



Zdeněk FIBICH
Symphony No. 1
in F major
Impressions from
the Countryside

**Czech National
Symphony Orchestra
Marek Štilec**

Zdeněk Fibich (1850–1900)

Symphony No. 1 in F major, Op. 17 • Impressions from the Countryside, Op. 54

Zdeněk Fibich was born in Všebořice on 21st December 1850. His father was a forestry official and the composer's early life was spent on various wooded estates of the nobility. Educated at home by his mother up to the age of nine, he was sent to a gymnasium in Vienna for two years before attending a Czech-speaking school in Prague where he stayed until he was fifteen. After this he was sent to Leipzig where he remained for three years studying the piano with Ignaz Moscheles and composition with Salomon Jadassohn and Ernst Richter. Following a year in Paris, Fibich concluded his studies with Vinzenz Lachner in Mannheim. Fibich spent the next few years in Prague where he wrote his first opera *Bukovín*. At the age of 23 he married Růžena Hanušová and took up residence in Vilnius as a choirmaster. Having endured eleven unhappy months in the city, marked by the death of his son, Richard, on the day he was born, and of his sister-in-law, Anna Hanušová, who had come to Vilnius to care for the ailing Růžena, in August 1874 he returned to Prague where his wife died in October (Richard's twin sister, Elsa, died in 1876). In August 1875 Fibich married his late wife's older sister, the contralto Betty Hanušová, but left her in 1897 for his former student Anežka Schulzová. Their relationship was to be an important one artistically, as she undertook the librettos for all his later operas. Active as a writer and cultural commentator as well as composer, which former capacities led to considerable controversy concerning his posthumous reputation up until the First World War, Fibich remained in Prague until his death on 15th October 1900.

Among Fibich's numerous works are chamber music including two string quartets, piano trio, piano quartet and quintet for piano with strings and wind; three symphonies and several symphonic poems; seven operas including *Šárka* and *The Bride of Messina*, several melodramas including the large-scale trilogy *Hippodamia*, various liturgical pieces including a *Missa Brevis*, and perhaps as many as 600 piano pieces (composed during 1892–99) of which 376 were printed in four volumes and entitled *Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences* that served as a diary of his involvement with Schulzová, as well as providing a thematic resource that the composer was to mine extensively in his

operas as well as his *Second* and *Third Symphonies*.

Although Fibich's career overlapped with Smetana and Dvořák, he never came down firmly on the side either of Czech nationalism or of the New German school. During his years at Leipzig, he worked on two symphonies – one in E flat of which two movements have survived in short score, and one in G minor of which all that remains is the scherzo arranged for piano duet. His first extant symphony is that in F major which was begun in 1877, but not brought to its definitive form until 1883. This is undoubtedly the most stylistically conventional of Fibich's contributions to the genre, and has consequently failed to warrant the periodic revival enjoyed by its successors, though it more than fulfils the technical requirements expected of such a piece without threatening to become an overtly academic exercise.

The first movement begins arrestingly on tremolo strings, before easing into a pastoral dialogue for woodwind and strings that soon takes on a greater impetus as the whole orchestra is brought into play. Following a lively transition the second theme unfolds in much the same expressive vein, and with some evocative writing for harp, before heading to a vigorous coda with a repeated-note brass motif to the fore. This exposition is duly repeated, after which the development opens pensively with ruminative gestures from horn that initiate a methodical interplay on the themes already heard and which only gradually becomes more agitated in manner. It presently dies down on lower strings and timpani, the horn providing an understated link into the reprise, which unfolds much as before but now with a greater emotional fervour that makes possible the main theme's restatement in a surging peroration – the repeated-note motif now heard decisively on timpani.

The second movement is a scherzo whose outer sections are propelled along by its engaging polka rhythm, as woodwind and strings trade exchanges with no mean abandon. The trio section is more relaxed in its underlying manner, with some deftly contrapuntal writing for the strings along with a delectable transition on woodwind through to the scherzo music.

The third movement is marked '*alla romanza*', which no doubt explains the song-like quality of the initial theme on

upper woodwind that assumes a greater expressive gravity when it is taken up by strings and brass. Clarinets introduce a more flowing and folk-inflected idea, made more evocative when heard against divided strings, which leads into a heightened recall of the first theme then on to a poignant coda where the theme's main motif can be heard on cor anglais and pizzicato strings.

The fourth movement is launched with rushing strings, over which a festive theme is expounded on brass. This comes to an abrupt halt, whereon a contrastingly rhapsodic theme emerges on woodwind and strings before itself gaining in energy as the first theme is excitedly recalled at the start of an intensive development. This still makes space for its more relaxed successor, besides featuring some resourceful orchestration and duly heads into the climactic return of the main theme, now with a slightly smoother transition into the rhapsodic theme. This is also unfolded at greater length, making way for an arresting recall of the work's opening bars prior to the return of the main theme in a resounding apotheosis.

As with his older contemporaries, Fibich wrote a number of symphonic poems and programmatic orchestral works. One of the most appealing of these is the suite *Impressions from the Countryside*, composed during 1897–8 (just prior to the *Third Symphony*) and which consists of five movements that in themselves take on more overtly symphonic implications as they unfold. As what is effectively a symphonic suite, the piece therefore anticipates similarly conceived pieces by younger composers such as Novák, Ostrčil and Suk in its interplay of descriptive sections with

those of a more developmental character, and stands as arguably Fibich's most significant orchestral work other than the latter two of his symphonies.

Moonlight Night opens with dreamily evocative writing for strings that briefly opens out as the orchestration becomes fuller, before subsiding back into its initial repose. *Country Dance* is modelled on the *sousedská* and unfolds as a series of robust exchanges between strings and woodwind that make engaging play with the dance's characteristic underlying rhythm. *Highlands Ho* is set in motion with lilting music for horn and strings, soon taking on a rather more imposing manner of expression before it tails off towards a subdued close. *Fireside Talk* takes the guise of an intermezzo whose purposeful main theme is introduced by woodwind and strings, a brief pause bringing a contrasting idea which proceeds at much the same pace. After the brief return of the main theme, a further melody unfolds at a slower tempo on bassoon and lower strings, its ruminative quality seeming to affect the main theme whose final return is a little more hesitant than before. Finally, *Village Dance* gets going with a rather stern theme which finds contrast in the more openly expressive idea that ensues – the initial theme returning at greater length before it leads into what amounts to a development of the material already heard, and which is framed by forceful two-note chords from the whole orchestra. The main themes are then recalled, providing the impetus for a rapid coda that rounds off the whole suite in brusque and decisive terms.

Richard Whitehouse

Marek Štilec

Marek Štilec was born in Prague in 1985 and began his studies at the Prague Conservatoire in the violin class of Dana Vlachová. He studied conducting with Leoš Svárovský, graduating from the Prague Academy of Performing Arts. He works regularly with a number of orchestras, including the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra, Czech National Symphony Orchestra, Prague Symphony Orchestra, Prague Chamber Orchestra, Prague Philharmonia, Chamber Philharmonic Pardubice, Kammerphilharmonie Graz and the Berlin Camerata. He founded the Chamber Orchestra Quattro with which he has given dozens of concerts and has made a number of internationally successful recordings. He works with Czech Television and the Czech Radio and his recordings have also been broadcast by the BBC. He has attended the Leonid Grin master class at the Neeme Järvi Academy for Conductors, and has also taken part in master classes with Jorma Panula, Vladimir Kiradjev, Gerd Albrecht and Achim Holub. In March 2010 he undertook a study visit with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and its chief conductor Michael Tilson Thomas.

Czech National Symphony Orchestra

Celebrating its twentieth birthday in 2013, the Czech National Symphony Orchestra has gained a leading position among the top Czech and other European orchestras. Renowned for its versatility, each year the orchestra presents a broad programme ranging from classical music concerts to contemporary genre, film scores, jazz, and musicals. The CNSO also organizes the summer Prague Proms Festival. The orchestra takes pride in the several Gold awards received for its recordings, and in the Gustav Mahler Prize, awarded for its performances of Mahler's works. Other achievements include the prestigious worldwide representation contract with IMG Artists London, and the long-standing recording project in association with Tokyo Victor Entertainment. The Czech National Symphony Orchestra was established in 1993 by the trumpet-player Jan Hasenöhrl. A spiritual father at the birth of the CNSO was the legendary conductor Zdeněk Košler. In 1996 the American Paul Freeman was named Chief Conductor, followed in 2007 by Libor Pešek.



Marek Štělec Photo archives

Czech NSO Marek Štělec

Zdeněk Fibich's career overlapped those of his countrymen Smetana and Dvořák, but his music remained poised between the twin poles of Czech Nationalism and the New German School. His earliest surviving symphony is *No. 1 in F major, Op. 17*, completed in Prague in 1883. Whilst it is the most conventional of his three symphonies it is excellently proportioned and reveals the influence of Schumann on his developing art. *Impressions from the Countryside, Op. 54* is, in effect, a symphonic suite and was highly influential on the younger generation of Czech composers.



**Zdeněk
FIBICH**
(1850–1900)



Orchestral Works • 1

Symphony No. 1 in F major, Op. 17 36:45

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|---|---|-------|
| 1 | I. Allegro moderato | 16:14 |
| 2 | II. Scherzo: Allegro assai | 5:45 |
| 3 | III. Adagio non troppo (alla romanza) | 5:10 |
| 4 | IV. Finale – Allegro con fuoco e vivace | 9:33 |

Impressions from the Countryside, Op. 54 25:26

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| 5 | I. Moonlit Night (Měsíčná noc) | 2:56 |
| 6 | II. Country Dance (Sousedská) | 3:06 |
| 7 | III. Highlands Ho (Vzhůru) | 4:11 |
| 8 | IV. Fireside Talk (Na táckách) | 7:19 |
| 9 | V. Village Dance (Tanec v zeleni) | 7:51 |



**Czech National Symphony Orchestra
Marek Štělec**

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