

## **Dvořák's Cheerful Eighth Symphony**

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

**Piston: Suite from *The Incredible Flutist*.** A circus band, its seductive flutist and small-town romance—what's not to like? Both irreverent and sentimental, Piston's perky score scampers and grins.

**Prokofiev: Violin Concerto No. 2.** Classicism and modernity find a splendid balance in this concerto, which was Prokofiev's last commission from the West before returning permanently to the USSR. His opening theme is unexpectedly warm and lyrical. Spanish accents in the finale suggest dance music.

**Dvořák: Eighth Symphony.** Sometimes called Dvořák's "Pastoral" Symphony, the Eighth breathes the transparent, wholesome spirit of the Bohemian countryside. Bird calls and a wistful calm in the Adagio evoke the peace of the composer's summer home.

### **PISTON: Suite from *The Incredible Flutist***

#### **WALTER PISTON**

**Born:** January 20, 1894, in Rockland, Maine

**Died:** November 12, 1976, in Belmont, Maine

**Composed:** 1938; Piston extracted the suite in 1940.

**World Premiere:** Arthur Fiedler conducted the Boston Pops in the ballet's premiere on November 30, 1938. Fritz Reiner premiered the suite on November 22, 1940, with the Pittsburgh Symphony.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1996–97 season; Leslie Dunner conducted.

**Duration:** 16 minutes

As a composer, he was overshadowed by Gershwin, Copland and Bernstein, but Walter Piston was widely respected as an educator and author. He was educated at Harvard and in Paris, where he studied with Paul Dukas (composer of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*) and the legendary Nadia Boulanger. For most of his career, he served on the Harvard faculty, where he had a major impact as a teacher. Elliott Carter and Leonard Bernstein were among his many important students.

Piston was a champion of absolute music, earning Pulitzer Prizes in 1948 for his Third Symphony and in 1961 for his Seventh Symphony. Only twice did he incorporate programmatic ideas into his instrumental compositions—for his ballet *The Incredible Flutist* and in *Three New England Sketches* for orchestra (1959).

Piston's sole stage composition, *The Incredible Flutist*, was a collaboration between the Hans Wiener Dancers and Boston Symphony Orchestra. The slender plot of this lighthearted divertissement revolves around the arrival of a circus band in a small town. The townspeople are just resuming commercial activity following an afternoon siesta. Among the circus players is a flutist who plays so seductively that he enchants the snake charmer as well as the snake. He catches the eye of the local merchant's eldest daughter, and they arrange an evening tryst. A comic subplot concerns another budding romance between the merchant and a wealthy widow. The ballet's theme addresses how ho-hum life can be metamorphosed through artistic accomplishment and human fancy.

Piston's suite comprises 13 sections played without pause. Prominent dance rhythms make the action easy to follow. During the circus march, members of the orchestra imitate the rowdy sounds of the crowd; one barks like a dog reacting to the hubbub. These non-musical punctuation marks add to the suite's festive, good-natured atmosphere.

*Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, castanets, cymbals, bass drum, glockenspiel, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, piano and strings.*

## **PROKOFIEV: Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 63**

### **SERGEI PROKOFIEV**

**Born:** April 23, 1891, in Sontzovka, Ukraine

**Died:** March 5, 1953, in Moscow, Russia, USSR

**Composed:** 1935

**World Premiere:** December 1, 1935, in Madrid. Enrique Fernández Arbós conducted; Robert Soëpens was the soloist.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1974–75 season. Jesse Levine conducted; Gil Morgenstern was the soloist.

**Duration:** 26 minutes

### **A young lion rattles cages**

With Prokofiev, the man is never far from the music. In his early works, the exuberance and rebellion of youth express themselves in iconoclastic, daring pieces that scandalized the pre-revolutionary Russian musical establishment (including the conservative Glazunov). Prokofiev exploited an adventurous vocabulary with glib abandon, pushing the boundaries of tonality with rhythmic drive to match his aggressive dissonance.

Prokofiev lived abroad from 1918 to 1934, first in the United States and then in Paris. But his was a profoundly Russian spirit. Despite misgivings about the political climate in his homeland, he returned to the Soviet Union permanently in spring 1935. In his later years, his abrasive style ceded to a simpler, more accessible musical language that is most easily explained as neoclassicism, but that may actually have been prompted by political guidelines for composers dictated by the Stalinist regime.

### **From sonata to concerto: a concept evolves**

He started work on the Second Violin Concerto in 1935 in Paris, completing it in the USSR at Voronezh and Baku. The commission materialized from a group of admirers of the French violinist Robert Soëpens. Prokofiev had met him in 1932 in conjunction with the premiere of his Sonata for Two Violins. Soëpens had performed the sonata with Samuel Dushkin, who was touring with Stravinsky at the time.

Prokofiev's initial concept had been a grand concert sonata for violin and orchestra, but as it

progressed, the piece grew beyond the confines of any sonata. True, no strong assertive profile is hinted at in the warm, opening solo measure of the first movement; this theme hardly bespeaks a hard-driving, aggressive movement. Yet Prokofiev's sense of balance is impeccable, and soon a more characteristically rhythmic pulse counters the lyricism that introduces the concerto.

The first movement is uncharacteristically subdued—perhaps not so flashy as other violin concertos, but it overflows with haunting, memorable themes. As biographer Harlow Robinson has observed: “What is most different about the Second Concerto is its predominantly *cantilena* character: its melodies are some of the most beautiful, flowing and lyrical that Prokofiev ever wrote. Nor does he cut them short, impatient with emotional display, as he did in many of his earlier compositions.”

In short, the music has room to breathe, and we all breathe the more effortlessly with it. Prokofiev's genius may be most evident, however, in the *tumultuoso* finale, where his addition of castanets, triangle and snare drum add zest and humor. The music historian Michael Steinberg has suggested that the Spanish accents in the finale were Prokofiev's bow to the city where he knew the work would first be performed. It is easy to understand this concerto's popularity.

*Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; snare drum; bass drum; triangle; cymbals; castanets; strings and solo violin.*

## **DVOŘÁK: Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88**

### **ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK**

**Born:** September 8, 1841, in Muhlhausen, Bohemia

**Died:** May 1, 1904, in Prague, Bohemia

**Composed:** August–November 1889.

**World Premiere:** February 2, 1890, in Prague; the composer conducted.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1956–57 season; Samuel Antek conducted.

**Duration:** 36 minutes

## **Numbering confusion**

Dvořák composed nine symphonies, but only five were published during his lifetime. Consequently, great confusion has persisted with respect to their numbering and chronology. The English firm Novello published this symphony in 1892 as No. 4, adding fuel to the numbering mixup and causing the dubious nickname “The English” to be occasionally attached to the work. It is an ironic misnomer, for few of Dvořák’s compositions have a more staunch Czech feel to them than this bright symphony.

After his Symphony No. 9, “New World,” the Eighth Symphony is the best loved of Dvořák’s large orchestral works. Part of the symphony’s disarming appeal is the folklike character of the melodies in all four movements. Another asset is Dvořák’s magnificent, imaginative writing for woodwinds. So fertile is his melodic gift that virtually every instrument has its chance for solos. That stated, flute emerges as first among equals.

## **Melody vs. structure: Dvořák, Brahms, Bruckner and others**

Most of the sketches for the G-major symphony date from August 1889. Dvořák completed the orchestration by early November, and the premiere took place in Prague under the composer’s direction in February 1890. The following January, prominent Hungarian-born conductor Hans Richter led the Viennese premiere. Richter wrote to the composer the next day: “You would certainly have been pleased with this performance. All of us felt that here was a magnificent work, and so we were all enthusiastic. Brahms dined with me after the performance and we drank to the health of the unfortunately absent father of [your symphony]. Vivat sequens!”

Brahms apparently expressed some reservations to the Austrian critic and composer Richard Heuberger. Two days after the Viennese premiere, Heuberger wrote to the publisher Fritz Simrock in Vienna, reporting Brahms’ reaction in some detail:

Too much that’s fragmentary, incidental, loiters about in the piece. Everything fine, musically, captivating and beautiful—but no main points! Especially in the first movement, the result is not proper. But a charming musician! When one says of Dvořák that he fails to achieve anything great and comprehensive with his pure, individual ideas, this is correct. Not so with Bruckner, all the same he offers so little!

Heuberger's letter implies that Brahms continued to admire Dvořák's fertile melodic imagination and apparently valued that above the structural integrity of Bruckner's music. The observation is surprising from a composer who was himself such a rigorous master of musical architecture.

In comparison to Brahms, Dvořák treated symphonic form flexibly. Even so, some historians have noted a stylistic change in this work, sometimes bordering on the improvisatory. English composer and conductor Julius Harrison wrote:

Melodies come and go in more rhapsodic continuity, less concerned with problems of inner contrapuntal development. Their innate charm is matched by rich yet simple harmonies mostly of a diatonic character, springing naturally from the primary triads of the key in which the music happens to be at the moment. The spirit of fanciful improvisation hovers around.

### **Childlike wonder and the appeal of rustic Bohemia**

By allowing Bohemian songs and dance tunes to dominate, Dvořák gave the symphony a celebratory, almost childlike spirit. The consistency of mood is underscored by a strong thematic relationship between the first and last movements. Both have themes based on a simple G-major triad, and the emphasis on variation technique in both movements underscores the similarities.

The inner two movements provide contrast and emotional depth. The rhapsodic Adagio, with its bird calls and wistful character, could be a musical portrait of Vysoká, the composer's beloved summer home. Dvořák's biographer Alec Robertson calls this slow movement "completely original from start to finish. It could stand as a miniature tone-poem of Czech village life described by a highly sensitive man. There is a touch of pain in the opening harmonies that becomes pronounced later on."

The predominant atmosphere, nevertheless, remains resolutely positive. Czech conductor Rafael Kubelik, rehearsing the finale's opening fanfare, is said to have told an orchestra that "in Bohemia the trumpets never call to battle—they always call to the dance." The characteristic, lighthearted rhythms do invite foot-tapping. Essentially the finale is an introduction (the fanfare), theme and variations and a coda. What you will remember are the blazing trumpet, the exuberant horn trills and the spellbinding variation for solo flute.

*Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings.*