

## **ANTONIN DVOŘÁK**

(1841–1904)

*Symphonic Variations, opus 78*

Widely regarded as the most distinguished of Czech composers, Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904) is considered one of the major figures of Nationalism (making use of folk influences in works of other genres). The son of a butcher and amateur zither player, Dvořák studied the organ in Prague as a young man and worked as a café violist and church organist during the 1860s and 1870s while composing symphonies, chamber music, and a Czech-language opera. In the 1870s he won a three year government grant (the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick was among the judges) designed to help the careers of struggling young creative artists. Brahms helped Dvořák obtain a contract with his own publisher, Simrock, in 1877. The association proved a profitable one despite an initial controversy that flared when Dvořák insisted on including Czech-language work titles on the printed covers rather than German titles. In the 1880s and 1890s, Dvořák's reputation became international in scope due to a series of masterpieces that included his three final symphonies. The 1890s represented for Dvořák a time of creative and personal renaissance. It was during this decade that he made his first forays into the New World, the direct result of which included the production of a wealth of American-influenced chamber music as well as the composer's best-known work, the Symphony No. 9 (1893). The latter proved to be Dvořák's final essay in that form, signaling his increasing interest in other genres. Dvořák became director of the Conservatory in Prague in November 1901 and remained in that post until his death, from heart failure, on May 1, 1904, following five weeks of illness.

During four days in the middle of January 1877, Antonín Dvořák composed three part-songs for male voices, the first two of which are settings of Moravian folk poems and the third, "Huslaf" (The Fiddler), which does not have a folk origin. Seven months after its composition, Dvořák used it as the theme for his "Symphonic Variations". Composed between August 6 and September 28, 1877, these variations were premiered in Prague on December 2, 1877. The work was, supposedly, a response to a challenge from a friend to write variations on a theme that seemed impossible for that purpose. But far from being impossible as a subject of variations, the theme turned out to be exceptionally well suited for that purpose.

Although the "Symphonic Variations" received positive reviews at its premiere, Dvořák's publishers were uninterested in buying and publishing it. Until the famous conductor Hans Richter decided to program the work on his tour in early 1887, it remained a stranger to the concert hall. Richter wrote to the composer after the first rehearsal with the Philharmonic Society in London: "I am absolutely carried away. It is a magnificent work! I am so happy to be the first to produce it in London. But why have you held it back so long? These variations should shine in the first rank of your compositions". The concert itself later that month was a huge success and Richter wrote again: "At the hundreds of concerts which I have conducted during my life, no new work has ever had such a success as yours".

In December 1887, the "Symphonic Variations" were finally premiered in Vienna. In the audience were Dvořák, his friend, Johannes Brahms, and the publisher N. Simrock – who immediately offered to publish the work, but as opus 78 rather than the opus 28 that Dvořák had given it so as to suggest a brand new composition.

### OF NOTE:

Dvořák's "Symphonic Variations" are among the three most frequently played of all sets of orchestral variations, along with Brahms' "Variations on a Theme by Haydn" and Elgar's "Enigma Variations".