

dso
DULWICH
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

Bedřich Smetana
Má Vlast - complete

Conductor Julian Williamson

Leader Paula Tysall

All Saints' Church, Lovelace
Road, London, SE21



Saturday 13 March 2010



Interval collection for St Christopher's Hospice

Bedřich Smetana - Renowned Czech Nationalist Composer *by Sam Wise*

(2 March 1824 – 12 May 1884)

Smetana was born in Litomyšl, about 200km east of Prague in what was then the Habsburg Empire, one of several kingdoms that formed the soon to be established nation of Czechoslovakia. At the time German was the official language of Bohemia and of the Smetana family. Bedřich was born halfway through a family of 12 siblings. His father was a brewer of moderate wealth, untrained but naturally gifted in music – playing violin in a string quartet. Bedřich was naturally gifted as a pianist, and though apparently only trained by his father, gave his first public performance at the age of six, playing Auber's overture to *La Muette de Portici* in the Philosophical Academy to a "rapturous" reception. The family moved into southern Bohemia, where he undertook his early education, during which he began to study violin and piano and started to compose simple pieces, one of which survives. After several changes of high school he ended up at the Academic Grammar School in Prague in 1839, with a headmaster who was a leading figure in the Czech national revival movement. However, that school too did not hold his attention and he played truant to attend musical events and wrote in his diary that he wanted "to become a Mozart in composition and a Liszt in technique". His father caught word of his truancy and increasing musical interest and, not seeing music as a suitable career, removed him from Prague to complete his education elsewhere. This didn't stop Bedřich, however, who came to be in demand as a pianist at his new location and continued to compose, his creativity largely stimulated by various youthful romances.

After his education was complete, he returned to Prague in 1843, finally with his father's blessing, to pursue a musical career, but without much financial support; his father's business being in decline. Bedřich soon found both an excellent composition teacher and a noble family desiring him as a piano tutor, so settled back into Prague in relative security. In 1847 he resigned his teaching post and undertook a local concert tour, hoping to establish himself as a concert pianist. This was not a financial success, so he returned to Prague to teach and as an accompanist in chamber concerts, however beginning to work on more major compositions. Shortly after this, through the influence of an old friend, Smetana joined the pro-democracy movement in Prague and began writing patriotic works, finally helping to man the barricades when Prague came under attack from Austrian forces, meeting his future librettist in the process. During this time he also made friends with Liszt, who encouraged him in composition through the rest of his life.

Notwithstanding his revolutionary leanings, in 1850 Bedřich accepted a position in Habsburg monarch Ferdinand's court as pianist, continued teaching in his piano institute, but increased his compositional output. In the following years members of his family were stricken with illness, leading to several deaths of children and other relatives; political turmoil increased in Prague and his importance there waned.

Writing to his parents "Prague did not wish to acknowledge me, so I left it" in 1856, he left not only Prague, but also his remaining daughter and tuberculosis ridden wife behind, heading for Gothenburg, Sweden. In what he described as a musically unsophisticated city, he temporarily found his niche, soon to be overwhelmed with success in his new music school and as conductor of the Gothenburg Society for Classical Choral Music, finding little time for composition. In 1857 he returned to Prague briefly to collect the remaining family members, his wife succumbing to her disease in 1859 in Gothenburg. This period saw his penning of larger works and his marriage to his brother's sister-in-law Bettina, 16 years his younger, a marriage which in later years would prove devoid of love.

Meanwhile the Habsburg Empire fell from power, bringing a more enlightened atmosphere to Prague. Dabbling again unsuccessfully as a touring concert pianist and finding some rejection in real contentment. It is to this that I will sacrifice myself". Prague was to become his (almost) permanent home.

Failing to gain the conductorship of the new Provisional Theatre he applied himself to the next opportunity – a competition for each of the best comic and historical operas based on Czech culture. In 1863, he submitted the score of his first opera *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*. Having spent his youth in the language and culture of Germany he set out to master the Czech language – studying, reading, writing and taking it up as his normal spoken language. In 1864, he was fluent enough to be appointed as music critic to the main Czech language newspaper. Then in January 1866 his *Brandenburgers* was publically performed to much acclaim in a sold out Provisional Theatre, against the wishes of its artistic director, and later that year was announced as winner of the competition he had entered three years earlier. Now, having achieved the response he always considered that he deserved his *Bartered Bride* was readily accepted at the theatre. Sadly, the performance was a failure, not due to its own qualities, but an imminently expected invasion from the Prussians. However, later on in 1870, when things had calmed down, the new opera found tremendous public success. When the military risks were over Bedřich finally achieved his long-standing ambition – appointment as principal conductor to the Provisional Theatre. Surviving criticism and accusations from jealous competitors about his musical influences and style that were intended to dethrone him, Smetana found himself in the end with an increased salary and laying the stone for the new National Theatre – which survives to this day as the Prague Opera House.

In 1874 Smetana was not well and was heading toward complete deafness. This none-the-less began a period of sustained composition that continued until his death, in an insane asylum, in 1884. At first the diagnosis was senile dementia, but later an autopsy revealed signs of syphilis as the underlying cause.

The basic materials from which Smetana fashioned his art were nationalism, realism and romanticism. A particular feature of all his later music is its descriptive character – all his major compositions outside his operas are written to programmes, and many are specifically autobiographical. *Má Vlast* was begun in 1872, in his years of waning health, but near the height of his nationalistic feelings. Musicologist John Clapham states that the cycle presents "a cross-section of Czech history and legend and impressions of its scenery, and... conveys vividly to us Smetana's view of the ethos and greatness of the nation".

At its first performance "Everyone rose to his feet and the same storm of unending applause was repeated after each of the six parts... At the end of *Blaník* [the final part] the audience was beside itself and the people could not bring themselves to take leave of the composer".

Smetana dedicated *Má Vlast* to the city of Prague. After its first performance in November 1882, it was acclaimed by the Czech musical public as the true representation of Czech national style. Its *Vltava* movement depicting the river that runs through Prague towards its junction with the Elbe is Smetana's best-known and most internationally popular orchestral composition. Despite its nationalistic associations this work has carried Smetana's name further afield than anything else he wrote, with the exception of *The Bartered Bride Overture*.

For tonight's performance Julian has decided change the usual order of the movements. We shall not be performing them in order of composition, but in a way which makes more musical sense.

- 1) Vyšehrad
- 2) Tábor
- 3) Blaník

INTERVAL

During the interval please give generously to the collection for St. Christopher's Hospice

- 4) Šárka
- 5) Z českých luhů a hájů (From Bohemia's Woods and Fields)
- 6) Vltava (Moldau)

Violin	Viola	Flute	Trumpet
Paula Tysall (<i>leader</i>)	Frances Barrett	Sam Purser	Robert Johnstone
Helen Bartholomew	Brian Clarke	Annabel Noton	Susan Emmons
Chris Burns	Laura Davis		
Katherine Byrne	Sara Jones	Piccolo	Trombone
Anna Carlisle	David Lawes	Alison Gill	Charles Mackworth-Young
Elizabeth Cleary	Alan Taylor		Steve Jenkins
Tessa Crilly		Oboe	
Jo Duggan	Cello	Louise Simon	Bass Trombone
Sophia Eberhard	Nicky Jackson	Ian Finn	John Bell
Emma Gant	Caroline Annesley		
Paul Gray	Russell Ashley-Smith	Clarinet	Tuba
Jane Howard	Sarah Bort	Roland McCabe	Mike Llewellyn
Nuri Koseoglu	Fiona Clarey	Brendan O'Neill	
Robert Pack	Bridgid Constantine		Timpani
Sarah Priscott	Margaret Hodgson	Bassoon	Tony Maloney
Iain Speirs (<i>leader 2nds</i>)	Oliver Pearce	Hilary Dodd	
Nancy Taylor	I-An Tai	Jeremy Crump	Percussion
Ted Thornhill	Peter Watkins		David Holmes
Jill Vaughan		Horn	George Bird
Robin White	Double Bass	Graham Vernon	Laurence Rowley-Abel
	Sam Wise	Ellie Latter	
Harp	Chris Bond	Catharine Raitt	
Elizabeth McNulty	Jerelle Jacob	Lindsay Ryan (<i>Asst. Conductor</i>)	
Federica Mossone	Simon Wolf		

Julian Williamson

In a career spanning nearly fifty years, Julian Williamson has conducted choirs and orchestras in many parts of England and abroad. He has directed concerts in all the major concert venues in London and has given many performances all over the country. He also spends much time lecturing, a part of his work which takes him all over Britain and beyond.

The next DSO concert is on Saturday 26th June at All Saints' Church
 The programme will consist of works by Elgar, Alwyn and Wagner
 plus the winner of the Philip McKenna Young Composer Award

Support the DSO! Use the link to Amazon on our home page for your shopping and Amazon will make a donation to the orchestra.