

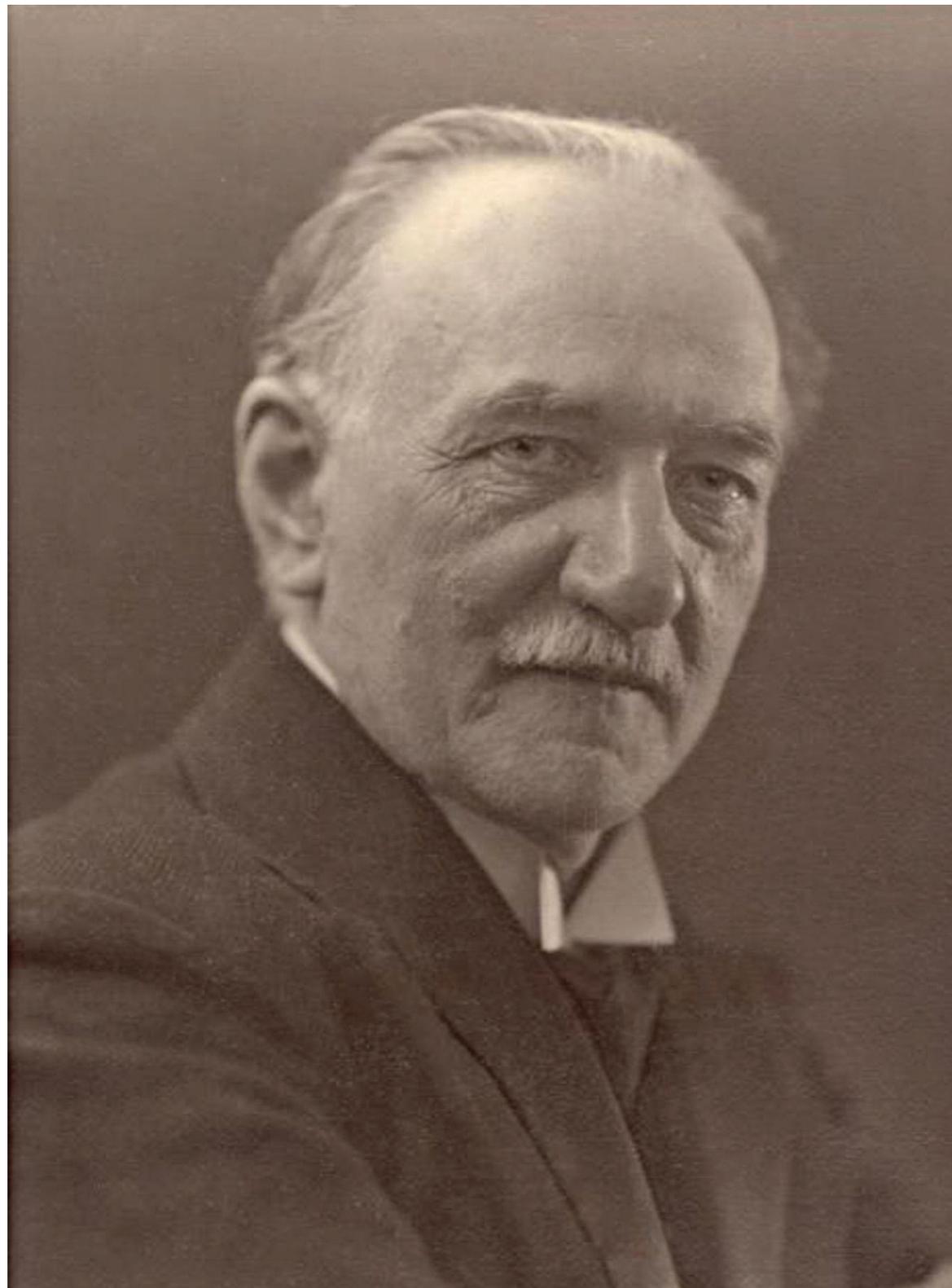


Josef Bohuslav
FOERSTER

Symphony No. 2
Cyrano de Bergerac

Hradec Králové
Philharmonic
Orchestra

Marek Štilec



Josef Bohuslav Foerster (1859–1951)

Symphony No. 2 • Cyrano de Bergerac

Josef Bohuslav Foerster was born in Prague on 30 December 1859. His father Josef taught at the Prague Conservatoire (where his pupils included the future composer of operetta Franz Lehár), while his brother Viktor (1869–1915) was an artist and designer. Foerster studied at the Prague Organ School, then after graduation was appointed organist at St Vojtěch Church, in succession to Antonín Dvořák. Foerster also had close contact with Bedřich Smetana and received guidance from such artists as Tchaikovsky and Grieg. From 1884 he found work as a critic, in which capacity he achieved distinction throughout much of his subsequent career. In 1888 he married the soprano Berta Lautererová (1869–1936) and they moved to Hamburg where he continued work as a critic, and she was engaged at the Staatsoper. It was here that Foerster met Gustav Mahler, like him a German-speaking Bohemian, and the two enjoyed a lasting friendship. The couple duly went with Mahler to Vienna in 1903, where they stayed until returning to Prague in 1918 with the advent of the Czechoslovak Republic that October.

Teaching thereafter at the university and conservatoire in Prague, Foerster helped to guide the musical fortunes of his country over its first two decades. Criticised by some of the more nationalistic cultural figures for having spent much of his time in German-speaking countries, he was nonetheless respected for his knowledge across the spectrum of music history as for his mastery of compositional technique. Born in the year that Wagner completed *Tristan und Isolde* and dying in the year that Boulez began his first book of *Structures*, he was aware of new developments without advocating or condemning them. In 1946 he was recognised as a National Composer, but neither this nor the respect shown him by the communist authorities from 1948 could alter his music's eclipse after his death in Nový Vestec on 29 May 1951.

The length of Foerster's composing career is reflected in the extent of his output, which runs to almost 200 numbered works and takes in all the major genres. Along with 350 songs and six operas, he left five symphonies and numerous shorter orchestral works, several concertos, chamber music with five string quartets and three piano trios, and a fair body of piano music with various cycles as well as collections and anthologies. Sacred and liturgical choral music likewise features prominently, his writing for which demonstrates a profound knowledge of the contrapuntal technique of Palestrina. A pivotal figure in what was a golden age for Czech music, at the heart of Foerster's creativity was a conviction that music, and all art in general, was an expression of the beauty of the human soul, which is reflected in whatever he wrote.

The two works that are featured here constitute a plausible overview of Foerster's orchestral output, with representative instances taken from his symphonic output and the programmatic – or at least illustrative – music that had early on become a mainstay of his creative thought.

Having established his credentials in the genre with his *First Symphony* (Naxos 8.574336), Foerster increased his ambitions accordingly when writing its successor. Composed during 1892–93 then premiered in Prague the following year, this *Second Symphony* is dedicated to the memory of his sister Marie (who had died in 1890) – which likely explains the sombre quality that informs what might otherwise have become a 'pastoral' symphony written in the same key, F major, as Beethoven's *Sixth* and, moreover, Dvořák's *Fifth* symphonies.

The opening movement begins with a warmly ruminative theme for woodwind and horns, soon taken up by strings and building to a brief climax then heading into a more plaintive theme with woodwind once again to the fore. The solo horn leads into a development that focusses for much of its length on the second theme, before it heads to a forceful climax on the first theme. This subsides into a judiciously altered reprise, both themes now even more felicitously scored, then a coda that deftly underlines the essentially inward nature of this music as it arrives at its serene conclusion. Emerging on lower strings, the slow movement centres on its processional, chorale-like melody whose sombreness ensures a funereal cast. Various solo woodwinds attempt to lighten the discourse, while the strings (initially heard muted) build to a climax of unforced eloquence. The main theme resumes much as it was before and gradually reaches a culmination, with brass to the fore, of considerable tragedy, after which, the music sinks back resignedly into the depths from which it had emerged.

Contrast is immediately provided with the *scherzo*, its main theme exuding a nonchalance which assumes greater resolve as it unfolds. This is offset by a central trio whose capering theme takes on unexpected gravitas when it reveals its proximity to the 'chorale' from the previous movement, though this disruption proves short-lived as the earlier theme blithely resumes its course to a decisive close. It remains for the finale to draw matters together as it launches with a purposeful theme whose pivoting between the ominous and affirmative sets the course for what follows. A second theme returns to the inward manner of hitherto, while the development is notable for introducing an almost theatrical element – hence the presence of solo cello then violin – into the discourse. Although its main themes are duly brought back as part of a varied reprise, it becomes evident that the composer is intent on ensuring unity across this work. This he achieves with a heightened return to the theme with which it began, transformed into a fervent and (almost) triumphal apotheosis.

Completed a decade later and first performed at Prague's Rudolfinum on 3 March 1905 by Oskar Nedbal with the Czech Philharmonic, *Cyrano de Bergerac* quickly became Foerster's most successful orchestral work and indicates the popularity of Edmond Rostand's romantic comedy at this time. Conceived as an autonomous work and not intended as incidental music for any staging, Foerster's suite is subtitled 'Five Symphonic Images' that amply reflects the nature of its conception, yet each of its five pieces is related to a specific place in the drama.

Representing the end of Act I, when the military cadet Cyrano covertly declares his love for his distant cousin Roxane, the first piece starts as an equable dialogue between cello and oboe, with other woodwind emerging as the music gains in ardour then subsides on lower strings. From here it returns to the earlier mood, cello again to the fore, but a more restive element is prescient for what follows. Taking place near the start of Act II, where Roxane commends Cyrano for his bravery in the fracas the night before, the second piece has the character of an intermezzo, its halting inwardness accentuated by writing for divided strings with woodwind here adding a bittersweet note before an anguished close. Representing an exchange between Cyrano and his would-be rival De Guiche near the close of Act III, the third piece unfolds as a *scherzo*, its animated introduction setting in motion a suave waltz-like theme which duly combines with the livelier music for a sequence that vividly evokes its theatrical context.

Taking place at the end of the Act III, with Cyrano, Roxanne and De Guiche involved in a confrontation rather at cross-purposes, the fourth piece is also the most extended – alternating between the energetic and the expressive as it evokes the climactic action of this drama. Just before mid-point, harp introduces insinuating music on woodwind and upper strings, and this is gradually fused with the previous unrest before a close of suffused longing. Representing the final scene of the play, toward the close of Act V, the fifth piece serves as a conclusion to the drama as a whole in terms of recalling ideas from earlier in the suite; so bringing to its climax the key relationship of the play. The ending is hence one of resignation informed by no little regret; the music wending its way to a limpid close when Cyrano's love for Roxane can, at last, be made explicit and he dies with at least that aspiration having been fulfilled.

Richard Whitehouse

Hradec Králové Philharmonic Orchestra



The Hradec Králové Philharmonic Orchestra has borne its name since the establishment of the Czech Republic in 1993. It follows the tradition of a professional municipal orchestra founded in 1978, which achieved the status of a state symphony orchestra in 1987. The orchestra underwent significant artistic development under František Vajnar and Andreas Sebastian Weiser. Kaspar Zehnder has served as principal conductor since the 2018–19 season. The orchestra has performed in major European concert halls including the Grosser Musikvereinssaal in Vienna, Gewandhaus Leipzig and KKL Luzern. It has appeared at leading festivals such as Prague Spring and Smetana Litomyšl, and toured Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Austria, Spain and Switzerland. The orchestra's artistic quality is reflected in recordings for Czech and international labels, Czech Television and Czech Radio. Since 2005, it has organised the Music Forum Hradec Králové, a contemporary music festival broadcast by Czech Radio. The orchestra also focuses on blending musical genres and presenting crossover concerts. www.fhk.cz

Marek Štilec



Czech conductor Marek Štilec is known as an interpreter of Classical orchestral repertoire and is a specialist in Czech Romantic and contemporary music. He has collaborated with orchestras the world over, including the New World Symphony, Ulster Orchestra, London Classical Soloists, Orchestra of the Swan, Berlin Camerata, Kammerphilharmonie Graz and Sinfonietta Bratislava. A prolific recording artist, he has made over 30 albums for labels including Naxos, ArcoDiva, cpo and Supraphon. In the field of historically informed performance Štilec has collaborated with ensembles including Czech Ensemble Baroque and Ensemble 18+. He is also the founder of the Wranitzky Kapelle and artistic director of Academy Prague Mannheim with Das Kurpfälzische Kammerorchester Mannheim. He attended the masterclasses of conductor Leonid Grin at the International Järvi Academy for Conducting, and also taken masterclasses with Michael Tilson Thomas, Jorma Panula and Gerd Albrecht. Since 2020 he has been the permanent principal choirmaster of the Czech Boys' Choir, Boni Pueri. www.arcodiva.cz/en/agency/instrumental-soloists/marek-stilec

Josef Bohuslav Foerster was a pivotal figure in Czech musical history and a lifelong friend of fellow German-speaking Bohemian, Gustav Mahler. Foerster's *Symphony No. 2*, dedicated to the memory of his sister, Marie, achieves a satisfying unity, with its sombre qualities eloquently transformed into a fervent apotheosis. *Cyrano de Bergerac* was Foerster's most successful orchestral piece and is a perfect example of his late-Romantic finesse. Conceived as an autonomous work not intended as incidental music, its 'five symphonic images' each relates to a specific place in the drama.

Josef Bohuslav
FOERSTER
(1859–1951)

	Symphony No. 2 in F major, Op. 29 (1892–93)	35:44
1	I. Allegro moderato	10:56
2	II. Andante sostenuto	7:56
3	III. Allegro	5:33
4	IV. Allegro con brio	11:19
	Cyrano de Bergerac, Op. 55 (1903)	31:47
5	I. Andante con moto	6:35
6	II. Andante sostenuto	3:24
7	III. Allegro – Tempo di Valse	6:01
8	IV. Allegro deciso	9:55
9	V. Andante sostenuto	5:52

Hradec Králové Philharmonic Orchestra
Marek Štílec

Recorded: 25 5–7, 26 8 9, 27 1 2 and 28 3 4 March 2024
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