

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

Scored for: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones timpani and strings

Dvořák was born on [September 8, 1841](#) in [Nelahozeves](#), near [Prague](#), which today is a part of the [Czech Republic](#). His father was a butcher, innkeeper, and professional player of the [zither](#). Dvořák's parents recognized and nurtured his musical talent from an early age. He studied organ, violin and viola, becoming accomplished on all three instruments. As a young adult he played [viola](#) in the Bohemian Provisional Theater Orchestra, and fell under the spell of its director, Czech nationalist composer Bedrich Smetana. Bitten by the compositional bug, Dvořák turned his attention away from performing in 1871 began to receive modest acclaim for his work. Within a few years his reputation as a composer had spread throughout the continent attracting the attention of such musical luminaries as Johannes Brahms. Brahms recommended Dvořák to his publisher, Simrock, who subsequently commissioned the wildly popular *Slavonic Dances* published in 1878.

As his reputation grew, Dvořák traveled more and more. He enjoyed exceptional popularity in London after the introduction his *Stabat Mater* in 1883. He himself conducted the *Stabat Mater* and other works, including the *Sixth Symphony*, during a London visit made in the spring of 1884 at the invitation of the Royal Philharmonic Society. Writing to a friend, Dvořák commented, "I am convinced that England offers me a new and certainly happier future, and one which I hope may benefit our entire Czech art. The English are a fine people, enthusiastic about music, and it is well known that they remain loyal to those whose art they have enjoyed. God grant that it may be so with me." Shortly after his return home, Dvořák learned that the Philharmonic Society had elected him a member; and at the same time, the Society requested a new symphony.

Blessed with a commission, Dvořák set to work on his *Symphony No. 7*. (This was to be the only symphony he composed under commission.) He had recently heard a performance of Brahms's *Symphony No. 3*, and was determined that he must compose a work that not only solidified his international reputation, but was worthy of his mentor's approval. "It [the *Symphony No. 7*] must be something respectable for I don't want to let Brahms down," he wrote to his publisher in 1884. That same year Dvořák wrote to a friend: "Now I am occupied by my new symphony for London, and wherever I go I have nothing else in mind but my work, which must be such as to make a stir in the world and God grant that it may!"

Many writers consider the resulting symphony to be Dvořák's greatest single symphonic achievement. It is a work of powerful and varied moods, a nationalistic symphony that offers more than quaint touristy views of peasant dances. Rather it espouses the highest degree of musical seriousness and refinement while still evoking Czech culture at every turn. The symphony premiered on April 22, 1885 in a concert of the London Philharmonic Society in St. James's Hall, the composer conducting.

The *Seventh Symphony* begins with a foreboding rumble deep in the basses, horns and timpani. The haunting main theme is quietly introduced by the violas and cellos and is subtly echoed by the clarinets. The music rapidly grows in intensity until the main theme bursts forth from the full orchestra. The tension subsides to allow the flute and clarinet to present the lyrical second theme. A relatively brief development section ensues, rising and falling with the symphony's primary melodic material. The recapitulation is swept in with an enormous wave of sound that is capped by the timpani, followed soon after by the flowing second theme. The opening material returns one last time, beginning forcefully and slowly fading off into the distance.

The second movement opens with a chorale played by the wind instruments over an accompaniment of plucked strings. Members of the string section present the second thematic idea and then a subtle agitation works its way into the texture. A third theme is presented by the solo horn and then the tension begins to build, exploding into a stormy middle section that is reminiscent of the first movement. As the storm passes, former themes melodies return, the excitement subsides and the instruments fade into silence.

The Scherzo is written in 6/4 time, but from the outset there is an exhilarating, some might say unsettling, conflict between the two beats per measure implied by 6/4 time (as found in the accompaniment) and the three beats per

measure that we hear in the melody. Despite being titled scherzo, the prevailing nomenclature for third movements during this time, this movement is, in fact, a furiant. A furiant is a characteristic Czech dance that derives its rhythmic drive from contrasting, or simultaneously presenting, the various subdivisions of a six-beat pattern.

Like the opening movement, the finale is a stormy work with two primary thematic sections, a development and a recapitulation. Most romantic symphonies that begin in a minor key have a psychological and physical transformation that occurs between the first and fourth movements. The psychological transformation is typically characterized as progressing from darkness to light, sometimes called romantic fulfillment. The physical transformation is more concrete: the last movement is cast in a major key. In the *Symphony No. 7*, however, Dvořák chooses to remain in a minor key for the last movement. The struggle continues without definite resolution until the very end where the final measures affirm the transformation as the theme is presented in all its glory in D major.