

SMETANA

Swedish Symphonic Poems

Richard III

Wallenstein's Camp • Hakon Jarl

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra

Leoš Svárovský



Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

Swedish Symphonic Poems

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884) is a figure of particular importance in the development of Czech music, creating and inspiring a synthesis of native tradition and the Classical forms of music in which he had been trained. Born in 1824, the eleventh child and first son to survive infancy of a brewer who served Count Wallenstein and other members of the nobility, he showed early promise as a pianist and as a violinist and wrote his first compositions at the age of nine. It was to Smetana's advantage that his father was a keen amateur musician, a violinist, able to encourage and teach his son. There was, however, a period of some eight years during which he had little professional musical training, while attending schools in various provincial towns. In 1838, however, he persuaded his father to allow him to study in Prague, and took the opportunity to devote himself more fully to music than to anything else. This happy state of affairs was ended when he was sent to study under a firmer regime in the town of Plzeň (Pilsen) where he lodged with an uncle.

Smetana had briefly enjoyed the rich musical life of Prague, writing music for his friends and being inspired by the playing of Liszt in 1840. The years in Pilsen allowed him considerable activity as a pianist for dances and brought contact again with a friend from his earlier life, Kateřina Kolářová, who in 1849 was to become his wife. In 1843 he left school and moved to Prague, resolved to make his living as a musician, perhaps as a virtuoso pianist. In practice he found it necessary to keep himself by teaching, while studying theory, and found a position as resident piano teacher to the family of Count Thun.

In 1848 Smetana's appointment to the Thun family had come to an end and he now planned to start a music school, at a time when national feelings were running high throughout Europe. The political events of the year found him involved in the nationalist rising, and his subsequent career was profoundly influenced by the ideas of patriotism then current. Nevertheless, even at this time, his first language remained German, the official language of the Hapsburg Empire in Bohemia. In 1849 he married

and continued his career as a teacher and pianist, serving in each of these capacities the former Emperor Ferdinand V, the mentally deficient heir to the Hapsburg throne, who had abdicated in favour of the able young Franz Joseph I. The latter's succession gave Czech nationalists some hope that he might have himself crowned King of Bohemia, which might allow the region a separate and equal development, a measure of freedom that Hungary was to achieve.

Smetana's subsequent career brought him both distinction and difficulties. For some years he taught and conducted choirs in Sweden where the *Festive Symphony* was well received in a concert in Gothenburg in 1860. The first performance of the work at the Convict-Saale in Prague in 1855 had been less satisfactory. The programme was a long one, starting with the composer playing Bach and Handel on the piano, followed by Schubert *Lieder*, a Beethoven *Trio*, in which a young piano pupil of Smetana's played, pieces by Schumann, Chopin and Mendelssohn, more songs and a group of polkas played by the composer. Smetana's wife in her diary found fault only with the concert's length, but added that Smetana tired towards the end, with the lamps giving out at the same time as his strength.

The establishment of the Czech Provisional Theatre in 1862 seemed to offer Smetana the opportunity he needed, and which he seized with the composition of his first operas, *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and *The Bartered Bride*. He was not appointed principal conductor until 1866, and then was to encounter constant critical hostility. In 1874 came the first signs of deafness, the result of a supposed venereal infection contracted earlier in life, and by October of the same year his hearing had gone completely. His last decade brought financial difficulties, but saw also the composition of that remarkable series of symphonic poems that make up *Má vlast*. By 1882 Smetana's health had deteriorated markedly, leading to aphasia, hallucinations and final insanity from which he was relieved by death on 12 May 1884.

From 1856 until 1862 Smetana returned frequently to Gothenburg. He had at first opened a music school there, where financial prospects seemed better than in his own country. After at first settling in Sweden, he soon found Gothenburg too isolated for his purposes, but returned regularly, appearing as a pianist and conductor. His musical development had been enhanced by the example of Berlioz, whose *Symphonie fantastique* and *Roméo et Juliette* the composer had conducted in Prague in 1846. Still more, his ideas had extended further through the influence of Liszt, whose advice he had sought before opening a music school in Prague in 1848, and, a few years later, before his move to Sweden, in Weimar, where he heard Liszt's *Faust Symphony* and *Die Ideale*, first performed in September 1857 for the unveiling of the Goethe-Schiller Monument.

Smetana's symphonic poem, *Richard III*, was completed in 1858, while he was staying with his wife at Särö, a resort south of Gothenburg, where it was hoped she might recover from the tuberculosis that was soon to bring about her death, after the loss of three of their four daughters. Inspired by Shakespeare's play, *Richard III* does not set out to offer a musical programme of a drama of diffuse incidents, but centres on the scene before King Richard's fatal Battle of Bosworth that will lead to his death. It has been convincingly suggested that the limping gait of Richard may be heard at the outset, marked *Maestoso, quasi andante*, leading to a dramatic climax. A *Più allegro vivo*, opening with muted lower strings, reflects Richard's plotting to seize the crown, leading to his success. In his tent the night before the battle that will bring about his death, Richard, now King, is haunted by the ghosts of those he has killed, Henry VI and his son, Clarence, Rivers, Grey and Vaughan, Hastings, the young princes smothered in the tower, his wife, Lady Anne and his henchman Buckingham. Each promises Richard defeat and death, and to Edmund, Duke of Richmond, the future Henry VII, success and victory. This is finally achieved, *Vittorioso, con tutta la forza*.

Schiller's dramatic tale *Wallenstein*, a trilogy, was written between 1797 and 1799. Smetana's symphonic poem, originally intended as an overture to the plays, was

completed in 1859 and is based on the first play of the trilogy, *Wallensteins Lager* ('Wallenstein's Camp'). Wallenstein acquired great power as a general of the Catholic League in the Thirty Years War, but was eventually accused of treachery and murdered in his sleep. Smetana depicts the play, written in traditional *Knittelverse* ('four-stress lines'), in general dramatic terms, in a symphonic structure. The opening is a busy crowd scene, followed by a *scherzo*, dancing, with the protests of a Capuchin, '*Ist das eine Armee von Christen? Sind wir Türken? Sind wir Antibaptisten?*' ('Is that an army of Christians? Are we Turks? Are we anti-baptists?'), represented by three trombones and a tuba, mocked by the crowd. A slow section reflects the camp asleep, to be woken in a final section by a trumpet call to rouse the camp and a final march.

Hakon Jarl, the third of Smetana's Gothenburg symphonic poems, was completed in 1861. It is based on the Danish poet Oehlenschläger's first tragedy, dramatising the activities of Hakon Jarl, a tenth century Viking warrior, Earl of Lade, for 25 years tyrannical ruler of Norway, where he had seized power in conjunction with Harald Bluetooth, killing Harald Greycloak. Hakon Jarl was eventually killed by his slave and friend, Tormod Kark, while hiding from his enemies. Oehlenschläger's play deals with the conflict between Hakon Jarl, a believer in the old Norse gods, and the Christian, Olaf, who was to defeat him. The first section, marked *Andante energico, non troppo lento*, depicts the sorrows of the Christian people and the Christian leadership of Olaf, followed by a harp cadenza. This leads to an *Allegro molto*, and a *Maestoso grandioso*, depicting the attack by Olaf and his triumph. The work ends with an *Andante religioso*, representing Christian victory, while Hakon Jarl's defeat is remembered.

The *Festive Symphony, Op. 6*, was written in 1854 at a time when nationalist hopes ran particularly high. The Emperor married Elisabeth of Bavaria on 24 April, and Smetana designed his symphony as a tribute to a monarch who was expected to take this occasion to have himself crowned in Bohemia. The composer asked permission to dedicate the work to the Emperor, but received no reply.

The work, in any case, in spite of its occasional use of the *Austrian Hymn*, is not of the overtly patriotic kind that the occasion of a royal wedding might demand. Three of the four movements make use of the Imperial anthem, a thematic element that could hardly prove acceptable to those imbued with the spirit of Czech nationalism. Smetana

himself in 1863 began the custom of playing only the *Scherzo*, the movement that lacks Hapsburg connotations, and this practice was to continue as the *Austrian Hymn* acquired even less pleasing political associations.

Keith Anderson

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra



Photo: Peter Brenkus

The Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra was established in 1949 by the esteemed conductors, Václav Talich and Ludovít Rajter. Other chief conductors who have played an instrumental role in the Orchestra's musical evolution include Tibor Frešo, Ladislav Slovák, Libor Pešek, Vladimír Verbitsky, Bystrík Režucha, Aldo Ceccato, Ondrej Lenárd, Jiří Bělohávek, Vladimír Válek, Peter Feranec, Emmanuel Villaume, James Judd, Leoš Svárovský, Rastislav Štúr and Petr Altrichter. In addition, the Orchestra has performed under the batons of some of the world's greatest conductors including Claudio Abbado, Sergiu Celibidache, Christoph von Dohnányi, Mariss Jansons, Neeme Järvi, Riccardo Muti and Kirill Kondrashin, to name a few, as well as composers such as Krzysztof Penderecki and Aram Khachaturian.

The Slovak Philharmonic has made numerous recordings and has toured extensively throughout the world, and in April 2019 it will be led by Rastislav Štúr in the concert cycle Kontrapunkt-Konzerte at the Cologne Philharmonic in Germany, and will also perform Mahler's *Symphony No. 3* in Oman under the baton of Emmanuel Villaume. www.filharmonia.sk

Leoš Svárovský



Photo: Tomáš Hulík

Leoš Svárovský studied flute and conducting at the Academy of Music in Prague as the last student of the renowned professor Václav Neumann. He started his career at the National Theatre in Prague as assistant to Zdeněk Košler and subsequently went on to hold principal positions with the Prague Chamber Opera, the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra Ostrava, the Brno Philharmonic, the Žilina State Chamber Orchestra, the Czech Chamber Philharmonic Pardubice and the Prague State Opera. During 2011–18 he was principal guest conductor of the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra. Today, he is the principal conductor of the Central Aichi Symphony Orchestra, Nagoya. Svárovský is a regular guest at various important

music festivals in the Czech Republic and abroad. His engagements in the forthcoming concert season include concert tours in Germany, Korea, Switzerland, Austria and Japan, among others. His discography contains more than 24 albums with several different record companies from around the world. www.leossvarovsky.com

The symphonic poems Smetana wrote during his stay in Sweden were composed during a pivotal time in his life. Financial prospects at first seemed better in Gothenburg than in his native country, while the dual influences of Berlioz and Liszt were informing the direction of his music. *Richard III* is not a programmatic drama, but focuses instead on the haunting scene before the Battle of Bosworth in Shakespeare's play. *Wallenstein's Camp* is symphonically structured, while *Hakon Jarl* dramatises the life of the tyrannical Viking warrior with memorable flair.

Bedřich
SMETANA
(1824–1884)

Swedish Symphonic Poems

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| 1 | Richard III, symphonic poem
after Shakespeare, Op. 11 (1858) | 14:13 |
| 2 | Wallenstein's Camp, symphonic poem
after Schiller, Op. 14 (1859) | 16:15 |
| 3 | Hakon Jarl, symphonic poem
after Oehlenschläger, Op. 16 (1861) | 17:20 |
| 4 | Festive Symphony, Op. 6 – III. Scherzo (1854) | 10:37 |

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Leoš Svárovský

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