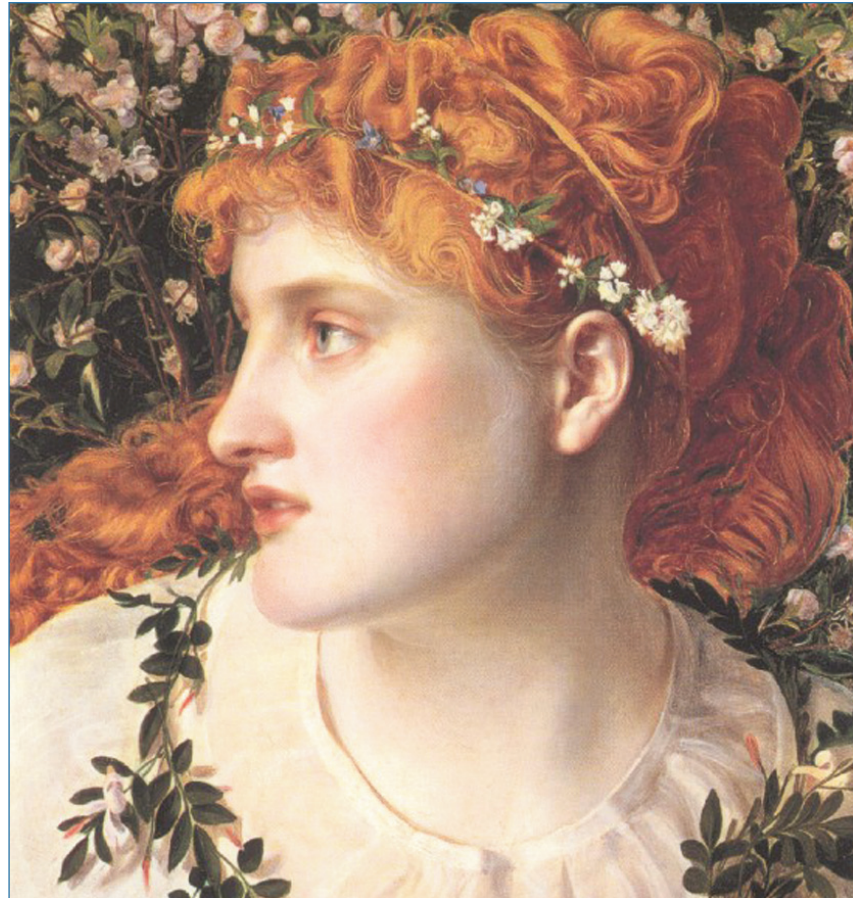


Josef Bohuslav  
**FOERSTER**  
Symphony No. 1  
Festive Overture • From Shakespeare  
Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra  
Marek Štilec



## Josef Bohuslav Foerster (1859–1951) Festive Overture • Symphony No. 1 • From Shakespeare

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 such as is reflected in whatever he wrote.

The three works that are featured here offer a viable overview of Foerster's orchestral output, with representative examples drawn from his occasional music, his symphonic output and the programmatic – or at least illustrative – music which was a mainstay of his creative thought.

*Festive Overture* – more literally *Festive Prelude* – was composed for the opening of the new theatre at Královské Vinohrady near Prague in 1907 and recalls several equally majestic such pieces written by Smetana. A proclamatory gesture on timpani precedes a dramatic theme for full orchestra, which is afforded contrast with its warmly expressive successor for woodwind and strings. These are duly combined in an intensive as well as resourceful development that leads into a truncated reprise of the themes previously stated. From here, the music gradually and confidently builds towards an expansive peroration – then, after an unexpected and very 'theatrical' pause, the first theme eloquently reappears to bring about the stirring conclusion. The whole piece fulfils its remit with an expressive impact out of all proportion to its length.

Among his earliest acknowledged large-scale pieces, Foerster's *First Symphony* was written during 1887–88 and premiered two years later, though it remained unpublished in his lifetime. The period of its composition was affected by memories of his mother's death as well as an illness that compelled Foerster to interrupt work just prior to starting the finale. In the event, any overly personal aspects are subsumed into what is a 'darkness to light' trajectory typical of 19th-century symphonism as well as the mid-Romantic era from out of which this piece emerged.

The first movement begins with a ruminative introduction that soon makes way for the main *Allegro* – its lively and suave initial theme finding contrast in the ingratiating theme, with its piquant scoring for woodwind, that ensues. What follows is essentially a paraphrase on these themes rather than a development as such, but it fulfils its role in a formal design which

then revisits its main themes on the way to a brief coda that wraps up matters in decisive fashion – albeit with the tersest of allusions to the introduction at its close. The second movement finds the composer at his most characteristic, its lyrical main theme drawing woodwind and strings into a wistful dialogue that does not so much evolve as change incrementally in harmony and texture as it proceeds on towards a conclusion with horns and lower strings gently to the fore.

The third movement is poised between scherzo and intermezzo – its initial theme abounding in characterful writing for woodwind, and its central trio denoted by stealthy fugal writing for strings as is soon drawn back into the earlier theme before this reaches a surprisingly forceful close. The final movement is much the most animated of the work, as is immediately evident from the restless theme which sets it in motion. A second theme features lively contributions from woodwind over pizzicato strings, with both these ideas drawn into a compact if eventful development which additionally alludes to the work's opening before heading into an altered reprise. The coda builds on that earlier allusion to the work's slow introduction, making it the basis of an apotheosis whose brevity is nonetheless equal to ensuring a determined send off.

From his earliest years, Foerster was a devotee of the theatre (indeed, at one stage he actively contemplated a theatrical career) – as is evident from his six operas, several melodramas and numerous incidental music for plays. His admiration for Shakespeare found direct expression with *From Shakespeare*, a suite he wrote during 1908–10 and whose four movements embody the representation of characters from four of The Bard of Avon's dramas. Not that this entails retelling of the action – rather, it is the dramatic essence of these protagonists that is evoked.

A calm and atmospheric *Introduction*, replete with elegant woodwind writing, sets the scene for the opening movement and its evocation of Perdita – the tragic heroine of *The Winter's Tale*. Her character is indicated with felicitous solos from violin and cor anglais, together with an underlying eloquence as amply confirms her nobility of character in the face of unwarranted humiliation and hardship. The second movement is an intermezzo that evokes Viola who, as the central figure of *Twelfth Night*, is denoted with writing by turns capricious and impulsive. Incidentally, this was one of Shakespeare's most popular plays outside of English-speaking countries and Foerster duly provided incidental music for a production at Prague's National Theatre in 1922, followed by a comparable score for the staging of *Julius Caesar* in 1927.

The highpoint of this piece comes almost inevitably in the third movement with its portrait of Lady Macbeth, from what has long been known as 'The Scottish Play'. Not that Foerster's evocation is without elements of pathos as it builds with due inevitability to a sombre climax – after which, the music subsides to its fatalistic close. It only remains for the final movement to transform this mood with its mingled evocations of Katherina (Kate) and Petruchio – main protagonists in *The Taming of the Shrew* – whose fractious dialogue eventually succumbs to the workings of Eros, which might well have been thought the dominant character all along. Foerster relates this in musical terms through some of his most resourceful orchestration, with a keen sense of dramatic timing as to make one regret he never attempted an operatic setting.

**Richard Whitehouse**

### **Marek Štílec**

Czech conductor Marek Štílec 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 discs for labels including Naxos, ArcoDiva, cpo and Supraphon. In the field of historically informed performance Štílec has collaborated with ensembles including Czech Ensemble Baroque and Ensemble 18+. He is also the founder of the Wránitzky 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](http://www.arcodiva.cz/en/agency/instrumental-soloists/marek-stilec)

## Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra

The Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra dates back to the first half of the 20th century and the founding of a radio orchestra in Ostrava, which saw performances with Hindemith, Prokofiev and Stravinsky. In 1954 the orchestra was officially established as the Ostrava Symphony Orchestra and quickly rose to prominence, culminating with its first international tour five years after its founding. Many world-renowned conductors and soloists have made their artistic contribution to the orchestra since then, including Sir Charles Mackerras, Karel Ančerl, Mariss Jansons, Sviatoslav Richter and Rudolf Firkušný, to name a few. Within the last five years the orchestra has toured extensively within Europe, as well as in China and South Korea. It has performed at such prestigious venues as the Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Musikverein Vienna, the Berlin Philharmonie, NOSPR Katowice, Gasteig Munich and numerous others. Petr Popelka is the principal guest conductor as of the 2020–21 season, and regular guest conductors include Christian Arming, Daniel Raiskin, Risto Joost, Gabriel Babeselea and Lukasz Borowicz. The prominent Russian conductor Vassily Sinaisky is the orchestra's artistic director and principal conductor. [www.jfo.cz](http://www.jfo.cz)



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Josef Bohuslav Foerster was the successor to Dvořák as organist in Prague, a lifelong friend of Mahler, and a pivotal figure in Czech music, whose almost 200 compositions take in all the major genres. The three selected works here offer an overview of his orchestral music. Recalling several equally majestic pieces by Smetana, the arresting *Festive Overture* combines Czech flair with Viennese elegance, while *From Shakespeare* explores characterisation with warmth and resourceful orchestration. The early *Symphony No. 1 in D minor* offers a darkness-to-light trajectory suffused with rich mid-Romantic colours.

Josef Bohuslav  
**FOERSTER**  
(1859–1951)

**Symphony No. 1**  
**Festive Overture • From Shakespeare**

<b>1</b> Festive Overture, Op. 70 ('Slavnostní předehra') (1907)	<b>9:28</b>
Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 9 (1887–88)	<b>28:15</b>
<b>2</b> I. Adagio – Allegro con brio	<b>10:01</b>
<b>3</b> II. Andante sostenuto	<b>5:22</b>
<b>4</b> III. Allegretto scherzando	<b>3:56</b>
<b>5</b> IV. Allegro energico	<b>8:48</b>
From Shakespeare, Op. 76 ('Ze Shakespeara') (1908–10)	<b>26:14</b>
<b>6</b> Introduction: Andante moderato 'Zas, mrtvé postavy, mne oblétáte...'	<b>1:04</b>
<b>7</b> I. Perdita: Allegro scherzando	<b>7:12</b>
<b>8</b> II. Viola: Andante	<b>4:53</b>
<b>9</b> III. Lady Macbeth: Andante sostenuto	<b>5:37</b>
<b>10</b> IV. Katharina, Petruchio and Eros: Allegro energico	<b>7:19</b>

**Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**Marek Štílec**

Recorded: 6–7 January 2021 **1** **6**–**10**, 19 and 22 March 2021 **2**–**5** at the House of Culture Ostrava,  
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