

**Leicester Recorded Music Society | Dvorak early symphonies |
11 February 2020**

INTRODUCTION

Always had a fascination for the musical underdog (actually, for the underdog in general)

Franz Berwald symphonies is a good example. Also, **Sibelius Symphonies 1 and 7**, neither high in the popularity stakes. | **Tchaikovsky early symphonies**, especially No.1 - 'Winter Daydreams'. Even the juvenile early symphonies of **Schubert** are worthy of an airing ... and not just by Classic FM.

I think I'm on confident ground when I say that everyone here this evening will have heard of (and almost certainly will have heard - or perhaps played?) **Dvorak's New World Symphony** - the composer's 9th; a smaller - but still significant - number may have heard his **8th symphony in G**. As the numbers fall from 9, to 8 ... and downwards, knowledge becomes less-assured, until we reach the earliest symphonies, especially the first three. (There has always been some confusion surrounding the symphonies' numberings; initially, they were numbered by publication date and not compositional date.)

I think there's an element of musical snobbery at play here, based on the idea that a composer's earlier works are, perhaps, less worthy than his or her mature works. We should learn that this isn't always the case - if you know **Mendelssohn's** music you will know that his youthful works show an astonishing musical understanding and ease of communication e.g. his octet for double string quartet which he wrote in 1825, at the age of 16. (Question: did he go off the boil as he got older?! - a charge you certainly couldn't make of Schubert.)

DVORAK SYMPHONIES

Born in 1841 and dying in 1904, Dvorak had strong associations with the United Kingdom - a number of 1st performances here -

the oratorio *The Spectre's Bride* at Leeds in 1886, the 7th Symphony in 1885 – but also performances of the *Stabat Mater* at the Worcester Three Choirs Festival also in 1886. Of the 7th Symphony, George Bernard Shaw wrote: “It seems to be the expression of the composer’s happy and romantic vein; but the happiness and romance are of a serious Northern sort.” It’s not known exactly what GBS meant by ‘Northern’, but it was probably to distinguish his writing from southern European styles, drawing him closer to his mentor and friend, Brahms. (Nothing to do with the current fad of ‘The Northern Powerhouse’!)

Today ... focusing on the earliest of Dvorak’s symphonies - No.1 in C minor written in 1865, No. 2 in B flat (also 1865), and No. 3 in E flat (1873) (my personal favourite). I want to spend a bit more time on the 3rd so will, inevitably skim a little in the first two.

I was brought up on the complete cycle by Istvan Kertesz on Decca in the 1960s. Tonight I’m going to be using recordings conducted exclusively by Jiri Belohlavek, the wonderful Czech conductor who died in May 2017. (Notice how many of our finest conductors have died in recent months – e.g. Lorin Maazel and Mariss Jansens. It would seem obvious to select a Czech orchestra and conductor; however, some of the finest recordings of national composers have been undertaken by foreigners – e.g. Leonard Slatkin (Elgar) and Andrew Litton (Walton and Elgar), both Americans.

Symphony 1

One could say that his first symphony is somewhat overlong, but there is no mistaking the originality of his compositional style or his unique orchestral writing, something which can be traced throughout his entire output ... the use of woodwind and strings ... the way he provides colour and timbre to drive the music forward. Here’s the opening down to the second subject, which reminds me of ‘Rockabye Baby’!:

CD 1 - 1st Symphony. Track 1 - Opening to 3'20" (fade)

No composer (or artists) exists in a vacuum, so we can see influences of other composers, especially Beethoven (the throwing of rhythms), Brahms (symphonic structures – most of Europe was moving away from symphonic structures at this time) and Schumann (his focus on melody).

The Adagio shows hints of Schumann's 2nd Symphony slow movement – another underrated work, in my opinion.

Symphony No. 2. Wealth of melodic ideas. Unique orchestral writing – not at all Brahmsian. Colour/timbres: woodwinds and brass ... independent parts

CD 1 - 1st Symphony. Adagio. Track 2 - Opening to 4'05" (fade)

The opening of the slow movement (**of the 2nd symphony**) provides some wonderful mood-painting, but maybe the composer didn't have anything in mind. It strikes me as being almost Straussian (Richard) in the first minute (e.g. his tone poem Death and Transfiguration), followed by the warm main theme, shared between the fiddles and winds ... again, we can hear the influence of Schumann, but Dvorak was a far more skilled orchestral writer than Schumann:

CD 2- 2nd Symphony. Poco adagio. Track 2 - Opening to 4'00" (fade)

Why don't we hear this? – ever?!

The Scherzo 3rd movement begins with a very unconventional introduction before the build up to the main theme after a minute. The arching melody with its surprise shifts in harmonies show an element of experimentation:

CD 2- 2nd Symphony. Scherzo. Track 3 - Opening to 3'20" (fade)

The finale is far more flamboyant, with Dvorak's tell-tale writing for the wind instruments (see also his Serenade for Wind Instruments), and 'thrown' melodies ... which actually remind me of Franz Berwald. Perhaps here, he didn't quite have the creative experience or maturity to know what to do with the material he had written ... other than spin it out. (see also Hamish MacCunn's overture 'The Land of the Mountain and the Flood'.) The way he manages to build tension through careful use of dynamics, coinciding with harmonic shifts is beguiling for me:

CD 2 - 2nd Symphony. Finale - Allegro. Track 4 - Opening to 4'00" (fade)

So we come to my favourite early symphony, the 3-movement **No. 3 in E flat**. Why do I like it so much? Maybe it's the key ... that reassuring Anglican hymn key! Or the opening gentle introduction with horns, strings and very quiet timpani, followed by the main theme ... which focuses on a turn, just like Wagner used (e.g. his Rienzi Overture opening main theme) ... the sense of anticipation, of driving forwards and upwards ... the orchestration, with the colours of the woodwinds, including the cor anglais ... the syncopations, almost Beethoven-ian (remember, no composer exists in a vacuum)

Interestingly, there is really only one main theme in this movement, supported by fragments of the theme which he develops, as opposed to a 'proper' 2nd subject.

CD 3 - 3rd Symphony. Allegro moderato Track 1 - Opening to 4'00" (fade)

The 2nd movement is headed *Adagio molto, tempo di Marcia* and is the longest of the symphony's three movements. The instruction *tempo di Marcia* is more to do with the tempo than style or mood ... although you may feel it has the spirit of a funeral march. Here I feel we are hearing a far more mature Dvorak, more confident in his use of musical material and of

the orchestra – I love the way he so often doubles a solo woodwind with the violins, as well as writing for clarinets in 3rd s, all for colour. We can hear the long, melodies to which he was to return in the later symphonies. At around 6 minutes there is an almost Wagnerian moment of fanfare. Here's a slightly longer extract that I've played so far:

CD 3 - 3rd Symphony. Adagio molto. Track 2 - Opening to 7'55" (fade)

There is no scherzo, so he moves from the Adagio to the Finale, which is a break from the norm ... I wonder why. This Allegro vivace (the shortest of the three movements) takes over half a minute to establish itself, but once it does there is energy to be found in the orchestration, especially in the strings and horns (although his writing for trombones is a little predictable); he drives the melodies on, throwing rhythms across the orchestra, requiring the players to dig into their bank of colours and dynamic ranges. As is common, he takes half a minute to establish the main musical material, but once he gets going there is much to admire and be excited about. One of his favourite devices is the use of the 'dominant pedal', where the tension is raised without realising how.

There is just one principal theme, but many subsidiary themes, so any development of the material deals primarily with these subordinate ideas.

I think it's worth hearing the whole of this movement; after you've heard it, I wonder whether you have a thought as to why this symphony is never played these days

CD 3 - 3rd Symphony. Allegro vivace. Track 3 - Complete (8'31")

Malcolm Goldring