

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Fri. June 10 The 102nd Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

"Carnival" Overture, op. 92 (B.169)

Shortly before his venture to the 'new world', Dvořák composed a trio of pieces based on nature, life and love. The *Carnival* (1891) was the central piece of the three, while the first was entitled *In Nature's Realm* and the last was based on Shakespeare's *Othello*. The middle of the three however has come to be performed on its own more often than not, perhaps not least due to its vibrant celebration of life.

The work was premiered in Prague on April 20th, 1892 with the composer conducting. The dedication was a nod to the University of Prague where he had recently been bestowed an honorary doctorate. Dvořák performed the entire triptych again upon his arrival in the United States later that same year, for his first concert at Carnegie Hall. He had been named the new director for the National Conservatory of Music in New York and this trio of overtures seemed the appropriate greeting to begin his foray into the new world, with its philosophical

commentary on the three pillars so important to the composer.

Throughout the work, Dvořák's typical use of Slavic folk music and dance rhythms can be heard. The festive atmosphere of *Carnival* is interrupted midway with one of the composer's favorite instruments, the English horn, together with solo flute and violin, and meant to portray "a pair of straying lovers". In Dvořák's own program notes he describes this overture as follows:

"The wanderer reaches the city at nightfall, where a carnival of pleasure reigns supreme. On every side is heard the clangor of instruments, mingled with shouts of joy and the unrestrained hilarity of people giving vent to their feelings in the songs and dance tunes."

Instrumentation: flute 2, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbals, tambourine), harp, strings

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Cello Concerto in B minor, op. 104 (B.191)

- I. Allegro (ca. 16 min)
- II. Adagio, ma non troppo (ca. 11 min)
- III. Finale: Allegro moderato (ca. 13 min)

"Why on earth didn't I know that one could write a cello concerto like this? Had I known, I would have written one long ago." This was Brahms' reaction

upon hearing Dvořák's Second Cello Concerto. Both composers apparently struggled with how to feature the instrument with orchestra over the years, Brahms seemingly settling on his *Double Concerto*. Dvořák having previously explored the genre in his earlier years had determined it extremely difficult, if not impossible, stating: "The cello is a beautiful instrument, but its place is in the orchestra and in chamber music. As a solo instrument it isn't much good... I have written a cello concerto, but am sorry...that I did so, and I never intend to write another one." This first attempt at writing a cello concerto remained undiscovered for many years, and when it surfaced in 1925, all that existed was the solo part and a sketch for piano accompaniment.

It wasn't until his sojourn to New York in the 1890's that Dvořák would reconsider his position on the matter. As director of the National Conservatory of Music from 1892- 1895, Dvořák not only had teaching duties, but also had the opportunity to compose (it was during this time his *New World Symphony* was written) and perform a number of his works. He also had the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues there, one of whom, Victor Herbert, was also a composer as well as a cellist. It was upon hearing Herbert's Second Cello Concerto that apparently inspired Dvořák to change his mind about the difficulties of composing in the genre.

For years a renowned European cellist had been urging Dvořák to write a cello concerto for him, and finally in 1895 Wihan's request was granted. Dvořák had decided to return to his homeland, partly due to financial difficulties at the conservatory and partly because he was homesick. He had also gotten word that his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová had become seriously ill as well. Many years earlier, Dvořák had fallen in love

with her and asked her to marry him. She declined and married another, while Dvořák instead married her younger sister. But apparently his feelings of affection remained as he paid tribute to her when he composed this *Cello Concerto in B minor*.

Writing the majority of the work before he left New York (1894-1895), Dvořák would ultimately complete the piece after returning to his home country. The concerto is written in three movements: *Allegro*, *Adagio ma non troppo* and *Allegro moderato*.

The second movement is where Dvořák makes his first tribute to Josefina. After a quiet opening section by the woodwinds, which are later joined by the soloist in reminiscences of his Slavonic homeland, the full orchestra suddenly interrupts with loud chords in a minor key, as if to grab our attention for what is to come next: the melody from "Leave Me Alone", which had been one of Josefina's favorite from Dvořák's *Four Songs*, op. 82.

The last movement makes one final tribute to Josefina, (apparently added after Dvořák returned home, and learned that she had died) where near the end we hear the tune for "Leave Me Alone" once more, the cello playing one final emotional farewell – to Josefina and perhaps to his New World – before a triumphant finish welcomes him back to his homeland.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle), strings, solo cello

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No.8 in G major, op. 88 (B.163)

- I. Allegro con brio (ca. 9 min)
- II. Adagio (ca. 11 min)
- III. Allegretto grazioso (ca. 6 min)
- IV. Allegro ma non troppo (ca. 10 min)

Dvořák as a composer is perhaps most renowned for his *Ninth Symphony*, often dubbed the 'New World Symphony'. Yet he was capable of composing not only symphonies, but in virtually any genre, including opera, symphonic poems, concert overtures, dances and marches, concertos, chamber music, as well as works for piano and voice. Many of these works were written as a result of commissions, which led one of his publishers Simrock to comment that Dvořák could 'pull melodies out of his sleeve.'

In spite of this reputation, Dvořák took great pride in working out every idea to its fullest, studying the master composers who preceded him in depth and setting a high standard for himself:

"To have a fine idea is nothing special. The idea comes of itself, and if it is fine and great, then that is not because of the person who has it. But to develop the idea well and make something great of it, that is the hardest part – that is art!"

For a number of years, many people did not even realize Dvořák had composed any symphonies prior to his last five, as his earlier works remained unpublished until much later. But each of his symphonies displays the developments and explorations of a composer going through various stages as an artist.

This, the *Eighth Symphony*, is said to be composed during his 'poetic period.' From April to June of 1889 he had written thirteen piano pieces, which he described as follows: "Here I'm not just a pure musician, but a poet." He had become fascinated by programme music and this can be heard clearly in this symphony, which was composed between August and November of 1889.

Dvořák conducted the premiere of the *Eighth Symphony* himself, in Prague on February 2nd, 1890. And although the work is arranged with the traditional four movements, (a fast opening movement, followed by a slow second movement and scherzo in the third, closing with a brilliant fourth movement), the poetic explorations of this period can be heard throughout. There are a great variety and number of thematic and motivic ideas that express a range of musical styles including fanfares, pastoral themes, chorales, and marches, as he explores this poetic language of allusions. In fact, when composing this work, Dvořák was on retreat at a recently acquired summer home in Vysoka where he said he felt 'as if cut off from the world' but instead could 'enjoy the beauties of God's nature.' Indeed, in this symphony, one gets a sense of Dvořák as he described himself in this time of his life, as much a poet as musician.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling on English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, strings