



PROGRAM NOTES

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88, B. 163

Composed 1889

Why does the eighth symphony of Dvořák hold such a special place for orchestras? The seventh is thought of as the most profound of his nine symphonies, and the “New World” is famous for its musical cross-pollination. In reading a short stack of program notes from scholars on the eighth to prepare for this writing, I found that the words used most to identify the eighth symphony are “folk” and “Slavic.” Over and over again we are told that the Czechs, and especially Dvořák, relied on their national history and culture to produce the music that has become beloved the world over. Missing is an exploration, or really even an explanation, of what those folk elements might be, how they are incorporated musically, and how we can identify them as listener. So, let’s explore.

In the case of the Czech culture, there exists a distinct political history that runs alongside its cultural one. Exactly 400 years ago, Germanic influence overtook the regions of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia. German became the official language and only the peasants retained the Czech (Bohemian) language. For two hundred years, this remained the case—until the industrial revolution drove the peasants and farmers towards the cities. It was at this time, in the early 19th century, that artists began to reinvest in the preservation of a uniquely Czech culture.

To relate Czech “folk” influence, the creators turned to the spoken language and to the dances of the common people. The *furiant* dance is Czech and often used by the nation’s symphonic composers. In addition, and a surprise to me, the “oom-pah” *polka* is the other dance whose origins are Czech.

The *furiant* is distinctive because of its hallmark opposing beat structures. While the overarching rhythmic pattern is based in a triple meter, the *furiant* will infuse duple groupings that serve to create an intentional instability and therefore, a sense of spontaneity in the music. The *polka* is much more straightforward. Czech *polkas* are framed in a 2/4 time, with emphasis placed on the primary beat of each gesture.

These rhythmic groupings and structures are uniquely Czech and help to form the folk music tendencies. They are generated from the stress patterns within the language, which emphasize the first syllable of every word, followed by an alternating pattern of stress on subsequent syllables. Therefore, the *polka* can be seen as the simplest derivative of this structure. *Oom-pah, Oom-pah*: a musical representation of two-syllable words with the stress falling on the first syllable of each. The *furiant* is the evolved version—expanding the mirroring of language to include multi-syllable formations that would have additional stresses within each word. This allows for the mixed-meter time-signatures, for which composers like Smetana and Dvořák are known.

I would also argue that simplicity of orchestration is a hallmark of this folk style. In the eighth symphony, this manifests in certain characteristic ways: a single soloist or section is used for many main melodic lines (you will hear cellos and a solo flute open the symphony in this manner); block usage of the winds, the strings and the brass as separate units of color; limited use of percussion instruments; and a lack of intricate counterpoint. These types of musical decisions can lead to a feeling of rusticity around the music.

Dvořák's eighth is not a test of virtuosity, nor of ambition. It simply is. So today, perhaps consider how you respond to a symphony of this type—that aims to please rather than to challenge.

~By John Devlin
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Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Symphony No. 9 in C Major, D. 944 "Great"

Composed 1825–1826

When we hear Schubert's Symphony No. 9 in C Major referred to by its nickname, the "Great," it is safe to assume that it must be pretty good. However, at the time, the subtitle was chosen to distinguish the symphony from the earlier Symphony No. 6 ("Little"), also cast in the key of C. The distinction could also apply to the work's prodigious length, which in performance rivals that of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony.

As was so often the case (consider Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony or Chopin's *Raindrop* Prelude), Schubert was not intentionally responsible for the sobriquet by which his symphony is now so well known. He did, however, intimate in an 1824 letter that he was about to begin work on a *grosse* (German for "large" or "grand") symphony.

The most recent scholarship dismisses the long-held belief that the work was composed during Schubert's final year. It is now thought to have been completed in the spring or summer of 1826. Schubert was unable to pay for an actual performance, but the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* (Society of Friends of Music)—to which he made the canny decision to dedicate the symphony—gave the work an informal reading. It would be the only time the composer would have an opportunity to hear it.

In 1838, ten years after Schubert's death, his brother, Ferdinand, showed the manuscript to Robert Schumann, during one of the latter's visits to Vienna. Schumann returned to Leipzig with a copy, where he handed it off to Felix Mendelssohn, then conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra. The symphony was first performed publicly under Mendelssohn's direction in 1839. Schumann reviewed the concert in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and famously praised the work for "its heavenly length."

The "Great" was composed by a man who stood only five foot one. His friends referred to him as *Schwammerl* ("Little Mushroom"). He was 27 years younger than Beethoven, the premiere of whose Ninth Symphony he had attended in 1824.

In homage to Beethoven, Schubert incorporated into the final movement of his "Great" symphony a reference to the "Ode to Joy." A fleeting remembrance occurs at the beginning of the development section, in the clarinet, flute, and oboes, before undergoing a transformation by way of tremolo strings. The episode appears as a fairly understated interlude in the otherwise rhythmically wild finale.

Schubert's astoundingly prolific output and the heights to which he strove were likely spurred in part by the fact that he was laboring under a death sentence. Syphilis would claim his life at the age of 31. He completed this, the last of his symphonies, at 29—the same age at which Beethoven had only just begun work on his first.

A torchbearer at Beethoven's funeral in 1827, Schubert outlived the elder composer by less than two years. On his deathbed, Beethoven is said to have attributed to him "the spark of divine genius." What further greatness "Little Mushroom" might have achieved, had he been able to live out his natural lifespan, is anyone's guess.

~Ross Amico
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