engages the cello in arpeggiated dialogue as the bridge to the full orchestral presentation of the movement’s melodic material. The main theme, given by the entire orchestra, is a somber but majestic strain that mixes duple and triple rhythms in Brahms’ characteristic manner. The second theme is a tender, sighing phrase introduced by the woodwind choir. The soloists then join the orchestra for their elaborated re-presentation of the themes. A development section (begun by the soloists in unison) and a full recapitulation and coda round out this deeply satisfying and richly expressive movement.

Two quiet summons from horns and woodwinds mark the beginning of the *Andante*. The principal theme of the movement’s three-part form is a warmly lyrical melody for violin and cello in unison; parallel harmonies in the woodwinds usher in the central section. In his biography of the composer, Walter Niemann called this movement “most lovely ... a great ballade steeped in the rich, mysterious tone of a northern evening atmosphere.”

The finale is a playful rondo heavily influenced by the melodic leadings and vibrant rhythms of Gypsy music. Wrote the eminent English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey, “It is the privilege of works in sonata form that they can, without weakening or falsifying tragic issues, bring finales to a happy ending. The tragedy of the first movement has been told without flinching, but told within the quarter of an hour that contains symphonic movements on a large scale. Within that quarter of an hour we have not time to see enough of the world in which such tragedies take place; and we are allowed to see its glorious melodies, its humours, and its capacities for happiness, in the other movements. And so the whole Concerto leads up to the wonderful tenderness of this last page which finally breaks into joyful triumph, and brings the great work to an end.”

Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60 (1880) Antonín Dvořák

On November 16, 1879, Dvořák was in Vienna for a performance by the Philharmonic Orchestra and conductor Hans Richter of his *Slavonic Rhapsody No. 3*, “which was very well received,” he reported. “I was called before the audience. I was sitting beside Brahms at the organ and Richter pulled me forward. I *had* to come out. I must tell you that I won the sympathy of the whole orchestra at a stroke and that, of all the new pieces they had tried, and Richter told me that there had been sixty, my *Rhapsody* was liked the best. I had to assure the Philharmonic that I would send them a symphony for the next season. It was a grand evening I shall not easily forget for as long as I live.”

By 1880, Dvořák had already completed five symphonies — all unpublished — but he did not feel them representative of his best achievements, so he chose to write a new work for Vienna. He could not take up the score until the following August, but once begun he progressed rapidly on it: the sketch was completed in just three weeks and the orchestration in another three (on October 15, 1880), though the composer’s student and biographer Karel Hoffmeister noted that the music “had been slowly maturing in Dvořák’s mind.” Dvořák took the score at once to Vienna to play at the piano for Richter, who, the composer wrote to his friend Alois Goebel, “liked it very much indeed, so that after every movement he embraced me.” The premiere, by Richter and the Philharmonic, was set for December 26th.

Shortly before the scheduled premiere date, Richter informed Dvořák that the performance would have to be postponed because there was no time to rehearse and perform the music in the Philharmonic’s busy schedule. (The Philharmonic was, and is, a self-governing orchestra whose members are mainly employed as the ensemble of the Vienna Opera. Their heavy commitments allow them to give only a limited number of concerts every season.) The premiere was put off until March, Richter counseling that introducing such a grand and worthy new work during the frivolous carnival season of January and February was inappropriate. Pleading personal and family problems, however, Richter once again canceled the first performance, and Dvořák started to ask some questions of his Viennese friends. It seemed that there was sufficient anti-Czech feeling in those politically volatile days of the Dual Monarchy to cause local resentment against a young Czech composer who would have two important premieres in successive years. Dvořák, who had no taste for such quintessentially Viennese political machinations,

gave the honor of the Symphony's premiere to the Prague Philharmonic and conductor Adolf Cech, with whom he had played in the viola section of the orchestra of the National Provisional Theater in Prague earlier in his career. The work was first heard on March 25, 1881, in Prague. Despite his difficulties in getting the Symphony produced, Richter remained its ardent champion. Dvořák inscribed the score with a dedication to the conductor, and had Simrock send him one of the first copies. "On my return from London I find your splendid work awaiting me, whose dedication makes me truly proud," Richter wrote to Dvořák in January 1882. "Words do not suffice to express my thanks; a performance worthy of this noble work must prove to you how highly I value it and the honor of the dedication." Richter finally conducted the Symphony on May 15, 1882, in London.

The Symphony No. 6 splendidly combines elements of the symphonic tradition as transmitted by Brahms with what Otakar Sourek called Dvořák's "process of idealization" of Czech folk music. This characteristic style of Dvořák, uniting two great streams of concert and vernacular music, richly illumines the Symphony's opening movement. The influence of Brahms (particularly of his Second Symphony of 1878) is clear in the music's sylvan sonorities, motivic development and careful control of the ebb and flow of the lines of tension, while the folk quality is heard in the tunefulness of the themes and the many harmonic plangencies. Music so rich in reference is bound to excite the imagination of certain commentators, and Otakar Sourek heard in this movement "the humor and pride, the optimism and passion of the Czech people come to life, and in it breathes the sweet fragrance and unspoiled beauty of Czech woods and meadows." Following the first movement are a lovely *Adagio* and a fiery *Furiant*, filled with the same powerful shifting accents borrowed from Bohemian dance that enliven so many of the *Slavonic Dances*. The bracing last movement, according to Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, "is the most convincing finale Dvořák ever wrote."