

Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60

Antonín Dvořák

During Antonín Dvořák's formative years his musical training was modest and he was a competent, if hardly distinguished, pupil. As a teenager he managed to secure a spot as violist in a dance orchestra. The group prospered, and in 1862 its members became the founding core of the Provisional Theatre orchestra. Dvořák would play principal viola in the group for nine years, in which capacity he sat directly beneath the batons of such conductors as Bedřich Smetana and Richard Wagner.

During that time Dvořák also honed his skills as a composer, and by 1871 he felt compelled to leave the orchestra and devote himself to composing full-time. This entailed considerable financial risk, but the aspiring composer eked out a living by giving piano lessons and playing the organ at St. Adalbert's Church in Prague. In 1874 he received his first real break as a composer when he was awarded the Austrian State Stipendium, a grant created by the Ministry of Education to assist young, poor, gifted musicians — which perfectly defined Dvořák's status at the time; he continued to receive the prize annually through 1878. Johannes Brahms served on the Stipendium panel and recommended the emerging composer to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock, writing: "Dvořák has written all manner of things: operas (Czech), symphonies, quartets, piano pieces. In any case, he is a very talented man. Moreover, he is poor!" Simrock lost no time publishing the Moravian Duets, commissioning a collection of Slavonic Dances, and contracting a first option on Dvořák's new works.

When he came to write this D-major Symphony, in 1880, Dvořák was therefore a relatively recent acquaintance to most music lovers. Nonetheless, he had been busy

composing even when nobody was listening and had already completed five symphonies (obviously, this being his Sixth). These early orchestral pieces were essential workshops for the development of his personal style, forums in which he might try his hand at compositional techniques that had worked for others, while injecting something of his own into the mix. His Third Symphony (1873), for example, was a fascinating and adept exercise in Wagnerism, a flirtation that ultimately would not predominate in Dvořák's musical language. His Sixth is just as overtly a paean to his true mentor, Brahms, and most especially an emulation of Brahms's recent Second Symphony (1877), also in D major.

Like Brahms's Second, Dvořák's Sixth may be regarded as a virtual "Pastoral Symphony." Several passages may leave listeners wondering if some pages have gotten collated into the parts mistakenly and the orchestra has strangely drifted off mid-phrase into Brahms-land. A bit of Beethoven's Ninth

In Short

Born: September 8, 1841, in Mühlhausen (Nelahozeves), Bohemia (today the Czech Republic)

Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague

Work composed: August 27–October 15, 1880; dedicated to the conductor Hans Richter

World premiere: March 25, 1881, in Prague, by the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra, Adolf Čech, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 6, 1883, Theodore Thomas, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 10, 2016, Jiří Bělohlávek, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 41 minutes

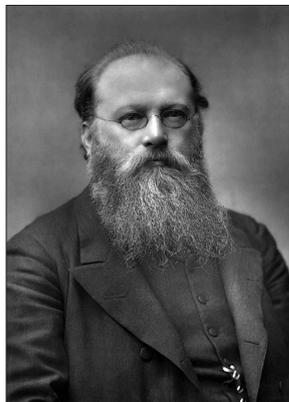
Symphony seems to have gotten appended, too, at the opening of the *Adagio*, and more than a few modulations in this symphony may strike us as Schubertian. Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms are not bad models for an emerging symphonist, and one shouldn't be too hard on Dvořák for not distancing himself more unambiguously from those archetypes. The fact is that there is plenty in this symphony that could be called “genuine Dvořák,” probably nowhere more than in the third movement, which is meant to evoke a *furiant*, a swirling Bohemian folk dance.

Dvořák, a man of the 19th century rather than the 20th, did not feel compelled to re-invent the premise of the symphony, and

he was content, certainly at this formative point in his career, to add his voice in modest increments to the symphonic language he inherited from earlier masters. In the three symphonies that still lay ahead for him — his Seventh in 1884–85, his Eighth in 1889, and his Ninth (*From the New World*) in 1892–93 — he would display a firmer sense of independence from his models. He was already on that path when he composed his Sixth Symphony, a formidable marker at the intersection of indebtedness and individuality.

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

The Dedication



Hans Richter, ca. 1880

“Hansi Richterovi” reads the line above the title on the first page of Dvořák’s score: “To Hans Richter.” As principal conductor of the Vienna Court Opera and the Vienna Philharmonic, Richter was at the center of European musical life. After conducting Dvořák’s Slavonic Rhapsody No. 3 in November 1879, he asked the little-known composer to write a symphony for the Vienna Philharmonic. Dvořák delivered this D-major Symphony a year later. They played through it at the piano (with the conductor hugging the composer after each movement). But the premiere was postponed several times, officially because Richter was overburdened with family problems but in reality because of anti-Czech sentiments in the orchestra’s ranks, which had already been simmering when the Slavonic Rhapsody No. 3 was in rehearsal.

Ever hopeful that he could mediate a resolution, Richter kept skirting the real issue in his gracious letters to the composer. Eventually Dvořák realized what was going on and, while he kept Richter’s name as dedicatee, he sought a performance elsewhere. He turned to his friend Adolf Čech, a colleague since they had shared a stand in the Provisional Theatre’s viola section years earlier. Čech had conducted the first performances of Dvořák’s *Stabat Mater* in 1880 and of his Fifth Symphony the year before that, and when he led the world premiere of the Sixth Symphony, in Prague in March 1881, the audience demanded that the *Scherzo* be repeated. Dvořák and Richter remained friends despite this mishap, and it was Richter’s conducting of Dvořák’s Sixth Symphony in London in 1882 that led to the Royal Philharmonic Society’s commissioning the composer’s next symphony, which Dvořák himself — considerably more famous by that time — conducted at its premiere in 1885.