

THE MOLDAU (VLATAVA) • Bedrich Smetana

Scored for: THREE FLUTES, ONE DOUBLING PICCOLO, TWO OBOES, TWO CLARINETS,
TWO BASSOONS, FOUR HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, TIMPANI, BASS DRUM,
TRIANGLE, CYMBALS AND STRINGS

BOHEMIA, A REGION THAT IS TODAY ESSENTIALLY THE CZECH REPUBLIC, HAS NEARLY A thousand year history of producing some of the best musicians in Europe. However, most of those musicians did not stay in Bohemia, but were in the service of others outside the borders of their homeland. This tradition of exporting the country's best talent came to a halt with Bedrich Smetana, who today is lovingly referred to as the father of Bohemian national music. It was he who insisted that the folk music, folk tales and beauty of his country deserved the attention of the world, and he set himself on a path that would bring international acclaim to the Bohemian people. Smetana, almost single-handedly, brought about a renaissance of musical activity in Prague and led the way in the writing of national music. Between 1863 and 1871 he completed four operas (even more would come later) based on Bohemian legends, the first national Bohemian operas ever written, that captured the hearts of the people and glorified the prevailing national feeling. Like Beethoven before him, Smetana was afflicted with the most disheartening malady for a musician: in 1874 he began to go deaf. The physicians of the day were unable to slow the unusually rapid progress of the deafness and within a year he was living in a world of complete silence. But this tragedy did not limit his musical activity. Indeed, it was after he became deaf that he composed much of the music that he is most remembered for today, including a set of six tone poems glorifying Bohemia, collectively titled *Ma Vlast*, or *My Country*. These works, Smetana's greatest orchestral monument to Bohemian nationalism, took five years to complete and were, in the words of his fellow countryman V. V. Zeleny, Smetana's "greatest poetic deed, as well as the proudest glorification with which an artistic spirit had ever celebrated his country."

The most popular tone poem of the set is *The Moldau* (Vltava), the name of a prominent river that flows through the Czech countryside. When Smetana sent the score to his publishers, Smetana wrote the following skeleton outline of what he had in mind:

Two springs pour forth their streams in the shade of the Bohemian forest, the one warm and gushing, the other cold and tranquil. Their waves, joyfully flowing over rocky beds, unite and sparkle in the rays of the morning sun. The forest brook, rushing on, becomes the River Vltava (Moldau). Coursing through Bohemia's valleys, it grows into a mighty stream. It flows through dense woods from which come joyous hunting sounds, and the notes of the hunter's horn drawing ever nearer and nearer. It flows through emerald meadows and lowlands, where a wedding feast is being celebrated with songs and dancing. By night, in its glittering waves, wood and water nymphs hold their revels. And these waters reflect many a fortress and castle--witnesses of a bygone age of knightly splendor, and the martial glory days that are no more. At the Rapids of St. John,

the stream speeds on, winding its way through cataracts and hewing a path for its foaming waters through the rocky chasm into the broad riverbed, in which it flows on in majestic calm toward Prague, welcomed by time-honored Vysehrad, to disappear in far distance from the poet's gaze.

The music begins with an unaccompanied flute melody (the cold stream) and is soon joined by the clarinets (the warm stream) symbolic of the two sources of the Moldau. The musical lines meander and intertwine as the two streams join, leading to the unforgettable flowing melody (pun intended) of the Moldau itself. Next, the growing stream passes through a forest where we hear vigorous horn calls and trumpet fanfares traditionally associated with hunting scenes. As the echoes of the hunt die away we come upon a peasant wedding celebration and the lively folk music that accompanies the festivities. The jovial atmosphere fades as night begins to fall, and a mysterious quiet surrounds the river. The moonlight shimmers on the surface of the water, depicted by the high muted strings. The wavering strains of the opening flute and clarinet are recalled, punctuated by an occasional splash of the harp which evokes in Smetana's words a "dance of water nymphs." We can hear the regal tones of the horns and brass recalling the age of castles and knightly splendor as the sun begins to rise over the river.

The Moldau now broadens as its melody is carried downstream by the full orchestra. Suddenly, the river is churned up by jagged rhythms, loud brass exclamations and outbursts of piccolo as we come to the Rapids of St. John. At these rapids, the broad river is forced between narrow, rocky banks, and the melody of the Moldau itself grows more turbulent with shorter, chopped-up phrases, and more clashing harmonies. The river emerges triumphantly from the narrows and approaches the city of Prague where the mountain fortress Vysehrad, rich in heroic legend, looks down. In the final grand moments the entire brass section recalls a theme that unifies all of the symphonic poems of *Ma Vlast*, suggesting the glories of Czech history. From there the river sweeps on past the great city and disappears from the poet's view.