

Antonin Dvorák
Symphony No. 5 in F major, B. 54 (Op. 76) (first published as No. 3)
by Brian Wise for AllMusic

Dvorák's Symphony No. 5 owes its genesis to a fortuitous series of events in the composer's life. At age 32, his lady friend informed him that she was pregnant, and the two were hastily married; having poor financial prospects, Dvorák did what any penniless composer of today would do: he applied for a grant. He submitted a couple of early symphonies and some chamber music to be considered for the Austrian State Prize; the judges for this contest were none other than the eminent critic Eduard Hanslick, the conductor Johann Herbeck, and the composer Johannes Brahms. Much to his surprise, Dvorák impressed the committee and he received the grant. The immediate imperatives were easily met: his son was born into good financial circumstances. An unexpected, and very fortunate, side effect was the resultant arrangement with Brahms' publisher, Fritz Simrock.

It was Simrock who began the arbitrary use of opus numbers and numbering of Dvorák's symphonies -- a practice that caused much confusion in later years. Being an astute business man, he knew perfectly well that works with higher opus number would sell better than lower numbers, and what Dvorák wanted to call his Fourth Symphony, Op. 24 (he had discarded his First Symphony altogether), was actually published as Symphony No. 3, Op. 76. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that all the confusion was cleared up, and the nine symphonies were numbered in their proper chronological sequence.

The Fifth Symphony is a finely crafted work, and an advancement beyond the best of the composer's early symphonies. It opens in a leisurely manner with an arpeggiated theme for two clarinets; this opening idea returns to dominate the development section, and the movement closes with a peaceful coda.

The Andante con moto is dominated by a plaintive, melancholy cello theme that is reminiscent of the opening of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. Dvorák continuously varies this tune, toying with the opening figure and deriving new accompaniment figures from it. Without pause, the music moves into a transition to the Scherzo, a vivacious, colorfully scored movement full of delightfully unexpected contrasts.

The Finale begins in the "wrong" key of A minor; when the music finally moves to the tonic key of F major, the effect is striking and dramatic. Reminiscences of the opening theme of the first movement conclude the Finale, which is not only the finest movement of the work, but one of Dvorák's most outstanding symphonic movements.

The Symphony No. 5 received its debut in Prague on March 25, 1879, with Adolf Cech conducting. It was subsequently dedicated to Hans von Bülow, who was a tireless advocate of the composer's symphonic works.