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Vítězslav
NOVÁK
(1870–1949)

Orchestral Works • 1
South Bohemian Suite • Toman and the Wood Nymph

Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra
Marek Štilec

Vítězslav Novák (1870–1949)

Orchestral Works • 1

Vítězslav Novák was born in the Southern Bohemian town of Kamenice nad Lipou on the 5 December 1870, the eldest son of a doctor. His father died when he was only 12, thus leaving him with responsibility for the upkeep of his family. At the Gymnasium in Jindřichův Hradec (formerly Neuhaus), Novák became an able pianist and also began to compose his own music. His tendency was towards programme music, influenced by Mendelssohn then by Schumann and Grieg. He studied law at Prague University on a scholarship, while also concentrating on musical studies at the Conservatory from where he graduated in 1892 with his *Violin Sonata*. He maintained his piano studies for a further four years, also attending compositional courses at the University – not least with Dvořák – until 1895, when he left without taking his degree.

The connection with Dvořák proved highly profitable, however, in allowing Novák a further scholarship and also grant from Conservatory funds, along with an introduction to important publishers. He found something of an individual voice when he visited in 1896 the Moravian district of Valachia, whose folk music was to remain an abiding influence. He also pursued a deepening interest in this native artform during concert tours across Slovakia and Moravia, when he collected and analysed folk songs. In 1909 he was made a professor of composition at the Prague Conservatory and further honours followed, coupled with growing popular and critical acclaim. In 1912 he married a former pupil, the singer Marie Prášková, and assumed additional administrative duties when Czechoslovakia became an independent nation in 1918.

Despite these undoubted successes, Novák endured a measure of professional setbacks during the inter-war period – notably as a consequence of the schism initiated by the polemics of the cultural (latterly political) ideologue Zdeněk Nejedlý and his advocacy of Smetana as the true embodiment of Czech music as opposed to the Germanic compromises undertaken by Dvořák and his followers. Nor did reception of his operas from this period equal that of his orchestral works, leaving Novák with a diminished

reputation by the early 1930s. A series of large scale symphonic works duly helped to redress the balance, as also did his patriotic pieces written during the Nazi occupation. He died, well respected though not a little embittered (witnessed by his memoirs *Of Myself and Others*), in the East Bohemian town of Skuteč on 18 July 1949.

Although he laid the basis of a reputation through his chamber and piano output, it was with a series of increasingly ambitious orchestral works that Novák gained national prominence. Notable among these are the symphonic poems *In the Tatra Mountains* (1902) and *Eternal Longing* (1905) (both recorded on Naxos 8.573683), along with the *Serenade in D major* (1905) (Marco Polo 8.223649) and the *Slovak Suite* (1903) that has long remained his best-known piece in the West. Much of the appeal in these works derives from a flexible and personal amalgam of folk music elements with those inherited from the impressionism of Debussy and the late Romanticism of Richard Strauss; an amalgam reaching its culmination with the overture *Lady Godiva* (1907) (also on Naxos 8.573683) as well as the symphonic poem *Toman and the Wood Nymph*.

Written during 1906–07, *Toman and the Wood Nymph* was premiered in Prague's National Theatre on 5 April 1908 by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra with Karel Kovařovic. On this occasion it was performed alongside the earlier *Eternal Longing* and these pieces were programmed thus on numerous occasions thereafter, under the collective title *Desire and Passion*. The later work caused no mean controversy through its far-ranging harmonies, in which the influence of Strauss's only recently premiered opera *Salome* can be detected. The programme is straightforward enough: in Novák's words, 'Impelled by strange restlessness, Toman decided to visit his lover on Midsummer Eve. He was not mistaken; she had forsaken him for someone else. He went off to the forest and died in the arms of a woodland fairy.' Here, though, it is not the actual story which

determines the composer's response but rather its eliding between supernatural magic and human passion, resulting in a heady atmosphere fairly imbued by that *fin de siècle* quality common to much European music of this period.

The piece commences in a mood of blithe expectancy, soon becoming more capricious when first woodwind, then horns and trumpets emerge to the fore in textures as intricate as they are fastidious. In due course a stealthy motion in lower strings denotes a change of expression as the tempo increases amid ominous gestures from brass. These continue as the musical activity gradually falls away, a distinct change duly setting in as woodwind and strings evoke a mood of rhapsodic playfulness with solo violin briefly while ecstatically to the fore. Inevitably, this can continue only so long – clarinet sounding a note of caution as tension gradually increases then the music accrues energy as it heads toward a transformed reprise of the opening section. The eventual culmination subsumes the whole orchestra into its infectious wake, enhanced with some of this composer's most evocative and uninhibited orchestration. This, however, is summarily curtailed to leave fleeting fragments of what went before, followed by a postlude whose initial uncertainty is answered in unequivocal terms by those brusque closing chords.

As mentioned, Novák focussed on operas and choral music after the First World War, only returning to the purely orchestral genre in his *South Bohemian Suite*. Written during 1936–37, it has all too readily been dismissed as an attempt to recapture the spontaneity and freshness of his *Slovak Suite*, thereby overlooking the subtlety with which folk songs from this region are embedded into textures of a resourcefulness the greater for their understated nature. Notable, too, is the effectiveness of a formal design whose four movements evince an audible unity. The work secured a dedicated advocate in Erich Kleiber, who gave the first performance in Prague with the Czech Philharmonic during the spring of 1937 and repeated it (just months before his death) with this same orchestra at the Prague Spring Festival on 20 June 1955.

The first movement, *Pastoral: Horizons*, begins with ethereal strings which soon conjure up a wistful and evocative aura. Woodwind and lower strings duly intone a hymnic theme that spreads throughout the orchestra, becoming more animated as solo woodwind engage in lively exchanges with the strings. The contrasted expressive moments further alternate (note the subtly effective use of piano in the texture along with deft percussive touches), building towards an effulgent climax before a warm recollection of the initial music slowly evanesces into silence.

The second movement, *Reverie: Forests and Ponds*, provides only a relative contrast in its restrained evocation of landscape. The initial pages (redolent of Delius or Novák's younger contemporary Suk) take on livelier expression as several related motifs are passed between the instrumental groupings, without undermining the equable mood established at the outset. Towards the close a note of uncertainty – even anxiety – comes briefly to the fore, but this is swiftly subsumed into the prevailing serenity on the way to a conclusion of exquisite repose.

The third movement, *Once Upon a Time: March of the Hussites*, commences with a fugitive activity on lower strings, becoming more ominous when this activity starts to come into focus. Gradually the texture fills out and a sense of striving comes to the fore, the music intensifying in a crescendo towards a climax of grimly heroic determination. It is here that the underlying theme is stated in forceful terms; after which, the intensity falls away as if to portray the Hussite warriors marching into the distance, solo woodwind and strings regretful in its wake.

The fourth movement, *Epilogue: To My Homeland*, is little more than a minute in overall length and functions as a coda not only to its predecessor, but also the suite as a whole. Here the Hussite theme underpins the texture for a conclusion whose resolve is the more decisive for its absence of grandiloquence or bathos, a resolve which Novák was to take up again in his patriotic pieces from the war years when the Czech soul was being fought for in earnest.

Richard Whitehouse

Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra



The Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra is one of the foremost and oldest symphony orchestras in the Czech Republic. It is based in the city of Olomouc in the historical province of Moravia, and has been a leader of musical activities in the region for the past 70 years. Its artistic development has been directly influenced by distinguished figures from the Czech and international music scenes, including conductors such as Otto Klemperer and Václav Neumann, violinists Josef Suk and Gidon Kremer and cellist Pierre Fournier. During the course of its long history, the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra has amassed an exceptionally broad, rich and varied repertoire. Its focus is mostly on the grand figures of classical music of the 19th and 20th century. The orchestra is an authentic performer of works by distinguished Czech composers such as Antonín Dvořák, Bedřich Smetana, Leoš Janáček, Bohuslav Martinů, Vítězslav Novák and Josef Bohuslav Foerster, among others.

www.mfo.cz

Marek Štílec



Marek Štílec began his musical studies on the violin at the Prague Conservatory and studied conducting with Leoš Svárovský at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Štílec is an alumnus of the International Järvi Academy and Jac van Steen's Emerging Conductors Series, and has participated in the masterclasses of Michael Tilson Thomas and Jorma Panula, among others. He conducts a wide range of leading orchestras, including the New World Symphony, the Ulster Orchestra, Das Kurpfälzische Kammerorchester Mannheim, the Wiener Concertverein Orchester, the Orchestra of the Swan, the London Classical Soloists, the Berlin Camerata, the Kammerphilharmonie Graz and Sinfonietta Bratislava, as well as the top orchestras in the Czech Republic. www.arcodiva.cz/en/agency/instrumental-soloists/marek-stilec

Vítězslav Novák, a composition student of Dvořák, rose to prominence with a series of increasingly ambitious orchestral works that reflect his very personal amalgam of folk music elements, impressionism and late Romanticism. The far-ranging harmonies heard in *Toman and the Wood Nymph* earned Novák some notoriety – his evocation of supernatural magic and human passion results in music of heady intensity. The evocative aura of the later *South Bohemian Suite* is notable for the subtlety with which folk songs are embedded into its textures.

Vítězslav
NOVÁK
(1870–1949)

Jihočeská suita, Op. 64

(‘South Bohemian Suite’) (1936–37)

29:23

- | | | |
|----------|---|--------------|
| 1 | I. Pastorale: Obzory (‘Pastoral: Horizons’) | 10:50 |
| 2 | II. Snění: Lesy a rybníky (‘Reverie: Forests and Ponds’) | 8:57 |
| 3 | III. Kdysi: Pochod Táborů (‘Once Upon a Time: March of the Hussites’) | 8:01 |
| 4 | IV. Epilog: Bud’ zdrav, můj rodný kraji! (‘Epilogue: To my Homeland’) | 1:30 |

5 Toman a lesní panna, Op. 40

(‘Toman and the Wood Nymph’) (1906–07)

26:45

Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra
Marek Štilec

Recorded: 29–31 October 2019, Reduta Hall, Olomouc, Czech Republic

Producer: Jiří Štilec (ArcoDiva Management) • Engineer: Václav Roubal

Booklet notes: Richard Whitehouse

Publishers: Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig **1–4**, Universal Edition, Wien **5**

Cover: *Sunset near Pisek, Southern Bohemia* by Richard Semik (www.shutterstock.com)

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