

Program Notes by Professor Michael Beckerman

A Program of Czech Songs for the Year of Czech Music

Certainly, the Year of Czech Music should showcase some of the most celebrated works of the tradition, and we surely will have opportunities to hear symphonic, operatic and chamber works by the most notable composers throughout the year. But it is fitting in a way that we begin this year of celebration with a part of the repertoire that is less known: the songs of four major Czech composers. Three national groups have dominated both the performance and the study of art songs. First and foremost is Germany, where composers such as Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Wolf set the highest standard for what previously had been more modest artistic efforts. The French chanson tradition of Berlioz and later Fauré, Debussy, and Duparc, produced many masterpieces, as did the Russian school of Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky and Balakirev. Aside from such warhorses as Dvořák's "Songs my Mother Taught Me," the Czech tradition has been relatively unknown, and thus it is a particular pleasure, and entirely appropriate to begin this year-long festival with some jewels from the song repertoire.

Songs with keyboard were not exactly central to Smetana's composition, in fact, compared to Schubert's 600 songs and Schumann's 400 the contributions seem slight. However, his cycle *Večerní písně* (Evening Songs) is a powerful collection, and the first composition on the program is the first song from that set. "Kdo v zlaté struny hrát zná" (He Who Can Play the Golden Strings) is a kind of Czech equivalent to Schubert's famous "An die Musik" (To Music). In straightforward and heartfelt music Smetana sets the text with both passion and restraint. Particularly moving and symbolic for tonight's program are the words, "však ze všech trestů největší, když národ nemá písně" (of all punishments, the greatest is when a nation has no songs). That Smetana provided such songs is not only evident from this cycle, but also from the dozens of gorgeous arias in his operas.

There are many differences between Dvořák and Smetana in terms of compositional output, most notably perhaps, that Dvořák wrote in almost every genre possible: operas, masses, oratorios, symphonies, concertos and more than fifty chamber works, while Smetana put his greatest energy into operas and symphonic poems. And unlike Smetana, Dvořák wrote many individual songs and cycles. Tonight, we will hear works from two collections. The first "O duše draha

jendinka,” (My only dear one) from Dvořák’s Op.83 *Love Songs*, is a delicate and beautifully wrought gem which originated in the 1860’s as part of the cycle, *The Cypresses*. The other two pieces are the second and third songs from *Ciganske melodie* (Gypsy Melodies). The first of these, *Aj, kterak trojhranec můj* (Hey! How my triangle rings so sweetly) is written in a kind of Romani musical dialect, as least as imagined by composers from Schubert through Brahms, while the second, “*A les je tichý kolem kol*” (The woods are silent all around) is a starkly exquisite work, a kind of “Schubert meets Wagner” with Dvořák in the middle, based on a series of striking, disjunct harmonies.

No composer in the Czech tradition, or really any other, was more productive than Bohuslav Martinů who, like Dvořák, worked in almost every conceivable genre, and composed several sets of songs. The two collections we will hear from are tinged with nostalgia, as both *Nový špalíček* (The New Chap-Book) and *Písničky na jednu stránku* (Songs on One Page) were written in the United States during the Second World War. The composer, in exile, reflects back on the world of folk poetry in songs that are gloriously transparent, using the “folk mask” to express both intense sorrow and lively and joyous moods.

Of all these composers, perhaps Janáček had the most ambivalent attitude towards the art song. Two of the songs you will hear tonight come from his collection, *Moravská lidová poezie v písních* (Moravian Folk Poetry in Songs). Consisting of more than fifty miniatures, these are not art songs *per se*, but rather arrangements and reimaginings of Moravian folk songs, using the original tunes, but often with quirky and unusual accompaniments.

There is a kind of giant gap between the world of *Moravian Folk Poetry in Song* and the monumental dramatic song cycle, *Zápisník zmizelého* (The Diary of One Who Disappeared) written in 1919. The story is well known: Janáček came across a series of poems, purportedly written by an anonymous young Czech boy who had left the settled life to run away with a Romani woman. That we know now that the work was a hoax perpetrated by a poet named Ozef Kalda, a master of the Moravian dialects used in the poems, is irrelevant to Janáček’s response. The verses resonated deeply with Janáček who, in a series of astonishingly dramatic songs, traces the boy’s obsession, struggle, and finally capitulation to erotic impulses, concluding with the boy’s “disappearance.”

MICHAEL BECKERMAN is Carroll and Milton Petrie Chair and Collegiate Professor of Music at New York University. He has written many studies and several books on Czech music topics, including *New Worlds of Dvořák* (W.W. Norton, 2003), *Dvořák and His World* (Princeton University Press, 1993), *Janáček and His World* (Princeton, 2004), *Janáček as Theorist* (Pendragon Press, 1994), and *Martinů's Mysterious Accident* (Pendragon, 2007), as well as *Classical Music: Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges* (Open Book Publishers, 2021). He has also written articles on subjects such as Mozart, Brahms, film scoring, music of the Roma (Gypsies), exiled composers, and music in the camps. He has been a frequent contributor to *The New York Times* and was a regular guest on *Live from Lincoln Center*. He is a recipient of the Dvořák Medal and the Janáček Medal by the Czech Ministry of Culture, and is also a Laureate of the Czech Music Council; he has twice received the Deems Taylor Award. He served as a Distinguished Professor at Lancaster University (2011–2015) and was The Leonard Bernstein Scholar-in-Residence at the New York Philharmonic (2016-17). In 2014, Dr. Beckerman received an honorary doctorate from Palacký University in the Czech Republic. In 2021, he was awarded the *Gratias Agit* Award from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Harrison Medal from the Society of Musicology in Ireland, and in 2022 he received an honorary doctorate from Masaryk University in the Czech Republic.