

Symphony No. 8 in G major, Op.88
Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904)

Allegro con brio

Adagio

Allegretto grazioso

Allegro, ma non troppo

Symphonic music was almost exclusively and quite copiously sustained by Germans, from the era of Beethoven to that of Mahler. There is an overall umbrella of perception that has an essentially Germanic core that is audibly sustained, in my view, almost unbroken from the late 1780's to 1900. It is a common link that, for instance, binds the music of Mozart to that of Wagner, despite the obvious polarity of the two composers. One of the most gifted, and luminous exceptions to this extensive German monopoly was the proudly proclaimed Czech, Antonin Dvorak.

It was the reception of his *Stabat Mater* in England, in 1883, that proved to be the turning point of his international reputation. This success generated return engagements with the Philharmonic Society's Concerts in London and sparked off tremendous enthusiasm across the ocean which was to culminate nine years later with his appointment as director of the National Conservatory in New York. The immediate practical outcome of the London concerts was the presentation of his 7th symphony**. "I am much preoccupied with my symphony, which must once again be of a sufficient quality to attract the attention of the whole world..." he wrote to a friend. Not least of all was the acknowledgement of his great friend and mentor Johannes Brahms, for whose expectations the symphony had to be "perfect". Their relationship started back in 1874 when Dvorak won a prize of four hundred guildens from the Austrian State Stipendium, adjudicated by Brahms. Brahms took a very keen interest in Dvorak's career and personal well being, introducing him to his publisher Simrock along with many influential musicians in Germany. He need not have worried about his seventh symphony, even with Brahms looking over his shoulder. It was a wonderful triumph. It's tragic elements – he was still said to be coming to terms with the loss of his mother - and Brahmsian

influences are in abundance but so are the endearing trade mark of the Bohemian influences.

The Eighth symphony, sometimes referred to as his “pastoral”, is associated with Dvorak’s continuing visits to England, and was dubbed there as the “English” symphony. The London performance, with Dvorak on the podium, took place in April 1890 and was not the premier. It was followed by a notable performance in June 1891 when it was presented as the “exercise” for his honorary doctorate at Cambridge. It was also published by Novello, an English publisher, while Dvorak had a temporary disagreement with Simrock. There is much circumstance to link the symphony geographically with England but the reality is that it is not even remotely connected musically. The first performance was given in February 1890, in Prague, and the symphony remains Dvorak’s most famous inherently Bohemian score. The mood of the symphony is not marked with the worries of the seventh, or the need to incorporate Americana as in the ninth. It may be, therefore, one of the purest, unadulterated, ‘straight from the heart’, Dvorak symphonies we have. Like all of Dvorak, whatever its original thought and whatever its conceptual basis, the music attracts by sheer energy, supreme melodic gift, strong structure and some extraordinary moments of orchestral color. Brahms would have been rightly proud as would have the entire German lineage from which this music comes and in which this music exists. Ironically, it is the un-German in Dvorak that gives him his place in the firmament.

*** Here is a short note explaining the numbering system that the Dvorak symphonies have employed over the years. Only five of Dvorak’s symphonies were published in his lifetime, but four more are dated from his earlier years, making a total of nine. The well-known five are now numbered as 5-6-7-8-9 corresponding to a former numbering 3-1-2-4-5. The numbering 1-4 has been reassigned to his youthful symphonies and whereas still published they remain the children who are “seen, but not heard”.*