



Smetana Má Vlast
Czech Philharmonic
Semyon Bychkov

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Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

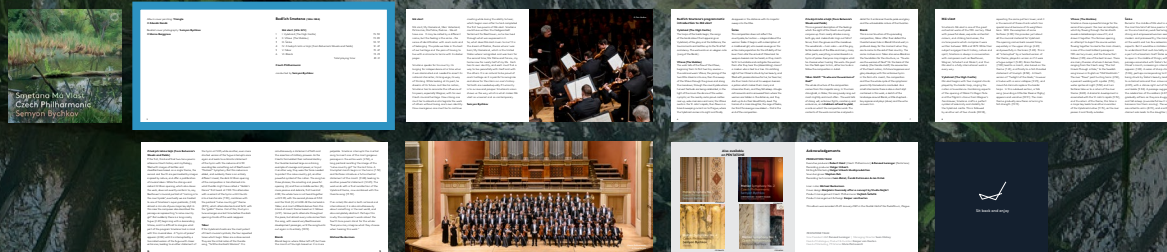
Má vlast (1874-1879)

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Total playing time: 81. 21

Czech Philharmonic

conducted by **Semyon Bychkov**



Má vlast

Má vlast, My Homeland, Mein Vaterland, Patria mia, Ma Patrie, Rodina... We all have one. It may be called by a different name, but the feeling is the same – the sense of identification with one’s roots and of belonging. The pride we take in the best of our heritage and the pain of having to live with and come to terms with its darker pages.

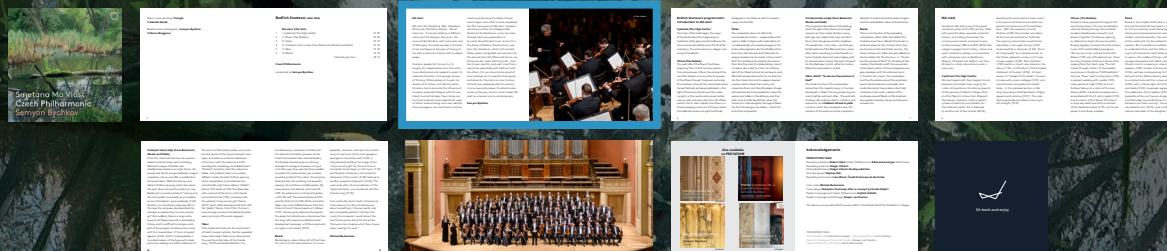
Smetana speaks for his country: its longing for independence at a time when it was dominated and needed to assert its national character, its language, its way of thinking. While looking at its past, he dreams of its future. Just like his nation, Smetana has to reconcile the influence of his peers, especially Wagner, with his own Czech musical heritage. How strong one must be to absorb and integrate the work of others without losing one’s own identity. How courageous one must be to continue

creating while losing the ability to hear, which began soon after he had completed the first two poems of Má vlast. Smetana could have written the Heiligenstadt Testament for Beethoven, as he too lived through what was expressed in it. So, what does Má vlast mean to me? It is the dream of Rodina, Russia where I was born; My Homeland, which is the United States where I emigrated and was born for the second time; Ma Patrie and France, my home now for nearly half of my life. Each has its own identity, and each must find a way to live peacefully with itself and with the others. It is as natural to be proud of one’s heritage as it is painful to recognize and atone for the stains on one’s history. Yet both are needed equally if humanity is to survive and prosper. Smetana’s vision shows us the way, which is what makes Má vlast so universal and so contemporary.

Semyon Bychkov



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Bedřich Smetana's programmatic introduction to *Má vlast*

Vyšehrad (The High Castle)

The harps of the bards begin; the songs of the bards about the happenings on Vyšehrad, of the glory and the brilliance, the tournaments and battles up to the final fall and decay. The work ends on an *elegiac note* (song of the Bards).

Vltava (The Moldau)

The work tells of the flow of the Vltava, beginning from its first two tiny sources — the cold and warm Vltava, the joining of the two little streams into one, then the sweep of the Vltava through the groves and along the meadows, through the countryside where harvest festivals are being celebrated; in the light of the moon the dance of the water-nymphs; on the nearby rocks proud castles rear up, wide mansions and ruins; the Vltava swirls in the St. John's rapids, then flows in a broad sweeping current on to Prague, where the Vyšehrad comes into sight and finally

disappears in the distance with its majestic sweep into the Elbe.

Šárka

This composition does not reflect the countryside, but *action* — a legend about the woman Šárka. It begins with a description of a maddened girl, who swears revenge on the entire male population for the infidelity of her lover. From afar the arrival of Ctirad and his weapon-bearers can be heard, as they march forth to humiliate and castigate the women. From afar they hear the (dissembling) cries of a maiden who is tied to a tree. On catching sight of her Ctirad is struck by her beauty, and filled with passionate love for her, he frees her; she then hands him and his weapon-bearers a potion which makes them merry and intoxicates them, and they fall asleep. A bugle call resounds and is answered from where the women are hidden in the distance, and they dash up to do their bloodthirsty deed. The horrors of a mass slaughter, the rage of Šárka, her thirst for revenge now slaked — that is the end of the composition.

Z českých luhů a hájů (From Bohemia's Woods and Fields)

This is a general description of the feelings which the sight of the Czech countryside conjures up. From nearly all sides a song both gay and melancholic rings out full of fervor, from the groves and the meadows. The woodlands — horn solos — and the gay, fertile lowlands of the Elbe and many, many other parts, everything is remembered in a hymn of praise. Everyone may imagine what he chooses when hearing this work—the poet has the field open to him, all he has to do is follow the composition in detail.

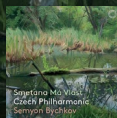
Tábor. Motif: "Ye who are the warriors of God!"

The whole structure of the composition comes from this majestic song. In the main stronghold, in Tábor, this song surely rang out most mightily and most often. The work tells of strong will, victorious fights, constancy and endurance, and **stubborn refusal to yield**, a note on which the composition ends. The contents of the work cannot be analyzed in

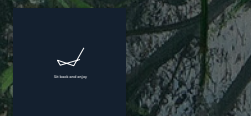
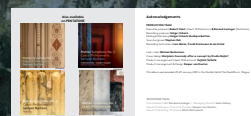
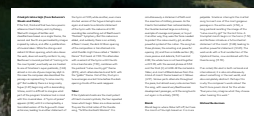
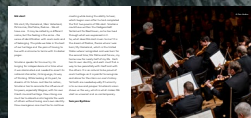
detail for it embraces Hussite pride and glory and the unbreakable nature of the Hussites.

Blaník

This is a continuation of the preceding composition, Tábor. After their defeat the Hussite heroes hide in Blaník hill and wait, in profound sleep, for the moment when they are to come to the aid of their country. The same motives as in Tábor also serve Blaník as the foundation for the structure, i.e. "Ye who are the warriors of God!" On the basis of this melody (the Hussite motif) the resurrection of the Czech nation, its future happiness and glory develops; with this victorious hymn in the form of a march, the composition and thus the whole cycle of the symphonic poems My Homeland is concluded. As a small intermezzo there is also a short idyll contained in this work, a sketch of the landscape around Blaník, a little shepherd-boy rejoices and plays (oboe) and the echo answers him.



Z českých luhů a hájů
Česká filharmonie
Semyon Bychkov



Má vlast

Smetana's *Má vlast* is one of the great orchestral works of the 19th century. Filled with powerful ideas, exquisite orchestral colours, and striking harmonies, the six tone poems which comprise it were written between 1874 and 1879. While their subject engages Czech history, nature and spirit, Smetana is always in conversation with composers such as Beethoven, Wagner, Schubert and Mozart, and thus *Má vlast* is a fully international work in every way.

Vyšehrad (The High Castle)

Má vlast begins with four magical chords played by the bardic harp, singing the nation into existence. Combining aspects of the opening of Mozart's *Magic Flute* and the Pilgrim's chorus from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, Smetana crafts a perfect symbol of solemnity and stolidity for the Vyšehrad castle. This is followed by another set of four chords (00:18),

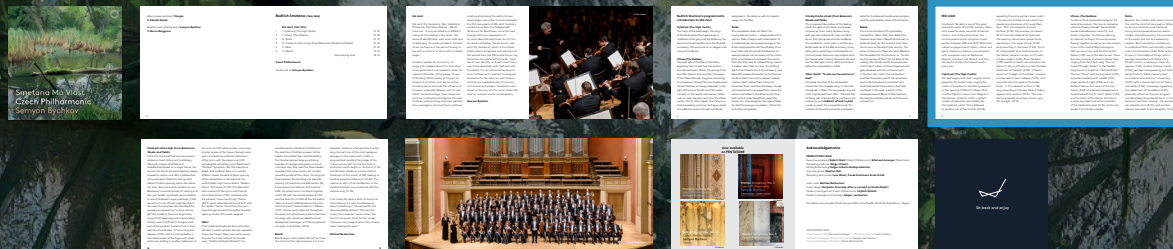
repeating the same pattern lower, and it is the second of these chords which has special sound because of its weightless bass. With the exception of some fanfares (2:00) this provides just about all the musical material for Vyšehrad. The opening comes back several times, exquisitely in the upper strings (2:49) and powerfully in the brass (3:40). This is all "interrupted" by a twisted version of the theme, played in unison as if it were a fugue subject (5:49). Brass fanfares (7:00) lead to a march, also based on the theme (7:41), and finally to a full-throated statement of triumph (8:58). A Czech version of "Twilight of the Gods," however intrudes with a sonic collapse (9:23), and mournful clarinets replace the bardic harps. In this subdued section, a folk song (sounding a little like Eleanor Rigby) appears and vanishes (10:51). The main theme gradually resurfaces returning to full strength (13:15).

Vltava (The Moldau)

Smetana chose a powerful image for the second tone poem: the river as metaphor, which by flowing through the land both reveals a kaleidoscopic view of it, and draws it together. The famous opening, an attempt to depict the source waters flowing together to create the main stream, is one of the most brilliant passages in 19th century music, and the theme that follows (1:03) one of the best known. There are many theories of where it derives from, ranging from the Czech song "The Cat Crawls Through a Hole," to the Swedish song known in English as "Old Stockholm." The river "flows" past hunting horns (2:52), a peasant wedding with a polka (3:51), water sprites at night (5:50) and horn fanfares take us to a return of the river theme (8:40). A dramatic development is associated with the St. John's rapids (9:32), and the return of the theme, this time in a major key leads to another invocation of the Vyšehrad motive (11:15), as the river passes it and finally subsides.

Šárka

Buried in the middle of *Má vlast* is one of the most brutal of all tone poems. While on the one hand any work featuring strong and empowered women seems modern and praiseworthy, the massacre at the work's end has few redeeming aspects. But it would be a mistake not to understand that such brutality is also a part of nationalism itself. Šárka seems to open in the middle of things, with a passage associated with Šárka's fury. Ctirad's march, increasing in intensity, appears (1:28). A series of sharp chords (3:06), perhaps corresponding to Ctirad's being struck by Šárka's beauty, lead to a clarinet solo and then a love song (4:03), with a climax right out of *Tristan und Isolde* (5:04). A passage suggesting the celebration of the soldiers (6:07), gradually softens as they are drugged and fall asleep (a wonderful low C in the bassoons has them snoring). The women are called to arms (8:19), and another clarinet solo leads to the slaughter (9:16).



Z českých luhů a hájů (From Bohemia's Woods and Fields)

If the first, third and final two-tone poems reference Czech history and mythology, filled with images of battles and steadfastness based on a single theme, the second and fourth are permeated by images inspired by nature, and offer a proliferation of musical ideas. While the strange and radiant G Minor opening, which also closes the work, does not exactly conform to, say, Beethoven's musical portrait of "coming into the countryside", eventually we are treated to one of Smetana's super-pastorals, (1:44) almost a minute of pure major key idyll. In this case the composer also described the passage as representing "a naïve country girl". But suddenly there is a long snarky fugue (2:47) beginning with a descending tritone, and it is difficult to imagine what part of the program Smetana had in mind with this musical idea. A "hymn of praise" appears (4:04) until it is interrupted by a truncated version of the fugue with closer entrances, leading to another statement of

the hymn at 5:05, while another, even more shorted version of the fugue interrupts once again and leads to a climatic statement of the hymn with the cadence at 6:50 sounding like something out of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony. But this cadence is elided, and suddenly there is an entirely different mood, the dark G Minor opening of the composition is transformed into what Dvořák might have called a "Goblin's Dance" first heard at 7:00. This alternates with a variant of the hymn until it bursts into a bacchanale (7:50), combines with the pastoral "naïve country girl" theme (8:55), which alternates back and forth with the "goblin" theme. Out of this, the hymn tune emerges one last time before the dark opening chords of the work reappear.

Tábor

If the Vyšehrad chords are the most potent of Czech musical symbols, the four repeated tones which begin *Tábor* are a close second. They are the initial notes of the Hussite song, "Ye Who Are God's Warriors". It is

simultaneously a statement of faith and the assertion of military prowess. As the Czechs formulated their national destiny the Hussites loomed large as a shining example of courage and power, or to put it another way, they were the force needed to protect the naïve country girl, another powerful symbol of the nation. The song has three phrases, the arresting and powerful opening (A) and then a middle section (B), more passive and delicate, first heard at 4:00; the whole tune is not heard together until 5:09, with the second phrase at 5:50 and the third (C) at 6:08. All the material in *Tábor*, and most of *Blaník* derives from this. A kind of march theme based on C follows (6:37). Various parts alternate throughout the piece, but almost every note comes from the song, with several very Beethovenian development passages, until the song bursts out again in its entirety (10:19).

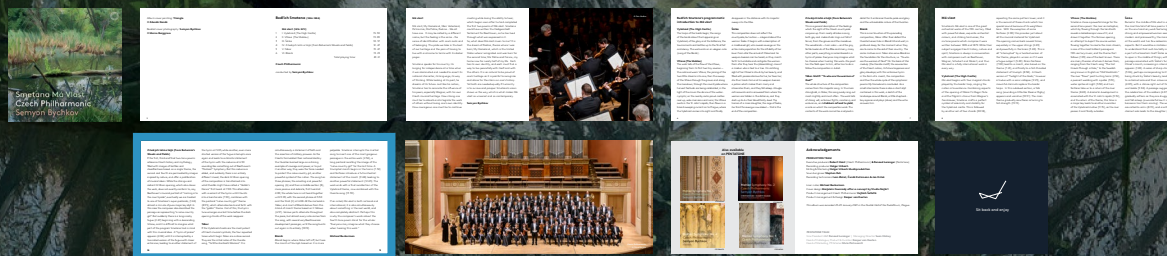
Blaník

Blaník begins where *Tábor* left off, but here the march of triumph based on C is more

palpable. Smetana interrupts the martial song to insert one of the most gorgeous passages in the entire work (2:34), a long pastoral recalling the image of the "naïve country girl" for the last time. A triumphal march begins in the horns (7:32) and fanfares introduce a full orchestral statement of the march (9:48) leading to another powerful statement (12:43). The work ends with a final recollection of the Vyšehrad theme, now combined with the Hussite song (13:39).

If as noted, *Má vlast* is both national and international, it is also simultaneously about something in the real world, and also completely abstract. Perhaps this is why the composer's words about the fourth tone poem stand for the whole: "Everyone may imagine what they choose when hearing this work."

Michael Beckerman





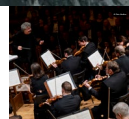
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Zajímavá místa
Česká Philharmonie
Semyon Bychkov

Program
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 Antonín Dvořák: *Česká suita*
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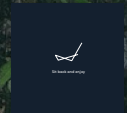
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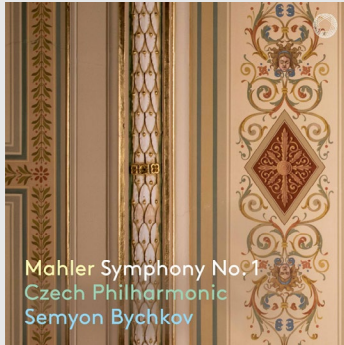


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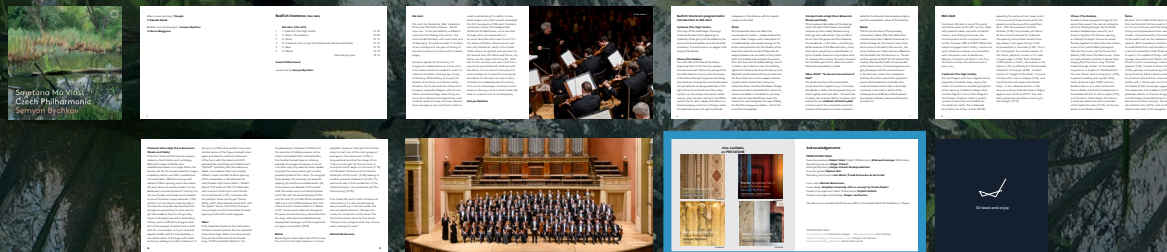
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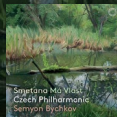
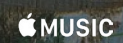
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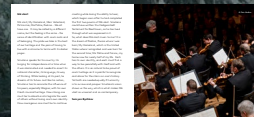


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