Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra

The Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1929 as the first professional music ensemble to meet broadcasting needs in Slovakia. The orchestra was first conducted by the Prague conductor František Dyk and in the course of the past seventy years of its existence has worked under the direction of several prominent Czech and Slovak conductors. Ondrej Lenárd was appointed its principal conductor in 1977 and a number of the orchestra's successful performances abroad are connected with his name. When Robert Stankovsky took over the orchestra in 1993, regular concert performances followed, at home and abroad, with important recordings for the radio and for foreign companies. The major recording partner of the orchestra remains HNH International Ltd, the parent company of Naxos and Marco Polo, for which the orchestra has so far recorded over 140 CDs. The orchestra has undertaken a number of successful tours in Europe as well as in Japan, Korea and Hong Kong.

Andrew Mogrelia

Andrew Mogrelia, in his flourishing career, has conducted many of the leading orchestras in Britain, including the BBC Symphony Orchestras and the BBC Orchestras in Scotland and in Wales, appearing in major concert-halls. Abroad he has conducted orchestras in the Netherlands, Eire, Australia, Hong Kong and the Czech and Slovak Republics and has toured South America with the City of London Sinfonia. In addition to activity in the concert-hall he has worked with many dance companies, including the English and Dutch National Ballets, the Netherlands Dance Theatre and the Birmingham Royal Ballet. He is conductor-in-residence at the Birmingham Conservatoire and has appeared with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. His many recordings include ballet music by Tchaikovsky, Delibes, Prokofiev and Adam for Naxos, as well as orchestral music by Handel, Suk, Fibich and Novák for Naxos and Marco Polo.
Josef Suk (1874-1935)
A Summer’s Tale, Op. 29 • A Winter’s Tale, Op. 9

Josef Suk belongs to the second generation of Czech nationalist composers, after Smetana and Dvořák. He was born in 1874 in Křečovice, the son of a village schoolmaster and began to play the violin at the age of eight and later the piano, writing his first composition, a Polka, in 1882. At the age of eleven he entered the Prague Conservatory, studying the violin with the director Antonín Benda and theory with Josef Foerster. His chamber-music teacher, during an extra year of study in 1891, was Hanus Wihan, for whom Dvořák wrote his famous Cello Concerto in B minor and who trained the distinguished Czech Quartet in which Suk played second violin until his retirement in 1933 with the consequent disbanding of the quartet, after giving some four thousand concerts. He studied composition first with Karel Stecker and, after his graduation in 1891, studied with Dvořák, whose favourite pupil he became. In 1898 he married the latter’s daughter Olga, whose death in 1903 brought him great sadness, leading to the composition of his Asrael Symphony. He taught composition at the Prague Conservatory, of which he later became director, and as a teacher exercised a strong influence over a whole generation of Czech composers. He died in 1935.

In spite of Suk’s long career in chamber music, his major compositions have done little for orchestra, from the Dramatic Overture of his graduation from Dvořák’s class on to a series of symphonic poems and his powerful Asrael Symphony, dedicated to the memory of his wife. His Musical Tale for Orchestra, Pohidička Leša (A Summer’s Tale), was first sketched out during the course of a few months in 1907, to be orchestrated the following year. It is scored for a large orchestra of piccolo, pairs of flutes, oboes, cor anglais and clarinets, a bass clarinet, two bassoons, double bassoon, six French horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, piano, two harps, celesta and strings, with an optional organ part. The work, which is dedicated to the Czech conductor and composer Karel Kovařovic, who conducted the first performance in Prague in January 1909, continues the emotional narrative of the Asrael Symphony, opening with a movement under the title Voice of Life and Consolation. Here Man is shown dogged by the cruelty of Fate and now seeking escape in nature, his sadness represented by the sighing chords of muted double basses over sustained and muted French horn octaves at the outset. The first full theme to emerge is heard from violins and oboes, the theme of man, which mounts to a dynamic climax. A distant cor anglais introduces nature in a second theme, in which other instruments join, a melody derived from the death theme in Asrael. This material is worked out in traditional symphonic form, leading to an idyllic closing section, initiated by a solo violin, accompanied by harp arpeggios, with a recurrent figure from the first theme constantly returning. The opening sighs, now in less poignant mood, are heard again, as the movement reaches an optimistic conclusion.

The sun is high in the sky at noon, the land shimmering in the haze of summer heat. The first theme is heard from piccolo and bass clarinet. A solo trumpet introduces a second idea and, briefly prefaced by the timpani, the brass chants a hymn to the sun. The first theme returns, played now by oboes and clarinets. The other thematic material is heard again and the movement ends in tranquillity with a memory of the third melody.

Blind musicians wander through the heat of the countryside in the third movement. Suk had intended to use the material as funeral music for a re-staging of the play Radu a Maluhenya by Julius Zeyer, for which he had earlier written incidental music. Harp chords provide an accompaniment to two cor anglais, to be followed by a solo violin and solo viola, mingling then with the cor anglais, as the movement moves towards its ending.

The fourth movement, In the Power of Phantoms, finds the protagonist in the power of the fantasmata of the night, nightmarish creatures, interspersed with pleasanter dreams. The slower introduction leads to a Scherzo, where soon a trumpet provides a further thematic element. There is contrast in an Andante, in which clarinets, including the bass clarinet, are heard at first, leading to music of romantic intensity before the return of the scherzo material, with the trumpet melody extended in contrapuntal mockery. Finally day banishes these fantasmagoria and all ends at peace.

Night concludes the tale, with conflict now resolved. Themes from the first movement, those of nature and man, are heard, with music of tender yearning, leading to a hymn to night, the counterpart of the earlier hymn to the sun. Finally, thematic elements remembered from the whole work come together in gentle tranquillity.

The overture Pohidička Zmiňová Velečná (A Winter’s Tale or Tale of a Winter’s Evening) is based on Shakespeare and was written in 1894, to be revised in 1926. The play itself is concerned with the jealousy of Leontes, King of Sicilia, who suspects his wife Hermione of infidelity with his friend and guest Polixenes, King of Bohemia. He is eventually restored to his senses and his wife, after her seeming death to life, when what had appeared to be her statue comes once more alive. The various elements in the play include comedy with the cunning pedlar Autolycus and pastoral scenes with the daughter of Leontes and Hermione, Perdita, abandoned at birth on her father’s orders and brought up in a country village. The overture may be supposed to be programmatic, coming at a time when Dvořák himself had turned to the composition of programmatic symphonic poems. It is scored for a slightly smaller orchestra than the later A Summer’s Tale, making use of a single cor anglais, four horns and a single harp, in instrumentation that in general is similar. The overture starts with a slow introduction, in d minor, a motif is played against a descanting figure for muted violins. The timpani add a sinister element, before the appearance of the clarinet motif from the oboe, developed more fully by other instruments. The music grows in intensity, leading to an Allegro con fuoco and a theme of Wagnerian pattern, introduced by violas and cellos. The earlier clarinet motif ushers in a second theme. A pastoral dance theme is heard from the oboe, developed in sequence. Earlier themes are developed and return, until conflict is resolved and a final section, marked Tranquillo, may be supposed to bring the happy ending that marks the close of the drama.

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In spite of Suk's long career in chamber music, his major compositions were written for orchestra, from the Dramatic Overture of his graduation from Dvořák's class on to a series of symphonic poems and his powerful Asrael Symphony, dedicated to the memory of his wife. His Musical Tale for Orchestra, Pohádka Léto (A Summer's Tale), was first sketched out during the course of a few months in 1907, to be orchestrated the following year. It is scored for a large orchestra of piccolo, pairs of flutes, oboes, cor anglais and clarinets, a bass clarinet, two bassoons, double bassoon, six French horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, piano, two harps, celesta and strings, with an optional organ part. The work, which is dedicated to the Czech conductor and composer Karel Kovařovic, who conducted the first performance in Prague in January 1909, continues the emotional narrative of the Asrael Symphony, opening with a movement under the title Voice of Life and Consolation. Here Man is shown dogged by the cruelty of Fate and now seeking escape in nature, his sadness represented by the sighing chords of muted double basses over sustained and muted French horn octaves at the outset. The first full theme to emerge is heard from violins and oboes, the theme of man, which mounts to a dynamic climax. A distant cor anglais introduces nature in a second theme, in which other instruments join, a melody derived from the death theme in Asrael. This material is worked out in traditional symphonic form, leading to an idyllic closing section, initiated by a solo violin, accompanied by harp arpeggios, with a recurrent figure from the first theme constantly returning. The opening sighs, now in less poignant mood, are heard again, as the movement reaches an optimistic conclusion.

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Blind musicians wander through the heat of the countryside in the third movement. Suk had intended to use the material as funeral music for a re-staging of the play Rady a Malubluna by Julius Zeyer, for which he had earlier written incidental music. Harp chords provide an accompaniment to two cor anglais, to be followed by a solo violin and solo viola, mingling then with the cor anglais, as the movement moves towards its ending.

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The overture Pohádka Zimního Večera (A Winter's Tale or Tale of a Winter's Evening) is based on Shakespeare and was written in 1894, to be revised in 1926. The play itself is concerned with the jealousy of Leonites, King of Sicilia, who suspects his wife Hermione of infidelity with his friend and guest Polixenes, King of Bohemia. He is eventually restored to his senses and his wife, after her seeming death to life, when what had appeared to be her statue comes once more alive. The various elements in the play include comedy with the cunning pedlar Autolycus and pastoral scenes with the daughter of Leontes and Hermione, Perdita, abandoned at birth on her father’s orders and brought up in a country village. The overture may be supposed to be programmatic, coming at a time when Dvořák himself had turned to the composition of programmatic symphonic poems. It is scored for a slightly smaller orchestra than the later A Summer's Tale, making use of a single cor anglais, four horns and a single harp, in instrumentation that in general is similar. The overture starts with a slow introduction, in d minor, a clarinet motif is heard against a descant figure for muted violins. The timpani add a violin element, before the appearance of the clarinet motif from the oboe, developed more fully by other instruments. The music grows in intensity, leading to an Allegro con fuoco and a theme of Wagnerian pattern, introduced by violas and cellos. The earlier clarinet motif ushers in a second theme. A pastoral dance theme is heard from the oboe, developed in sequence. Earlier themes are developed and return, until conflict is resolved and a final section, marked Tranquillo, may be supposed to bring the happy ending that marks the close of the drama.

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Josef Suk was Dvořák’s favourite pupil, and was seen as the natural successor to the great Czech composer. He eventually had a prolific output, his orchestral scores concentrating on colourful symphonic poems. A Summer’s Tale was the most extensive and dramatic of the series, a sinister and macabre element running through the five movements, and concluding with a dramatic portrait of a stormy night. A Winter’s Tale takes its theme from the Shakespeare play, a cold chill blowing through the music.