

TE DEUM, Op. 103

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

The son of a Bohemian innkeeper who had no plans for him as a professional musician, Antonín Dvořák worked and studied his way from a small village to the rank of internationally renowned composers. Beginning with his violin training from the village schoolmaster, he went on to study at the Prague Organ School. Following his graduation he made a living as a viola player in the orchestra of the National Theater in Prague, working also as a piano teacher, accompanist and composer. Gradually his compositional talent became noticed, most importantly by Johannes Brahms, who was instrumental in awarding Dvořák a prestigious prize (the first of many), and launched his international career. It is not too exaggerated to say that Dvořák became the most famous and celebrated of Czech national composers – yet who had to struggle with his publisher in order to have his name spelled in the Czech way (the way he wrote it!). Nor is it possible to forget the fierce champion that he was of pan-Slavism. In his works we can hear Dvořák 's abundant creativity, his gift for spontaneous melody, and his trademarks of rhythmic variety, harmonic color and intensity. Many listeners have discovered that passages of his music, once heard, are unforgettable.

The *Te Deum*, a centuries-old song text of praise and rejoicing has a definite place in the Roman Catholic and Anglican/Episcopalian liturgy. From the seventeenth century on, the *Te Deum* was used as an official hymn of thanksgiving for special occasions, notably after great war victories or recovery from plagues. As such, it often received immensely splendid settings for numerous performers.

Dvořák set the text of the *Te Deum* in response to a request from his American Patron, Jennette Thurber, who wished him to compose a short cantata for his first concert when he arrived in New York City (1892) to take up his duties as head of the National Conservatory. His British biographer, John Clapham, notes that he “obviously enjoyed writing it. His approach to the text was certainly novel, and resulted in a delightful blend of simple and direct diatonic writing...The cantata opens with a forthright display of jubilation that reminds us of a peal of bells, set against a conflicting triplet rhythm for the kettle drums. In the second part, the noble bass solo, “Rex gloriae,” is set between fine passages for bass choir; and the section “Te ergo quaesumus,” a verse which affected the composer deeply because of the phrase “redeemed by Thy precious blood” is entrancingly set for sopranos above like pulsing accompaniment, and with violins soaring above like an angelic choir. The third part turns into a kind of dance, with perhaps a suggestion of the gamboling of forest fairies.”

The concluding section recalls the opening section, as is Dvořák's practice, to come to a logical conclusion as well as a transcendent one. The form then, is a trajectory that comes back to its starting point, returning in fuller, more significant form as a result of what has been experienced. Emotionally, we can only concur with what we ourselves have found to be true.

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CELEBRATION JAZZ MASS

KAREL RŮŽIČKA, SR.

Intrigued by the inclusion of a “jazz mass” in the offerings of the 1997 Prague Spring Music Festival, and impressed by the participation of the renowned Pavel Kühn Choir, CPC director Frances Motyca Dawson attended the performance at the Church of Sts. Simon & Jude, and came back with a commitment from composer/pianist Karel Růžička to allow her to perform the

composition in its American debut in May, 1998 in Columbia. For that performance, as well as the performance tonight, Mr. Růžička and his son, virtuoso sax player, Karel, Jr., played the piano and sax parts as heard on their 1994 award winning CD of the *Mass*.

Commissioned by Antonin Matzner, composition of the *Celebration Jazz Mass* was influenced by Duke Ellington's *Sacred Concert*, Francis Poulenc's Gloria, and Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, as well as the public's response to Jaromír Hníčka's *Missa Jazz*. Following the liturgy of the Latin Mass, the five main parts of *Celebration Jazz Mass* are the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, written in a style directly reflecting the gospel and blues roots of jazz, including their contemporary reflections in the present funky style. In addition, the work contains three short blues sections, without voices, including a version of Růžička's great gospel-inspired *Celebration Blues*, which provides the unifying motif.

Following a bell-like opening, the motif from *Celebration Blues* appears in the first bars of Introitus, shifting immediately into a spontaneous mood, to be followed by a majestic switchover and finally the first part of the ordinary of the Mass, the Kyrie. The jazz authenticity of the sung parts is enhanced by the lively swing pattern of the instrumental accompaniment. The ceremonial choral introduction in Gloria is replaced by an ardent solo thanksgiving, from which an urgent "Jesu Christe cum sancto Spiritu" ensues. The dramatically arched Credo leads from the actual confession to the musically enhanced secret of Incarnation, in which the soloists/instrumentalists get their first chance of improvisation. The entire following contemplative part, composed as a modern jazz ballad, is theirs. The focus of Sanctus is the joyous "hosanna in excelsis," repeated once more in the actual finale of the Mass before the closing prayer and evoking the ecstatic mood of African-American congregations, which bore spirituals as one of the most beautiful fruits of African-American musicality. The touchingly ardent Agnus Dei is replaced by the ceremonious mood of *Celebration Blues*, while the simple melody combined with the words of the most widespread prayer of the Christian world is heard at the humble end of the whole *Mass*.

After the premiere held on October 27, 1991, in the Church of the Most Holy Heart of the Lord, in Vinohrady, Prague, on the occasion of the 19th International Jazz Festival, and the repeated performance at the church of St. Moritz in Olomouc in 1994, the composition was recorded by the Czech Radio and shortly afterwards released on CD by Supraphon, on the initiative of the conductor, Pavel Kühn. It was Pavel Kühn again, who asked Karel Růžička to compose another spiritual work for the same set of musicians before other planned appearances, so as to be able to give a regular-length concert. The result, *Te Deum*, was first performed with the *Celebration Jazz Mass* on July 12, 1996 in Studienkirche St. Michael in Passau, Germany, as part of the 1996 European Weeks of Culture festival.

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