

czech music *quarterly*



22
1

Dvořák's solo piano works

Forfest Festival

Josef Suk: *Epilogue*



Tomáš Vášek
and his *Dvořákian*
Discoveries

Talking to pianist Tomáš Vášek about Antonín Dvořák is like listening to an excellent audiobook. He captivates you not only with the depth of his knowledge, but also with the melody of his voice and the rhythm of his speech. Time flows unpleasantly fast, almost making you wish you could reduce the speaker into a pocket-size format, put on your headphones, and continue enjoying his words. But after all, the domain of this artist is the piano, so in place of words, you can transmit to your ears his new recording, *Antonín Dvořák Unreleased*, published by the Arco Diva label, which mostly contains the composer's works in world premieres. Tomáš Vášek has explored the work of Czech composers both well-known and overlooked throughout his career, which has

now lasted for over fifty years. At the centre of his attention are composers Erwin Schulhoff, Alois Hába, Jaroslav Ježek, Josef Suk, and Antonín Dvořák. In 2007, he participated in a tour by the cellist František Brikcius to honour the fortieth anniversary of the death of the Jewish composer Jaromír Weinberger.

Víšek is a graduate of the Prague Conservatory and the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where he studied with Josef Páleníček and Zdeněk Jílek. In addition to classical repertoire, he also explores jazz and jazz-inspired compositions. He has successfully participated in a number of competitions – last year, just before Christmas, for instance, he performed at Carnegie Hall as a laureate of the Golden Classical Music Awards 2021, playing Jaroslav Ježek's famous Bugatti Step. He is a frequent guest on both Czech and international stages. In 2017, he celebrated his sixtieth birthday with a recital at the Rudolf Firkušný Piano Festival that also included compositions by Firkušný himself.

In 2017, you defended a dissertation exploring Dvořák's solo piano works. Was the recording intended to continue this work?

I was not planning it back then – rather, I'd say that it was created precisely because of this dissertation. I had devoted a number of years to Dvořák before then, I had the opportunity to play quite a few of the pieces, and I decided that if I were ever to write a dissertation, it would be about him. I began developing an interest in him as a whole, not from a musicological perspective (I did not wish to write in "musicologese"), but from a practical one, as a guide, in the sense of a Baedeker. As if we were to enter each of the pieces and were now walking around in them. I wanted to draw attention to specific places, to suggest how they could be played so that they stand out well, and so on. And I also included the context. I had to leave out the pieces for piano four hands, that would be too much. Even so, the dissertation is over five hundred pages long.

How long did you spend writing it?

Several years, as I still had to honour my other commitments – performing and teaching, mostly. In my mind, preparations for the recording began at this time – I'd compare manuscripts stored at the Czech Museum of Music, the Clementinum (*home of the National Library of the Czech Republic – editor's note*), or Zlonice (*a town where Dvořák lived briefly in the 1850s, now home to the Antonín Dvořák Memorial and its archive – editor's note*), as I needed to see originals. I also worked on pieces that were not included in the edition of Dvořák's complete works, as they were only published once during his lifetime, or as a supplement, or not at all. But they are interesting pieces,

so I reconstructed or finished some of them, comparing manuscripts and editions (which, as we well know, often contain mistakes). Sometimes, Dvořák failed to include a *Da capo* or *Dal segno*, and as soon as we include them, the piece is finished. The *Presto for Piano in E flat major*, for instance, a beautiful, sweet piece that would also be suitable for children, was drowned out in a single edition like this, and this is the kind of thing that I wish to draw attention to with my CD. I hope that in the future, some of these pieces will be published in critical editions.

Your Antonín Dvořák Unreleased came out at almost the same time as Ivo Kahánek's complete recording of Dvořák's solo piano works. Barring two exceptions, however, your selections do not overlap at all.

The difference is that I included unfinished works and pieces that were only published once. Moreover, the *Forget-me-not Polka*, officially Dvořák's oldest solo piano piece, can well be recorded multiple times, as it only survives in two transcriptions, which - whatever Burghauser's catalogue might claim - are not the same in the middle section. Every resultant sounding will thus be a compromise, as it depends on the performer what position they will assume.

How did you conceive of the recording dramaturgically?

It was quite difficult. At first, I thought I would not be able to put it together, but I finally arrived at a way of arranging and balancing the pieces, for instance using the law of contrast: fast - slow. As for the bonus tracks, these are recordings I made twenty years ago. My interest in Dvořák began in 2000, when I began teaching workshops at the Dvořák's Turnov and Sychrov festival. That was where I discovered that we knew very little about many of Dvořák's pieces - we don't know them, so they are barely played, which led me to take an interest in them. I recorded a CD, but it was later recalled. These are the pieces used as bonus tracks, as listeners would have no access to them otherwise.

You have recorded on historical instruments from the collection of the Czech Museum of Music, on Ježek's, Suk's, and Fibich's pianos. Did you not consider for this recording the piano from Dvořák's estate, located in the composer's museum at the Vila Amerika in Prague?

You are right that I have recorded a fair bit on historical instruments in the past, but Dvořák's piano is not regularly played and it would all be a little too complicated - the instrument would have to be renovated at exorbitant costs, and I also did not want the pieces I was presenting to seem like a museum exhibit. I therefore chose a different approach and recorded at the concert hall of the Jan Deyl Conservatory in Prague on a Steinway piano.

Did you record the pieces from memory?

I usually did, but I had the sheet music with me so we would not have to go back more than was necessary because of memory errors. I generally prefer playing from memory, though - you have a better perspective of the piece as a whole; you can create with greater freedom if you're not "hanging on to the music", syllabifying measure after measure. Of course I make exceptions with seldom performed pieces of the 20th and 21st centuries.

You also included on the CD the as yet unpublished and unrecorded Pauperia-Mazur, which might be even older than the 1854 "Forget-me-not" Polka, written when Dvořák was only thirteen. Did he really compose Pauperia-Mazur?

What survives from the *Pauperia-Mazur* is a manuscript that states that this is the first piece ever written by Antonín Dvořák. However, this inscription was made at a later date and in a different handwriting, so attributing authorship is definitely problematic.

Even so, I decided to include the piece on my recording - it is charming and serves as an apt documentation of Dvořák's very beginnings, inspired by the countryside music of the time.

I am interested in the pieces you completed: Silhouette No. 7, Legend in B flat major, and the Presto for Piano in E minor. How much did you have to complete?

Dvořák reworked the *Silhouettes* many times over. We know twelve of them, but there were originally fifteen. The *Silhouette No. 7 in F sharp major* consists of two densely filled pages without an ending. Either Dvořák did not continue or the missing measures will one day appear somewhere. But all that was necessary was to write in a final chord and the piece can come to life. I attempted to piously add several measures to the finale of the *Legend*, and in the case of the E minor *Presto*, Dvořák was evidently thinking of a *da capo*, but probably because the piece reminded him too much of the violin mazurek, he did not finish the piece. Thankfully, he did not throw it away.

What kind of a pianist was Dvořák?

We know that Dvořák could play the instrument, but he was never a solo pianist - he was not trained this way and did not feel like it either. We also do not know what he played during his time as a student. Everyone had to play something in order to hold their own in practice, so we know Dvořák could improvise, accompany singers on the choir loft and in choirs - generally speaking, he could work collaboratively as a pianist. Let us not forget that he was not originally meant to become a professional musician. Perhaps with the exception of a single charity concert, he never performed solo, perhaps occasionally improvising somewhere or playing a piece for his publishers, or else for his students at the conservatory. The heights of his public performance career was a tour he did before departing to America.

How do you see his piano oeuvre in the context of the period?

There were Czech composers who took a lot from Liszt, but few of them managed to step out of his shadow - perhaps only Smetana. Something similar is true of Chopin, with the exception of Karel Bendl, who is very distinct, and sometimes Dvořák, who is sometimes more original (sometimes less so). I think the greatest link with a composer from abroad is in his relationship to Robert Schumann. His pieces are impressive, but they do not primarily aim to amaze us with technique, there are few virtuosic passages, but he uses the sound of the piano in its full orchestral breadth, which resonated strongly with Czech music. Though Dvořák did not declare his allegiance to Schumann (if anything, that was Schubert), Schumann's general influence on Czech music was strong and Dvořák grows out of that too. But he did not have his own Clara Schumann to play everything for him. It is true that he had a dedicated pianist at his service, Karel Slavkovský, who premiered (among other pieces) his piano concerto and to whom he dedicated the *Furiant's op. 42*. but he had no one to give him feedback concerning writing for piano. Sometimes, Dvořák sees his texture as an orchestral score. The result is that there is a lot of sound in the left hand and you're trying to figure out how to save the melody from being drowned out. It is up to us, performers, to uncover the beauty of Dvořák's music.

Where do you locate its essence?

In the striking melodies, and also the imaginative colours, which almost seem ahead of their time. When we listen to the *Silhouette No. 7 in F sharp major*, it is a work by the young Dvořák, but no one recognises this because it seems almost impressionist. Or *At the Old Castle* from *Poetic Tone Pictures* - he could conjure up an atmosphere brilliantly using these colours.

Which of Dvořák's pieces are closest to your heart?

I would propose dividing Dvořák's piano music into three basic periods. First, the young Dvořák and his *Silhouettes*. Then, the mature Dvořák and the *opus summum* of this period - the cycle of *Poetic Tone Pictures*. This was Dvořák's attempt at virtuosity, so these are demanding pieces. They contain extremely difficult and brilliant moments that are not easy to pull off with lightness. Programming them and playing them from memory truly demands great courage, as the composer himself put it. The last two pieces, *At the Hero's Grave* and *At the Holy Mountain*, are inspired by Liszt, while *Spring Song* or, particularly, the *Serenade* take its cues from Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*. And finally, there are the American works, i.e. first the *Suite in A major*, which I consider highly undervalued. It must be well considered interpretively to avoid the left hand "battering" the right. Personally, I don't much like its orchestral version, as the tempos are different, slower, and I don't accept the opinion that these are stylisations of old dances. I believe that its third section, of which it is often claimed that it is a polonaise, is more of an early study (formally speaking, too) for the famous *Humoresque*. And I don't see the last movement as a gavotte, but rather as an *odzemek*. The finale seems to me to be a premonition of the cello concerto - the infinite lyrical song of the ending, with only the coda on the last system returning to a faster tempo. Another work of the American period is a series of *Humoresques* that was originally to be titled *New Scottish Dances*. It is marked by the fact that almost all the sections have the same metronome marking, with the exception of no. 6, which has no metronome marking at all. Each of them has their own character, which is why I wouldn't necessarily follow the metronome markings, as if they were chained together like this, I don't think the result would be pleasing, the individuality of each of the pieces suppressed. I would certainly emphasise this particular period - I love the blend of America and Dvořák's maturity.

And what about the sketch for the original famous version of the Humoresque in G flat major?

I learned of its existence entirely by chance from *Hudební věda* (Musicology) magazine. A complete ur-form of this piece has survived in an archival transcription for solo oboe (!), made several years before his departure to America - at the time, it was in F major and not really reminiscent of the famous piece. But when Dvořák began writing the *Humoresques*, he started with this fragment, creating - now in G flat major - a cohesive sixteen-measure fragment. Upon hearing it, most people will think "this reminds me of something..." Afterwards, Dvořák crossed these measures out (thankfully only in pencil!), turned the page over, and wrote the *Humoresque* as we know it today.

What degree of personal closeness do you feel towards Dvořák, not only as a composer but also as a human being?

I'd say he was very authentic in his humanity and character. Of course, I have read much about him and I don't know if we would understand each other on all matters - what's most important is to attempt to understand what he created.

We have discussed the pieces and his compositional approach, but you also have a very good overview of the performance of Dvořák's piano works, as well as Czech piano music in general, a long-term interest of yours.

I have deep respect for anyone who performs Dvořák's music. I was surprised by how many foreigners have recorded parts of his piano oeuvre, and not just the *Humoresque* either. Objectively, there are many recordings, and what's more, foreigners often uncover some things that remain hidden to us Czechs, and that can prove highly inspiring.

With the kind permission of Harmonie magazine.
www.casopisharmonie.cz