

Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70
Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Bohemia, the western portion of what we now know as the Czech Republic, has long been known as one of the most deeply musical regions of Europe. During the 1770s the traveling English scholar Charles Burney was astonished at the level of musicality throughout Bohemia, writing that “not only in every large town but in all villages . . . children of both sexes are taught music.”

Nestled cozily next to present-day Austria and Germany, Bohemia had long been a bicultural region where Czechs and German-speakers coexisted. Yet even in the late-19th century, success in cultivated Prague paled next to fame in Vienna—still considered the cultural capital of Central Europe. Thus it was with some bitterness that Dvořák received the news, in 1883, that the Vienna State Opera had rejected his Czech operas *The Cunning Peasant* and *Dimitrij*, which were hugely popular in Prague.

During this same period, curiously, Dvořák found that his “serious” works were received more warmly in Britain than on the Continent. His *Stabat Mater* had created a sensation there in 1883, and when he arrived in London with his Sixth Symphony in 1884, the Royal Philharmonic Society invited him to become a member—and commissioned him to write a new symphony. In April 1885 he returned to conduct the Seventh, which was again greeted with enormous enthusiasm. “The English again welcomed me as heartily and demonstrably as before,” the composer wrote to a friend. “The Symphony was immensely successful.” More than one writer has dubbed the Seventh “Brahms’s Fifth,” and it indeed contains much of the Hamburg master’s propulsive drama. “I wanted to justify Brahms’s words when

A RINGING ENDORSEMENT

The British critic Donald Francis Tovey, who doled out praise sparingly, wrote that he had “no hesitation in setting Dvořák’s [Seventh] along with the C-major Symphony of Schubert [No. 9] and the four symphonies of Brahms as among the greatest and purest examples in this art-form since Beethoven.”

he said, ‘I imagine your new symphony will be quite unlike the D major [the Sixth],’ ” Dvořák wrote to Simrock in 1885. “There shall be no grounds for thinking he was wrong.”

Dvořák well understood the Brahmsian art of capturing the listener’s attention by opening a piece with concise and easily grasped but “loaded” thematic material. The Seventh’s Allegro maestoso, with its puzzlingly incomplete first subject, invites the listener on a long journey. The Poco adagio contains one of the composer’s most lyrical central themes, and the majestic Vivace is a tension-charged scherzo along the lines of the parallel movement of Beethoven’s Ninth. The final Allegro sets the ear on edge with a highly unstable opening chord: Its storm-clouds are never fully dispersed, as the D-major conclusion feels more like resignation than resolution. ✕

40 minutes ■ 4 movements

THE PRE-AMERICAN DVOŘÁK

Dvořák’s Seventh Symphony predated his famous sojourn in the United States by eight years. Still, so indelible is the imprint of the “New World” Symphony, as well as its origin story, that it’s easy to forget that its unique voice was one Dvořák had established long before he ever contemplated a Stateside visit.