

# Classical Series 8 - Program Notes

## Bedřich Smetana

March 2, 1824 – May 12, 1884

### **Overture to *The Bartered Bride***

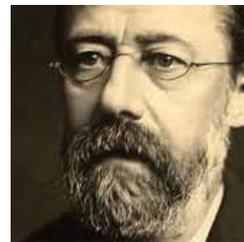
During the Seventeenth Century, the Habsburg Empire swallowed up the Czech people in Bohemia and did everything it could to extinguish their distinctive culture and language. The Empire's efforts did not succeed, however, in large measure because Bedřich Smetana purposefully created a Czech national music as a patriotic instrument. His music preserved and celebrated his people's cultural heritage, engendered strong ethnic pride among them, and galvanized their collective spirits. He did it not by simply quoting their folk music, but by capturing their spirit, the distinctive cadence of their spoken language, and the compelling rhythms of their dances.

Smetana's efforts paid off in 1919 after WWI when the Treaty of St. Germain dissolved the Austro-Hungarian Empire and created three new independent states: Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia. Who would have guessed that the power of music led by one composer's opera could have helped found a nation. Bedřich Smetana, the father of his country?

Smetana's rustic comic opera *The Bartered Bride* is the centerpiece of his nationalistic works. It is a fast-paced tale of love and chicanery. Jeník and Mařenka plan to marry, but alas, Mařenka's greedy father has arranged through a village marriage broker for a more lucrative nuptial arrangement for his daughter. The better prospect? None other than the witless Vašek, who turns out to be Jeník's half-brother. This plot creates endless opportunities for fun and mischief as Jeník successfully schemes to undo the deal, pocket the broker's fee, and end up at the altar with his beloved Mařenka.

Smetana's rollicking curtain-raising Overture sets the mood for the whirlwind story that follows. The Overture is ebullient, high-energy, and provides a real workout for our musicians.

*The Bartered Bride*, should its subtitle be "The opera that toppled an empire?" So many forces seem to try to drive us apart. Isn't it reassuring to know that something exists that can bring us together? Yes, music!



## Frédéric Chopin

March 1, 1810 – October 17, 1849

### **Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor**

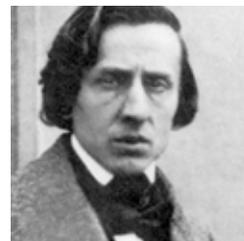
Bartolomeo Cristofori, a harpsichord maker from Padua, Italy, invented the piano in 1709. His purpose was to overcome one of the harpsichord's limitations: because its strings were plucked with a keyboard-activated quill, it was incapable of playing softer or louder no matter how hard the keys were depressed. Therefore, it lacked an important expressive weapon in its sonic arsenal. Cristofori replaced the picks with hammers, and presto, an entirely new sound with new unlimited nuanced capabilities. In fact Cristofori called it a "gravicembalo col piano e forte," "piano" meaning soft and "forte" loud.

Nevertheless, the "pianoforte" was not an immediate success. The primitive iron strings were strung on a wooden frame, and the keyboard covered only four or five octaves, not almost seven like today's version. Moreover, the mechanism was fragile and often broke down during a performance. J.S. Bach turned up his nose at it in 1736, dismissing the treble as being too weak and the action too stiff. Mozart, schooled in the harpsichord and the organ, did not warm up to the piano until the 1770s. By 1800, however the piano had dislodged the harpsichord from its throne, thanks to improvements in construction and a compositional change in focus from the polyphonic sound of Baroque music to the homophonic – or single melody – style of the Romantics. Pianos became the rage of Europe, like the iPhones of today. Music was the dominant performing art, and the piano was its voice.

The musical horizons of the adolescent piano in 1800 were like the Old West in the United States – vast, open to exploration, and seemingly limitless. Mozart and Beethoven paved the way to the piano's Mississippi River, but two intrepid pioneers, two geniuses, showed us the way from Missouri to the Pacific Ocean: Liszt and Chopin.

The pair started as friends, but they could not have been more different. They took completely diverse artistic and personal paths, and they ended up not talking to each other. Chopin became the anti-Liszt.

Liszt was the ultimate virile showboat. Everything he did was grandiose, way over the top, and designed to get attention. His virtuosic style of playing bordered on the histrionic. He created the "symphonic poem," incorporating secondary programs into his music.



Chopin, on the other hand, was reserved, rather shy, and physically infirm, a victim of “consumption.” He rarely performed in public settings, preferring the intimacy of a salon. There is nothing in his music but pure unadulterated music. For him, the piano and his compositions were not ends, but means to explore who we are. Liszt’s compositions have largely faded into the background, but Chopin’s etudes, mazurkas, ballades, polonaises, nocturnes, waltzes, and fantasies are as fresh and popular today as they were two hundred years ago. Liszt captured the tenor of his time, Chopin the arc of forever.

Tonight, Chopin’s Piano Concerto No. 2, composed when he was only twenty-four years old. He wrote part of it while dreaming about an unrequited love, the soprano Konstancja Gladkowska: In a letter to a friend, he said, “Six months have collapsed and I have not yet exchanged a syllable with her of whom I dream every night. While my thoughts were with her, I composed the Adagio of my concerto.”

Unfortunately, Chopin lived before recorded music. Thus, all we have are contemporary descriptions of his art. At the age of seventeen, a pianist who in later years was to become a celebrated conductor, said this: “I heard Chopin. That was beyond all words. The few senses I had have quite left me. He is no man, he is an angel, a god. There is nothing to remind one that it is a human being who produced this music – so pure, so clear, so spiritual.” Sixty years later, and having heard all the greats of his century, he said, “I can confidently assert that nobody has ever been able to reproduce [his works] as they sounded under his magical fingers. In listening to him, you lost all power of analysis; you did not for a moment think how perfect was his execution of this or that difficulty; you listened, as it were, to the improvisation of a poem, and were under the charm as long as it lasted.”

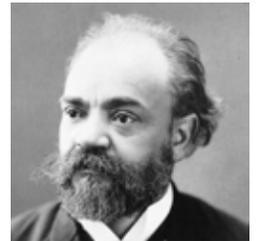
To quote Robert Schumann, “Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!”

## Antonin Dvořák

September 8, 1841 – May 1, 1904

### **Symphony No. 9 “From the New World”**

Dvořák was born in Bohemia, now called the Czech Republic or Czechia. He was the son of a butcher and expected to follow in his father’s footsteps. We might never have heard of Dvořák had it not been for a rancorous fight between Brahms, on one side, and Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, on the other, an aesthetic fight about the proper essence of music. Liszt had founded what he called the “New German School of Music,” the credo of which was that music must incorporate the other arts – literature, poetry, myth, etc. in order to achieve its full potential. This “new music” imported into compositions actual programs or themes, and stories and ideas that were non-musical in nature. To accomplish this objective, Liszt wrote what he called “symphonic poems,” each of which had an extra-musical unspoken script.



Brahms, who was a staunch musical conservative, hated Liszt and his theory of the “music of the future,” calling it self-serving gobbledygook. Brahms publicly described the new music as “rambling, histrionic, and evil – a threat to the true art.” Brahms believed that adding anything external to music simply polluted or adulterated it, and that music needed to stand on its own without any crutches to prop it up. Wagner loudly proclaimed, “I and my compatriots have revolutionized music, delivered it from the stale abstractions of the past into a world of infinite freedom, and achieved a unity of the arts toward which the entire history of humankind has evolved. Then this boy [Brahms] comes along writing sonatas and variations and fugues like some damned periwigged composer a hundred years ago, and Schumann declares him the Messiah.”

But what do you need if you are in a war, even a war of words and ideas? You need allies, and Brahms found a musical ally in Dvořák who shared Brahms’ musical philosophy: No crutches, thank you, just pure music. Brahms convinced his musical publisher Simrock to take on Dvořák as a client. Thanks to the wide distribution of his music at the behest of his mentor, Dvořák soon became well-known.

The beloved folk music of his homeland influenced Dvořák’s style. He was quickly branded as a “nationalist composer,” a style which was in vogue between 1850-1900. In an age when nationalism was the political, cultural, and musical rage in Europe, we in the United States had no music of our own. We were mired in the Old World models, mostly from Germany and Austria. This situation did not sit well with a wealthy handful of American patrons of serious music who believed we should stop imitating and borrowing from the Germans and develop music that reflected our own national character. So Jeanette Thurber, the wife of a wealthy wholesale grocer, founded the “National Conservatory of Music” in New York City in 1888 and set out to find someone who could lead her Conservatory in a search for a distinctive American style of serious music. And, if you were looking in 1890 for a big name, who knew how to write music of a national character and was not stuck in the German tradition, who might come to your attention? Antonin Dvořák. When she offered him a salary of twenty times what he was earning in Prague, he accepted and boarded a ship for America.

After Dvořák arrived in New York, he said to the throng of reporters who greeted him: “I am convinced that the future music in this country must be founded on what are called ‘Negro melodies.’ These can be the foundation of a serious and original

school of composition, to be developed in the United States. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them.”

In New York Dvořák soon became homesick for Bohemia. Instead of going home to Europe, however, he went to a Czech colony in Spillville, Iowa where people spoke his native language, ate his native food, and practiced his native culture. It was here, in this Czech enclave, that he finished his New World Symphony.

This masterpiece received its premiere in Carnegie Hall in 1893 in New York City to great acclaim. Immediately people began to scour it for evidence of musical quotations from American songs. Finding a resemblance between the symphony and our folk music became an obsession in some quarters. This “parlor game” angered Dvořák who tried to throw cold water on the idea that he had merely orchestrated existing material. He publicly derided as “nonsense” claims that he used actual African-American or Native American tunes in his symphony, insisting that he only wrote “in the spirit of native American music.” Whatever its precise inspiration, the New World Symphony manages to embody the turn-of-the-century American spirit.

As an aside, the closest anyone can find to an actual musical quotation comes in the second theme of the first movement, where Dvořák's favorite spiritual, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, seems to make an appearance – that is, if you have an active imagination.