

In Nature's Realm

By Barbara A. Renton

Antonín Dvořák, a proud Czech who insisted on the correct spelling of his name and who came to represent the nationalist movement in Czech lands to his compatriots and to the world, developed his musical craftsmanship in the Romantic style throughout his life, so that it continually sounds fresh and spontaneous. Born in Nelahozeves, Bohemia, Dvořák spent his adult years in the capital city of Prague as both instrumentalist and composer. His sojourn in the United States (1892-95) as teacher and composer made an indelible influence on the development of American music, particularly in the way Americans learned to hear and value their own musical environment.

Dvořák composed *In Nature's Realm (V přírodě)*, a set of five unaccompanied choral pieces with texts by one of his favorite Czech poets, Vítězslav Hálek, expressly for the numerous amateur and semi-professional choruses in Germany, Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and surrounding countries. Sonority and balance, intricate vocal lines and serene chords paint in sound a favorite theme and vision of Dvořák's -- that of nature - in all its surface simplicity, underlying complexity, and capacity to refresh and renew the human soul. Dvořák believed this about nature all of his life.

Sonatina in G, Op. 100

By Barbara A. Renton

How does a famous composer mark his significant milestone in his career? With Dvořák, it was a family affair; his 100th work would be for his children. He planned a modest piece, a Sonatina in G major that two of his children could play: daughter Otilka at the piano and son Toník on the violin. Composed in the United States between November 19th and December 3rd, 1893, the Sonatina is "Dedicated to my children Otilka and Toník, Aninka, Mařenka, Otakar and Zinda to commemorate the completion of my hundredth work." The work is modest, written in "classical" form with clear and distinct sections, and basically in major keys; it also uses compositional features that have been called "American," and which can be heard in Dvořák's Symphony No. 9, *From the New World*, as well as other works he wrote in America: features that are present in African-American spirituals and American Indian songs. The Larghetto's main theme was inspired by Dvořák's interest in Longfellow's poem, *Hiawatha*, and his visit to the Minnehaha Falls in Minnesota, where, it is said, he scribbled the musical idea on his starched cuff, having no sketch book at hand.

Otče Náš (the Moravian Our Father)

By Barbara A. Renton

This work was one of the few pieces of a religious nature that Janáček wrote. It was inspired, not by the liturgy, but, like many of his compositions, by an impetus from another of the creative arts; in this case a set of seven paintings by the Polish artist Josef Krzesz-Mecina (1860-1934). The committee of the Zenské útulné v Brně (the Brno Home for Women), to whom the work is dedicated, planned to stage a series of living tableaux with music to illustrate each of these pictures. Janáček composed music based on five paintings (each described below). Although the subject matter was strongly pietistic, Janáček's artistic interpretation is one that is less religious in nature than in social consciousness and shows deep empathy for rural people and their lives. The work contains early examples of the composer's now-familiar trademarks: ostinato rhythms (especially the fifth movement), contrasting phrases, and an underlying modality.

The first performance (1901) at the Provisional Theatre in Brno was scored for piano/harmonium accompaniment and conducted by the composer himself. In 1906 it was rearranged for harp and organ and performed in Prague at the Hlahol Choral Society as a chamber cantata without tableaux, under the baton of Adolf Piskáček.

1. Otče náš (Our Father) - Andante

Painting: The workers kneel in the woods before a cross. A movement in three parts, the last based on the first part with the tenor introducing the middle part, *Ó přijd' nám království tvé (Thy kingdom come)*.

2. Bud' vůle tvá, (Thy will be done) - Moderato

Painting: The family beside a child who has died The accompanying rhythmic pattern gently "rocks" throughout.

3. Chléb náš ..., (Give us this day our daily bread) – Con moto

Painting: A thunderstorm destroys a rich harvest just reaped. The impassioned demand for *Chléb* (bread) is startling in comparison with other composers' murmured settings. No murmuring for Janáček! The people have a right to bread earned by their toil, hence the closing shouts.

4. A odpust' nám naše viny (And forgive us our trespasses) – Adagio Painting: Dungeon – the prisoner.

The chorus echoes and completes the soloist's petition.

5. Neúvod' nás v pokušení, (Lead us not into temptation) – Energico moderato

Painting: The burglar invades the room at night. A driving rhythmic motif propels the movement forward, not even stopping at the close, but seemingly continues in the listener's imagination.

Organ Voluntary from Glagolitic Mass (Postludium for organ solo) By Barbara A. Renton

This exhilarating "hurricane" of a work, as one writer referred to it, was written to follow the last choral movement of the *Glagolitic Mass* (1926) and serves to release the tension that was left unresolved. Reflecting Janáček's own virtuosic mastery of the organ and his long tenure as founder and teacher of the Brno Organ School, the piece also demonstrates Janáček's mastery of the ancient art of organ improvisation. The entire movement is in the form of a passacaglia -- a set of variations on a single theme which is announced immediately in the lowest (pedal) notes. But this passacaglia is barely held in check as the white heat of inspiration drives the work forward through amazing modulations and juxtapositions, ending *Prestissimo*. Jaroslav Smolka, a Czech scholar/organist has declared that this work, one of the most technically difficult to perform, is, in its inventiveness and individuality, one of masterpieces of organ literature.

The Star-Splitter

By Elam Ray Sprenkle

The Star-Splitter was commissioned and performed by the Laurel Oratorio Society in 1989, Ernest Green conductor. It was subsequently performed by the Baltimore Choral Arts Society, Tom Hall conductor, and several times by the Annapolis Chorale. The text is taken from a poem of the same name by Robert Frost. A "hugger-mugger" farmer ("Has a man, I should like to ask, no rights at all?") burns his house down to collect the fire insurance. He wants the money to buy a telescope in order "to satisfy a life-long curiosity about our place among the infinities." Part of the story is told from the point of view of a narrator who notes, "mean laughter went about the town that day," but who comes to admire the "thief" and warns, "to be social is to be forgiving." Brad the farmer becomes Bradford who invites the narrator over for a look "up the brass, black velvet barrel," and the two spend a night star-gazing where they "said the best things they ever said."

Frost's poetry is--as everybody knows--a poetry made of backyard words a ten-year-old schoolboy can understand. So, in our world, it is easy to read casually his work and say "so what?," as if complexity is a given for items meriting the status of high art. I believe this is not the case, but rather the opposite: to achieve the uncommon while using the common-- this is great art, and beneath its lazy surface *The Star-Splitter* is as well-made a poem as you will find. From its description of the "smoky, lantern chimney" we all use to its declaration that "the best thing that we're put here for's to see," the poem, as passionate an examination of the human condition as I've ever read, repays repeated readings much like a good piece of music keeps on revealing itself.

I set about to revise the work last September and finished--after some of the hardest work I've ever done--in early December. Last May one of my closest friends was killed in an industrial accident. He had much in common with "Brad" and in a sense the revision is my homage to him.

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