



BEDŘICH SMETANA

Piano Works

Piano Sonata in G minor • Czech Dances, Books 1 and 2

Bogang Hwang



Romantic Piano • 11

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

Bedřich (Friedrich) Smetana was born in Leitomischl, Bohemia (now Litomyšl, Czech Republic), on 2 March 1824 and died in Prague on 12 May 1884.

His father, František (Franz) Smetana, the manager of a brewery on the estate of Count Waldstein, was married three times and had nine daughters and one son prior to Bedřich. A further seven children were born but only two sons and two daughters reached maturity. Bedřich received little systematic tuition in music but played the piano publicly from the age of six when he performed the overture to Auber's *La Muette de Portici*.

Later while at school in Pilsen (1840–43) he was well known for playing Liszt, Thalberg and Henselt. He had associated with the Kolářová family in Pilsen for some years and a romantic attachment developed with their daughter Kateřina around this time. Her piano teacher in Prague – Josef Proksch – became aware of Smetana's musical talents and agreed to teach him on credit.

Having received permission, with some misgivings, from his father, he moved to Prague to pursue in-depth music studies with Proksch in 1843. Financial hardship was alleviated when Johann Kittl, Director of the Prague Conservatory, recommended Smetana as resident music master for the family of Count Leopold Thun, where he remained until 1848. During this time his interests turned to composition, producing piano pieces including *Bagatelles* and *Impromptus*, and the Count's summer residence in Southwest Bohemia allowed him to appreciate the area's scenic beauty.

With Liszt's encouragement Smetana opened a private music school in Prague and in 1849 married Kateřina Kolářová who in turn became music teacher for the Thun family. They went on to have four daughters, only one of whom, Zofie, survived into adulthood. Times were difficult with the 1848 revolutionary period sweeping across many European countries. Smetana's sympathies lay with the revolutionary Bohemian patriots and his *March of the Prague Student Legion* and *Solemn Overture, Op. 4* caused him to be viewed with some suspicion. It proved difficult for Smetana to forge a musical livelihood in the prevailing atmosphere so he obtained teaching and the directorship of the Harmoniska Sällskap in Gothenburg, Sweden, where he and his family were based from 1856 to 1861. Following the untimely death of Kateřina in 1859, Smetana married his brother Karel Smetana's sister-in-law, Bettina (Barbora) Ferdinandiová, in 1860, with whom he had two daughters, Zdeňka and Božena, both of whom lived into adulthood.

Smetana's time in Sweden seems to have provided him with an opportunity to objectively evaluate his compositional style in relation to Liszt's and Wagner's New German School and three symphonic poems from this period, *Richard III*, *Wallenstein's Camp* and *Haakon Jarl* show that influence.

With the declaration of Italian Unification in 1861, Austria's hold on the constituent elements of its remaining empire began to loosen and Smetana's return to Prague in 1861 saw him deeply involved in the establishment of a national Czech voice in music. He began a series of eight operas with *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, completed in 1863 but first performed in 1866 at the Provisional Theatre in Prague, with Smetana conducting. *The Bartered Bride* was first performed later in the same year and proved a great success. Smetana did not aim just to promote simple folk material in these and later operas but rather to imbue them with the spirit of Czech national life, especially its country areas where German influences were less pronounced. But for Smetana Czech colourations did not extend to his musical language itself and accusations of Wagnerian tendencies were frequently made by more extreme Czech musical purists.

Smetana's cycle of six symphonic poems, *Má vlast* ('My Fatherland') appeared between 1874 and 1879 and mirrors the operas in establishing a distinctive Czech musical voice regarding programmatic content and sentiment. *Vyšehrad*, *Vltava (Moldau)*, *Šárka*, *Z českých luhů a hájů* ('From Bohemian Fields and Groves'), *Tábor*, and *Blaník*, are all concerned with establishing the Czech identity in various contexts and all carry clear programmes. Being easier to stage than the operas, they were performed widely, bringing Smetana and the cause of Czech nationalism into the broad European conscience. Smetana also contributed significant chamber music, songs and piano music.

Smetana mentioned the sound of ringing in his ears, a likely symptom of Syphilis, in July 1874. A gradual onset of deafness followed, such that he had to hand over conducting the premiere of his opera *Libuše* to Adolph Čech in 1881. In March 1884 a banquet celebrating Smetana's 60th birthday took place without him and worsening health meant that in April he had to be transferred to an asylum, where he died on 12 May 1884.

Smetana himself was fully aware of the role some of his works had begun to fill in Czech national life. He was increasingly feted in later years, a gala concert, on 4 January 1880, commemorated the 50th anniversary of his first appearance as a performer and in September of that year, Smetana's birthplace organised the ceremonial unveiling of a plaque in his honour. The 100th performance of *The Bartered Bride* on 5 May 1882 was such a popular event that a second '100th performance', had to be given.

Piano Sonata in G minor (1846)

In 1846 Smetana was taking composition lessons from Josef Proksch in Prague who explored the music of Liszt and Berlioz with him. At the home of Count Thun, Smetana met Robert and Clara Schumann, and showed them his *G minor Sonata*, but Clara's diaries indicate she detected too much Berlioz in it for her taste. Lisztian figuration is certainly encountered in much of Smetana's piano music although there is also a certain robust angularity and simple directness about Smetana's pianistic style.

I. Sostenuto – Allegro

This spacious movement commences slowly with a motto motif followed by a short introduction. The energetic and strongly expressed first subject then establishes G minor but with frequent modulatory shifting before the second subject entry in B flat major characterised by a jaunty high-spirited dotted rhythm. Following a brief slow allusion to the motto motif the development section commences concentrating on this motto and then switching to the second subject in a contrapuntal style section. Dramatic pauses herald the recapitulation section with the slow motto motif, first subject and second subject returning in G. A very extensive coda section reminisces on the motto motif and then presents the second theme in G minor contrasting with its previous appearance in G major.

II. Adagio

The writing is sparse at times and when fuller, employs repeated chords to enrich the tone and give impetus in the Lisztian manner. Unheralded key-shifts also point to Lisztian influence and Smetana certainly wears his heart on his sleeve during this deeply romantic movement. A characteristic introduction, sweeping from bass to treble introduces the first main theme in E flat major. This moves rapidly from introspection to an elated derivative that travels stepwise from A major back down to E flat minor. A more agitated middle section follows before the main theme returns in the tonic key of E flat major.

III. Scherzo: Vivace

Smetana follows Beethoven scherzos quite literally here in their general puckish humour and their use of the old *Minuet and Trio* form. The harmonic language too is Beethovenian. Flecked with sudden silences and underpinned by an energetic three-in-a-bar rhythmic drive, the *Scherzo* section in B flat major maintains capricious high spirits while the *Trio* section again mirrors Beethoven with a less rhythmic landscape and a gentler mood before the *Scherzo* section returns.

IV. Finale: Molto vivace

This G minor movement follows Beethoven's *Sonata-Rondo* form with an ABACABA formal pattern. The main theme, A, is in a breathlessly agitated duple time, ever driving forward. It is based on the Czech folk song *S'il jsem proso na souvrati* ('I was sowing millet') and was re-used in tragic circumstances later in the *Finale* of Smetana's *Piano Trio in G minor*, Op. 15 dedicated to the memory of his eldest daughter Bedřiška who had died aged four. A fugue-like steadier second theme (B) then presents itself, which descends chromatically before the folk tune theme (A) returns in a high-pitched colouration. The music steadies itself again in section C, which reminisces on the first movement's second subject. The movement concludes with the return of themes A, B and A.

Czech Dances, Book 1 (1877)

Smetana wrote a variety of piano works during the 1840s and 1850s, but other interests then prevailed until the 1870s, when a few piano works appeared including two books of *Czech Dances*, the first inspired by Chopin *Mazurkas*, and the more heterogeneous *Book 2* informed by the retired teacher and amateur violinist Suchý who lived nearby, and also by the collection of Czech songs compiled by Karel Jaromír Erben. Smetana insisted on calling them *Czech* or *Bohemian Dances* to proclaim their origin, in contrast to Dvořák who used the generic title *Slavonic Dances*.

No. 1. Polka in F sharp minor

Smetana's *Non molto allegro* ('Not very fast') direction indicates a smooth polished cantabile sound suitable for salon and the front room rather than outdoors. An ABA form is used.

No. 2. Polka in A minor

Chopinesque decorative figures shimmer brilliantly across the monothematic structure as this balletic vision unfolds.

No. 3. Polka in F major

This high spirited, enticingly tuneful work, mixes humour in the outer two *Allegro* sections with a disarmingly attractive slower middle section in D flat major.

No. 4. Polka in B flat major

Two versions of the brilliant and dramatic middle section are available (the second slightly longer version is heard here). The slow rather wistful outer sections contrast acutely with it.

Czech Dances, Book 2 (1879)

No. 1. Furiant

Characteristically for this swaggering dance, the rhythmic three-in-a-bar is infused throughout with hemiolas, which give a contrasted two-beat effect. The main theme appears three times interspersed by contrasted episodes.

No. 2. Slepíčka ('Little Hen')

The charming arrangement of this dance is full of humour. In particular, three-beat bars impose themselves into the two-beat canvas and sparkling passage-work enlivens the theme.

No. 3. Oves ('Grain Dance')

This elegant triple-metre dance never strays too far from A flat major with the exception of one joyful outburst in B major where energy breaks through. Smetana indicates that the folk-song theme used throughout is five bars long.

No. 4. Medvěd ('Bear Dance')

Three main themes dominate this evocative triple-beat character work in C major – the heavy Bear theme, the sprightly puckish theme that follows and an attractive *pastorelle* theme, developed in the treble, *dolcissimo*.

No. 5. Cibulíčka ('Little Onion')

The initial G major main melody comprising rising and falling thirds permeates the whole of this gentle triple-beat canvas. It undergoes numerous variations, including an alluring waltz transformation, which appears once quietly and once triumphantly.

No. 6. Dupák ('Stamping Dance')

The wild duple-beat *vivacissimo* stamping theme, a rising chromatic scale in D major marked *martellato*, alternates with a smoother and slower rising and falling melody in B flat major that Smetana marks *Dudáká. Pastorelle* ('Bagpipes. Pastoral').

No. 7. Hulán ('Lancer')

Smetana provides five versions of this simple A major folk melody, a song of longing for an absent soldier. The second is especially taxing for the pianist with left-hand duplets against right-hand partial-triplets of the utmost delicacy.

No. 8. Obkročák ('Stepping Dance')

Starting demurely, the settings of this folk melody, with its echoes of Haydn's *Symphony No. 104*, gradually increase in intensity and vigour.

No. 9. Sousedská ('Neighbour's Dance')

Smetana divides this dance into three main sections, the first in B major, the second in G major, with contrasting material, and the third in B major again. Permeating the whole dance are sudden shifts of mood from elegantly formal to energetic.

No. 10. Skočná

The listener can clearly discern this furiously effervescent dance's two alternating sections. The first with pungent toccata-like semiquavers and two main themes, the second with gentler quaver movement. Smetana used this material years before in *The Bartered Bride*.

Rodney Smith



Bogang Hwang



South Korean pianist Bogang Hwang graduated from the Sunhwa Arts High School, where she had won the excellence performance award for three consecutive years, and was a recipient of the Sunhwa Piano Society Scholarship, before completing her undergraduate studies with Ick-Choo Moon at Seoul National University. She is currently studying at the Colburn School Conservatory of Music with Fabio Bidini. She has participated in numerous prestigious competitions, including the Queen Elisabeth Competition and Los Angeles International Liszt Competition. Festival appearances include Ravinia Festival, Wideman Spring Festival, Laguna Beach Music Festival and Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. Hwang made her debut at the Walt Disney Concert Hall performing Prokofiev's *Second Piano Concerto* with the Colburn Orchestra under Lionel Bringuier. She also performed Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5* with the Pasadena Symphony under Nicholas McGegan. An active chamber musician, she is a founding member of Sonarsix, with the ensemble named as Colburn Artists, and Bronze Medallists in the 2022 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, and is also a founding member of Trio Caspar, the inaugural Colburn Conservatory's Honors Chamber Ensemble.

Regarded as the father of Czech music Bedřich Smetana was a pioneer in developing a national style that culminated in his popular symphonic cycle *Má vlast*. Composed after he had become deaf the *Czech Dances* are Smetana's last major piano works. Sparkling with distinctive character and inventiveness *Book 1* elevates the humble polka to the level Chopin achieved with his mazurkas, while *Book 2* was inspired by the old Moravian and Bohemian dances played to Smetana by his neighbour, a local amateur violinist. Coloured with Lisztian harmonic richness, the *Piano Sonata in G minor* combines Romantic expressiveness with puckish good humour.

Bedřich SMETANA (1824–1884)

Piano Sonata in G minor (1846)	30:06	Book 2 (1879)	43:02
1 I. Sostenuto – Allegro	11:15	9 No. 1. Furiant	5:29
2 II. Adagio	9:12	10 No. 2. Slepíčka ('Little Hen')	3:04
3 III. Scherzo: Vivace	4:02	11 No. 3. Oves ('Grain Dance')	5:35
4 IV. Finale: Molto vivace	5:37	12 No. 4. Medvěd ('Bear Dance')	3:33
České tance ('Czech Dances')		13 No. 5. Cibulíčka ('Little Onion')	5:19
Book 1 (1877)	13:17	14 No. 6. Dupák ('Stamping Dance')	3:25
5 No. 1. Polka in F sharp minor	3:30	15 No. 7. Hulán ('Lancer')	5:07
6 No. 2. Polka in A minor	2:36	16 No. 8. Obkročák ('Stepping Dance')	2:59
7 No. 3. Polka in F major	3:32	17 No. 9. Sousedská (‘Neighbour’s Dance’)	4:52
8 No. 4. Polka in B flat major	3:39	18 No. 10. Skočná	3:39

Bogang Hwang, Piano

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