Dvořák Symphonies Nos. 7, 8, 9

Czech Philharmonic

Semyon Bychkov

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Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Disc 1

	Symphony No. 7 in D Minor, Op. 70, B. 141 (1885)	
1	I. Allegro moderato	11. 02
2	II. Poco adagio	9. 30
3	III. Scherzo. Vivace - Poco meno mosso	7. 37
4	IV. Allegro	9. 45
	Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88, B. 163 (1889-1890)	
5	I. Allegro con brio	9. 59
6	II. Adagio	10. 36
7	III. Alegretto grazioso	6. 50
8	IV. Allegro ma non troppo	10. 15
	Total playing time:	75. 42

Disc 2

	Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95, B. 178 "From the New World (Z Nového světa)" (1893)	
1	I. Adagio - Allegro molto	12. 30
2	II. Largo	11. 12
3	III. Allegro vivace - Poco sostenuto	7. 52
4	IV. Allegro con fuoco	11. 21
	Nature, Life and Love (1891-1892)	
5	**In Nature's Realm (V přírodě), concert overture, Op. 91, B. 168**	14. 26
6	**Carnival (Karneval), concert overture, Op. 92, B. 169**	9. 59
7	**Othello, concert overture, Op. 93, B. 174**	14. 35
	Total playing time:	82. 01

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conducted by **Semyon Bychkov**

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Dvořák's nine symphonies are among the most varied of any composed in the nineteenth century. The last three in particular show an astonishing range of style and expression reflecting the markedly different circumstances in which they were written: the Seventh composed for an enthusiastic London audience in England in 1885, the Eighth, conceived in the Bohemian countryside in 1889, primarily for himself, and the Symphony 'From the New World' (Z nového světa), as its title suggests, written during his time in America reflecting the excitement of new surroundings and influences. Between composing the eighth and ninth symphonies, Dvořák's muse took off in a more programmatic direction with the overture cycle, *Nature, Life and Love*. Although each has a clear mood and narrative, and sharing a distinctive melodic idea, they are also powerfully symphonic.

During the late 1870s Dvořák was becoming well known through publication and performance in Austria and Germany. In

Britain, also, his reputation advanced speedily following performances of three of the *Slavonic Dances* in 1879 and his appearance in March 1884 to conduct his *Stabat Mater* in the Albert Hall was greeted with huge enthusiasm. Honorary membership of the Philharmonic Society followed along with a commission for an orchestral work that became the seventh symphony.

Well aware of the Society's distinction - in 1817 it had commissioned Beethoven's ninth symphony — and high public expectations, Dvořák was determined to produce a work that would in his own words 'stir the world'. He sketched the symphony late in 1884, taking great pains to get the start of the work absolutely right, and completed the score on 17 March 1885. His arrival to conduct the premiere in London on 22 April 1885 was keenly anticipated and was a clear public success. Nevertheless, Dvořák made extensive revisions, including cutting nearly a third of the slow movement, before the symphony was published.

A tone of high seriousness is clear from the opening of the work with a determined first idea (inspired, according to the composer, by the arrival of a train of anti-imperial activists in Prague station). Dvořák's development of this theme is powerful, passionate and highly dramatic, particularly in the way it brings the movement to a subdued close.

The *Poco adagio* begins with a melody of disarming innocence leading to a ravishing passage for the solo horn. Overall, this movement is clear testimony to Dvořák's ability to produce music of remarkable depth from material of deceptive simplicity. The Scherzo begins softly but with excitable cross-rhythms soon builds to exhilarating climaxes. Emerging gently from all this turbulence, the Trio has an air of pastoral calm, but its role as a 'still centre' soon gives way to vigorous development of its main melody leading back to the heady excitement of the *Scherzo*.

The Finale opens in measured fashion. Two thematic ideas generate an irresistible sense of forward motion before relaxing into one of the loveliest symphonic melodies Dvořák ever composed. While there is much storm and stress in the development of ideas, the argument is guided with unerring skill toward a glorious major-key close.

Four years were to pass before Dvořák composed another symphony. In the interval he had certainly been busy with the oratorio *St Ludmila* for England in 1886, a second set of *Slavonic Dances*, the renowned A Major Piano Quintet in 1887 and in 1888 one of his finest operas, *The Jakobin*. When he settled down to working on a symphony early in September 1889, he could be content that his reputation at home and abroad was secure. Unlike the Seventh, his Eighth was not written to commission. Dvořák may have had in mind a performance during an upcoming tour to Russia in March 1890, but given his own comments it seems the symphony was written primarily for himself. He sketched it at his country home in Vysoká and completed the score in Prague on 8 November. The première, conducted by the composer, in Prague on 2 February 1890 and subsequent performance in London in April were both major successes.

Given the idyllic surroundings in which it was composed and the composer's well-known love of nature, much emphasis has been placed on the symphony's pastoral qualities. There are certainly allusions to birdsong, a sound beloved by Dvořák, in the first and second movements, but as a whole the symphony is marked by extraordinary mood swings and many of its melodies are coloured by soulful minor keys. In the summer before he composed the work, Dvořák's sister-in law had died affecting his family greatly. He was also clearly aware that the symphony was unlike his previous

works in the form suggesting in his note for the première that he wanted to present his thoughts in a new and different manner.

The symphony is indeed quite different from the Seventh not least the musical material: the first movement's opening theme, hovering between minor and major modes, seems almost like a slow introduction. A simple melody on solo flute, immediately evocative of birdsong, initiates a wealth of ideas all apparently new, but subtly linked with a strong sense of rhythmic purpose. This same sense of purpose results in a magnificently stormy recapitulation after which Dvořák restores the gentle calm of the opening of the movement before an infectiously cheerful close.

A single melody dominates the *Adagio*; its strong narrative quality draws the listener in as if a story is being told. The critic of *The Musical Times* claimed insider knowledge that there was indeed a 'story connected with it' adding that the composer was keeping it to himself. The result is a movement of enormous contrasts in which seductive lyricism frames music of dark, almost violent passion. The graceful third movement is quite unlike any of Dvořák's Scherzos. A limpid falling melody, exquisitely orchestrated, seems to evoke the gentle murmur of a stream. The winning, songlike main theme of the Trio is in fact derived from a rather wistful aria from Dvořák's early comic opera, *The Stubborn Lovers*.

The Finale is perhaps the most experimental movement of all. An ear-catching trumpet call initiates a free-wheeling mix of variation and concentrated development leading to a ruminative presentation of the main melodic idea before an uproarious conclusion.

The Eighth Symphony clearly indicated that Dvořák was moving in new directions. Earlier in 1889 he had composed a series of picturesque piano pieces, the *Poetic Tone Pictures*, just before starting work on the

Eighth Symphony. In 1891 he began another avowedly programmatic work, a cycle of orchestral overtures entitled *Nature, Life and Love,* completing all three in January 1892. When it came to publication in 1894, however, Dvořák recognised that each was a 'work on its own' and suggested the titles *Amid Nature* (published in English as *In Nature's Realm*), *Carnival* and *Othello*. Notwithstanding eager interest from abroad, Dvořák conducted the premiere in the Rudolfinum in Prague with the orchestra of the National Theatre on 28 April 1892.

The theme that unites the three overtures emerges over a pulsing accompaniment at the start of *In Nature's Realm* joined by hints of birdsong before the music rises to a climax evoking an individual's gradual awakening to the beauty of nature. Notwithstanding vigorous symphonic development, Dvořák never loses sight of his 'nature' theme treating it with delicacy and excitement before drawing the work to a close with a return to the quiet expectancy of the opening.

The second overture is much simpler in outline. Brilliant outer portions capture all the wild excitements of the 'carnival' of its title. In the central *Andante con moto* Dvořák creates a sultry atmosphere during which the 'nature' theme floats over an exotic instrumental accompaniment taking on a sensuous quality perhaps reflecting the work's original title, *Life*.

The high seriousness of *Othello* prompted Dvořák to consider calling it 'Tragic' or 'Eroica', before settling definitively on *Othello*. His pencil notes on the score indicate strong links to Shakespeare's drama. The solemn opening introduces the falling figure associated with Othello's jealousy and the 'nature' theme on flute and clarinet in sinister guise, a premonition of the tragedy about to unfold. Both ideas are drawn into the symphonic *Allegro con brio* that follows. A rising melody evokes

the lovers' embracing followed by amorous, almost Wagnerian, descending chords. According to Dvořák's notes Othello's jealousy grows during the development in which the 'nature' theme acquires an increasingly threatening character before a climax signalling Desdemona's murder. Gentler music follows as she proclaims her innocence before dying, succeeded by Othello's memories of their love and feelings of intolerable guilt. His inevitable suicide dominates the furious final pages of this stirring masterpiece.

Dvořák's decision, after much deliberation, to take up the offer to become Director of the National Conservatory of Music of America in 1892 was arguably the most momentous of his life. His welcome in New York in the autumn of 1892 was certainly warm, although it was clear to him that expectations were high as he wrote to a friend: 'The Americans look forward to great things from me ... in short to create a new national music'. Notwithstanding a busy schedule, he sketched some ideas for a symphony shortly before Christmas and, working rapidly, completed the outline of the first three movements by the end of January 1893. His teaching at the Conservatory prevented concentrated work during the winter, but by 24 May the score was complete. The première on 16 December in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic conducted by Anton Seidl was the greatest triumph of Dvořák's career and the 'New World' rapidly became one of the world's favourite symphonies.

The symphony's popularity with listeners derives from many factors, notably its engaging, frankly 'hummable', melodies, rhythmic dynamism and brilliant colouring. Dvořák was well aware of the impact of America on the work, writing to a close Czech friend that anyone with a 'nose must sense the influence of America'. He had always used pentatonic colouring and his exposure to the rich repertoire of Afro-American music intensified this tendency with their flavour clear in many places.

The first movement's slow introduction creates a sense of expectancy before the temperature rises with hints of excitement to come. The succeeding *Allegro molto* has enormous dynamism with an infectious main theme that sticks in the mind and is immediately identifiable when it returns as a motto later in the symphony.

A magical sequence of chords preludes the unforgettable first melody of the *Largo*; its unashamedly vocal character relates to the fact that the slow movement was in Dvořák's own words a 'study' for an opera based on Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. The instrumental detail in this movement is remarkable, nowhere more so than at the end of the central section where wind instruments produce an eruption of birdsong leading to a powerful climax before a poetic return of the main theme.

The *Scherzo*, contrasting pounding rhythms and gentle pentatonic melody, frames a genial waltz by way of a Trio that would not be out of place in one of his *Slavonic Dances*. Abrupt gestures prepare the listener for the *Finale*'s assertive main theme; its striving, march-like character is followed by a ravishing melody for solo clarinet, again vocal in character. As in the *Largo* and *Scherzo* Dvořák draws in melodies from earlier movements sometimes almost nostalgically, before a stormy and celebratory close the final chord of which dwindles memorably into silence.

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