

ANTONIN DVOŘÁK

(1841–1904)

Symphony No. 8 in G Major

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.

Dvořák began work on his eighth symphony on August 26, 1889. During the months that followed, he was inundated with commissions and complained to a friend that his head was "so full of ideas" that he couldn't write them down fast enough. The *Symphony No. 8* was completed on November 8, 1889 and premiered under Dvořák's direction in Prague on February 2, 1890. Simrock, his publisher, offered him a mere 1,000 marks (roughly \$850) for this symphony compared to 6,000 marks for his previous symphony. Enraged, Dvořák went to the English publisher Novello instead, and the work was published by Novello in 1892.

The Eighth Symphony is an example of Dvořák at his most spontaneous. He developed the general structure of the entire symphony in about ten days, and it took only seventeen days to sketch out all the music and one more month to finish all the details of orchestration. This short compositional time does not mean that the symphony is not full of interesting ideas. The last movement is a complex exploration of form involving several variations interspersed with other melodic twists and turns. Themes are often presented, then not developed as would be expected in a Germanic symphony. Dvořák stated that he wanted to create "a symphony different from my other symphonies with individual thought worked out in a new way." Although the new ideas are abundant, they are still contained within the Classical framework that was always a part of the composer's music.