

Antonin Dvořák

Symphony No. 5 in F major, B. 54 (Op. 76) (first published as No. 3) by Philip Huscher for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

To the late nineteenth century, Dvořák was the composer of five—not nine—symphonies. His first four, never published during his lifetime, were unknown, and so his last, *From the New World*, spent its first half century as no. 5. The F major symphony performed at these concerts is *really* Dvořák's fifth, although it took some time to get this all straightened out. Like his nineteenth-century colleagues Schubert and Bruckner, Dvořák has been good to musicologists, who sometimes make a living cleaning up after the fact. Only with the publication of Dvořák's first four symphonies in the 1950s (the long-lost First Symphony was rediscovered after the composer's death and performed for the first time in 1936) did we begin to use the current numbering.

This F major symphony is Dvořák's most significant product of 1875, a result of the encouragement he felt after winning the Austrian competition—along with powerful endorsements and four hundred gulden—for the first time, and the most promising sign that the judges had picked extremely well. The prize launched one of the most prolific years of Dvořák's career, and in addition to this symphony, composed in just six weeks during the summer, he also wrote his five-act grand opera *Vanda* in three months and turned out several substantial chamber pieces as well. But the symphony is the giant leap—a great advance over anything he had written before. It's easy now to see it as a score of extraordinary promise, because we know the brilliant Seventh Symphony, for example, or the timeless *From the New World* that followed, but the Fifth Symphony is itself a very impressive accomplishment.

We tend to think of Brahms and Dvořák as contemporary symphonists—their most famous symphonies were all premiered within the span of some fifteen years—who influenced each other in various ways. (When Dvořák began his Seventh, for example, he was still under the spell of Brahms's new Third, which he had just heard.) But Dvořák composed this F major symphony a year before Brahms finished his first, and so this is his answer to the classics by Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann that he knew, not a reaction to Brahms. (In fact, if either composer had an influence on the other at this point, it's the other way around: Brahms got to know at least three of Dvořák's symphonies while he was still writing his first one.) Dvořák's F major symphony sings with his own unmistakable voice; it's free of the heavy Wagnerian fog that clouds some of his early works and has a natural warmth and simplicity that often eluded Brahms. Still, Dvořák couldn't escape the inevitable comparison to Brahms: when he dedicated this symphony to Hans von Bülow, the great conductor said he was thrilled to accept this honor from Dvořák, “next to Brahms, the most gifted composer of today.”

This symphony is the first important work of Dvořák's maturity, and Simrock insisted (against Dvořák's wishes) on publishing it with a phony, high opus number to give it the stature of an even later composition. (Simrock picked op. 76, which puts it in the company of pieces composed a full decade later, even though Dvořák had appropriately written op. 24 at the top of his manuscript.) For a work saddled with such a convoluted numbering history, the music itself is a marvel of natural, unfussy expression and clarity of form. The entire symphony reveals

remarkable assurance and control, suggesting that the speed of its composition was the result of certainty, not haste.

The opening *Allegro ma non troppo* is filled with genial, outdoorsy music—clarinet bird calls and hunting horns paint an inviting pastoral scene in high summer. The movement is vigorous and muscular until the very end, when Dvořák opts for quiet contentment over visceral excitement.

The melancholy Andante—an intermezzo in a moderate tempo rather than a self-important slow movement—suggests the *dumka*, the mournful peasant dance that Dvořák loved. The scherzo, which follows immediately after only a moment's hesitation, takes its time shaking the spell of the Andante before it breaks into a jovial, rustic dance. (The way Dvořák blurs the distinction between the two inner movements is novel and highly effective.)

The finale shatters the symphony's pastoral mood with its powerful opening in A minor—an unexpectedly foreign key in an F major work. Dvořák shrewdly withholds F major for a very long time, which only adds to the suspense and drama. This entire movement, with its driving rhythms, big themes, and heated development, confirms Dvořák's stature as a natural symphony composer. Both the brief, unannounced return of the opening material of the first movement, pianissimo, and the triumphant recovery of F major, celebrated with pealing trumpets, only add to its continuous sense of excitement and discovery.