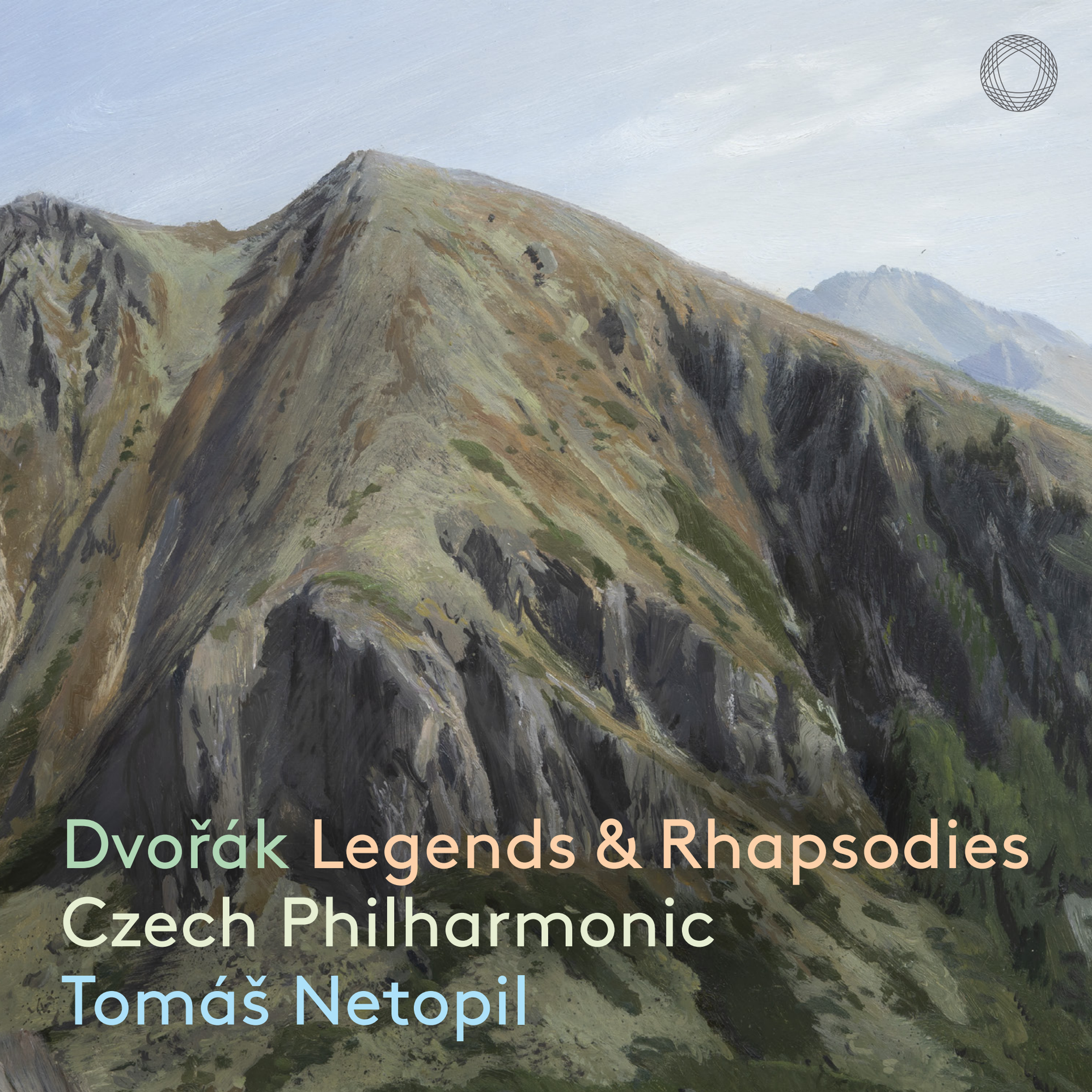

Dvořák Legends & Rhapsodies

Czech Philharmonic

Tomáš Netopil

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Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

	Legends, Op. 59, B. 122 (1881)	
1	No. 1 Allegretto	3. 12
2	No. 2 Molto moderato	4. 20
3	No. 3 Allegro giusto	4. 04
4	No. 4 Molto maestoso	5. 46
5	No. 5 Allegro giusto	4. 17
6	No. 6 Allegro con moto	5. 15
7	No. 7 Allegretto grazioso	2. 57
8	No. 8 Un poco allegretto e grazioso	4. 09
9	No. 9 Andante con moto	2. 46
10	No. 10 Andante	4. 20
	Slavonic Rhapsodies,Op. 45, B. 86 (1878)	
11	No. 1 in D major	12. 28
12	No. 2 in G minor	13. 13
13	No. 3 in A-Flat Major	13. 39
	Total playing time:	80. 35

Czech Philharmonic
conducted by **Tomáš Netopil**

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Slavonic Rhapsodies and Legends

The rise in national awareness that swept through Europe in the nineteenth century had a huge political impact, not least in Germany and Italy. For the Czechs, as part of the Austrian Empire, independent nationhood remained an aspiration rather than a reality until after the First World War, but the impact on their sense of identity had a profound effect on all aspects of culture. Since the mid-seventeenth century, Prague had been largely a German-speaking city, but during the nineteenth century opportunities for factory work drew large numbers of people into the capital from the countryside and by the 1870s the city had a majority of Czech speakers. Unsurprisingly, there was a growing demand for cultural institutions not least a theatre for plays and opera in Czech, which eventually opened in 1862.

A sequence of nationally-inspired comic and serious operas developed over the next few years led by Smetana. Within a few years composers soon found other ways to celebrate their nation in music. As with opera, Smetana took a lead in his cycle of six symphonic poems, *My Country* (Má vlast) celebrating the history, mythology and landscape of Bohemia. Smetana was not the first; the young Zdeněk Fibich wrote the first symphonic poem based on Czech legend with *Záboj, Slavoj a Luděk* premiered in May 1874 some months before Smetana had completed the first in his *My Country* cycle.

Dvořák took to celebrating 'Czechness' in orchestral music rather later in the 1870s. He had already made significant contributions to his nation's music with three operas based firmly in the growing tradition of Czech comic opera, and in 1876 a series of Moravian Duets which on the instigation of Brahms were published in Germany by Simrock the following year. 1878 proved something of an *annus mirabilis* in Dvořák's cultivation of the native accent. At the prompting of Simrock, clearly sensing a profitable publishing opportunity, Dvořák composed a series of *Slavonic Dances* for piano duet followed immediately by an orchestral version; these proved startlingly successful and did much to take his name across Europe, Britain and the United States. Shortly before beginning work on the Dances, in February and March, he produced his first orchestral work of an overtly national character, the Slavonic Rhapsody in D Major followed by two more in G Minor and A-Flat Major, composed between August and December later in 1878. (An earlier orchestral *Rhapsody* (op. 14, B 44) from 1874, later retitled *Symphonic Poem*, has nothing to do with the *Rhapsodies* of 1878).

Although the three *Rhapsodies* are grouped together under the same opus number, they are quite separate entities with none of the thematic interplay that links four of the six symphonic poems of Smetana 's *Má vlast* which Dvořák would surely have heard at their premieres between 1875 and 1877. At times Dvořák approaches the impassioned rhetoric of Smetana, but without employing an underlying programme. A common feature of all the *Rhapsodies* is their highly-coloured orchestration and the frequent use of the infectious dance-like character he adopted in the faster *Slavonic Dances*. For all their variety of tone, the Rhapsodies have a strong sense of cohesion resulting from Dvořák's inspired use of Liszt's technique of thematic transformation.

The first *Rhapsody* balances pastoral tranquillity with music of intoxicating excitement. Ominous drumbeats introduce an amiably lyrical first theme which rises in a grandiose manner giving way to a section in march tempo not unlike the triumphal march in the fourth act of his grand opera *Vanda* composed two years before. Dvořák's skilful handling of this, however, builds to a heady climax anticipating the last number of the first set of *Slavonic Dances* before returning to the calm of the opening.

In contrast to the close of the first *Rhapsody*, the second begins in volatile mood; its strongly narrative character is led by an expressive, elegiac second main theme whose almost vocal quality is enhanced by harp accompaniment. Moments of delicate poetry contrast with celebratory passages of a dance-like nature energised by the cross-rhythms of the Czech Furiant. Dvořák's symphonic instincts, however, are well to the fore in directing this broad range of material toward an overwhelmingly positive conclusion.

The third *Rhapsody* most clearly evokes earlier times. The harp solo with which it opens is a clear tribute to the bardic opening of Smetana's Vyšehrad of 1874 and a clear invitation to the listener to contemplate a stirring, mythic past. The *Allegro assai*, with its brisk polka-like accompaniment leads through some vigorous development to a catchy main melody. Just before returning to this attractive idea, Dvořák slows the pace of the music for two expressive solos, the first for violin and the second for flute; more development results in a majestic climax before a return to the elegiac tone of the opening. The story does not end there since Dvořák includes yet another transformation of the opening theme before a sumptuously harmonised *Poco andante* and an assertive close.

The concert at which the first two *Rhapsodies* were premiered, on 17 November 1878, was a self-promoted venture conducted by Dvořák in the large hall on Žofín Island. The event was also testament to the good connections he had built over the previous twenty years: the orchestra was that of the Prague Provisional Theatre, in which he had played for nearly ten years, and the soloist in *Three Modern Greek Poems* (B 84) was his old friend, the baritone Josef Lev. The third *Rhapsody* had its debut in Berlin on 24 September the following year. A more significant performance of the work, however, was given in Vienna on 16 November the same year which Brahms attended; moreover, the conductor, Hans Richter, was highly enthusiastic leading directly to the composition of Dvořák's sixth symphony.

Dvořák's ability, evident in the *Slavonic Rhapsodies*, to write atmospheric, evocative music without text, is even clearer in the ten *Legends* (op. 59, B 117) for piano duet composed two years later. He had intended to compose them by November 1880, but it was a busy year which included the composition of the Violin Concerto and Sixth Symphony. He made a sketch of the last *Legend* on 30 December 1880, but didn't get round to composing the rest until February 1881, completing the set on 22 March. The Berlin publisher Simrock, doubtlessly hoping for another lucrative opportunity, brought them out in short order and later that year Dvořák made superbly idiomatic orchestral versions of the entire set.

If the *Legends* lack the more overtly popular characteristics of the *Slavonic Dances*, also originally composed for piano duet and later orchestrated, their appeal is in no way inferior. With a view to some useful networking, Dvořák dedicated them to the influential Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, who was driven to an ecstasy of indecision as to which of the ten was the loveliest, eventually concluding in a review for the *Neue Freie Presse* in October 1881 that 'all of them are beautiful!'. The basic orchestra Dvořák used is smaller than that of either the *Slavonic Rhapsodies* or *Slavonic Dances* and includes double woodwind, horns, timpani and strings to which he added a triangle in the third and fourth, two trumpets in the fourth, and a harp in the fifth and sixth. They transfer so naturally to the orchestra that it seems likely Dvořák had always intended them for this treatment. The rolling figure in the 'Primo' piano part of the *Animato* section of the fourth *Legend* seems ideally suited to a pair of clarinets, and the outer sections of

the canonic ninth have a gloriously exultant quality in the orchestral version.

The consistently poetic atmosphere in these pieces invites programmatic interpretation particularly in the first, fourth and tenth with their symmetrical, song-like opening melodies. There is, however, no evidence in Dvořák's sketches that the themes he devised, unlike those of the late symphonic poems, were related to poetry in any way. All but three of the *Legends* end quietly — as if the composer were inviting the listener to step away from the world of story-telling back to reality. Perhaps the most appealing aspect of all the *Legends* is an outward simplicity in which attractive, apparently simple melodic ideas are the starting point for a wealth of inventive countermelodies.

The mood evoked in these delightful works varies widely both between the separate numbers and within individual movements. In the first, a robust opening contrasts with a yearning, heart-warming central section while the second sets a gentle, almost minuet-like opening theme against a determined, minor-key *Poco animato*. The third is the only one of the *Legends* that seems to look back toward the first set of *Slavonic Dances* with its brisk, catchy outer sections framing a relaxed central Trio. Dvořák ranges more broadly in the fourth *Legend* which opens with a simple, hymn-like melody which builds through ingenious development to a grand final climax before a quiet close.

The fifth *Legend* is a touch elusive with a main melody of two halves, the first ravishingly lyrical and the second almost ironic in response; what follows is less a development of the theme than creative transformations before he returns to the understated character of the opening. In the sixth, Dvořák adopts a consciously epic tone floating a broad melody over a rolling accompaniment shaded by a suggestion of distant horn calls. The contrasting central section is crowned by an ear-catching descending theme borrowed from the slow movement of his third symphony.

The seventh and eighth *Legends* have the air of pastoral interludes although both also include some powerful development of their disarmingly simple main ideas. The penultimate *Legend* is the shortest of the set: in the outer sections Dvořák evokes the Bohemian bagpipe style with a jaunty pentatonic melody set over a drone bass. The concluding *Legend* seems in some ways to be summing up the range of moods presented in the previous numbers: the melodies are leisurely and almost reflective, but there is still room for some excited development before an exquisitely understated conclusion. Whether listened to individually, in groups or as a whole, each and every one of these remarkably engaging pieces, as Hanslick observed, has its own charms.

Jan Smaczny

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