

Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104, 1st movement

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Written at the end of Dvořák's three-year tenure as director of the National Conservatory in New York, the Cello Concerto reflects some of the composer's American experiences but is at the same time filled with the spirit of his beloved Bohemia where he longed to return.

Dvořák enjoyed his first American visit, but was glad to go home in the spring of 1894 and reluctant to return that fall. Ultimately, however, Dvořák signed another contract with the National Conservatory, and on November 1 he was at work again. He began composing the B minor concerto in New York on November 8, 1894, working simultaneously on sketches and the full score, and completed it on February 9, 1895. In response to the death of his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová, Dvořák composed a new coda for the finale in June 1895.

The previous spring, in March 1894, he had heard Victor Herbert, then principal cellist at the Metropolitan Opera, play his Cello Concerto No. 2 in Brooklyn with conductor Anton Seidl and the New York Philharmonic. As a 24-year-old composer, Dvořák had written a Cello Concerto in A major in 1865, but he never bothered to orchestrate that unsatisfactory work. In the case of a cello concerto, orchestration is a matter of crucial importance, since the low pitch of the instrument makes it more difficult for it to stand out against a full orchestral texture. Three decades later, the mature composer knew how to solve the problem, not simply by reducing the volume of the accompaniment, but by placing the solo cello into a variety of constantly changing combinations with selected wind soloists from the orchestra. This results in a delicate, almost chamber music-like instrumental writing in which the timbre of the cello comes into full display.

Dvořák for some time had wanted to write a work for his friend Hanuš Wihan, the famed cellist of the Bohemian Quartet and the composer's partner on a concert tour in 1892. Just as Dvořák had encouraged violinist Joseph Joachim to give him advice and even make revisions in the Violin Concerto of 1879, he now leaned on Wihan for technical assistance with the Cello Concerto, who added fingerings and bowing instructions to the solo part. In addition to these, however, the cellist proposed some changes and wrote cadenzas (for the first and last movements) that the composer found impossible to accept. Šourek believed that it was because of these differences of opinion and ensuing friction that Wihan did not play the concerto's premiere. New research has discovered that this was not the case: due to miscommunication in correspondence, the cellist was simply not free on the day suggested by the London Philharmonic Society, which then engaged another soloist, much to Dvořák's dismay, since he had already committed himself to Wihan. Dvořák apparently cleared the situation with his friend, was released from his promise, and worked with the new cellist, Leo Stern, intensely for several days. "I hope he will be all right," he wrote to London a few days before leaving for the premiere on March 19, 1896, which Dvořák conducted. The work was given its American premiere on December 19, 1896. Alwin Schroeder was soloist, with Emil Paur conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

A reconciliation between Dvořák and Wihan having been achieved, Wihan gave his premiere of the concerto that had meanwhile been dedicated to him in 1899 with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra under Willem Mengelberg, and he later performed it on several occasions under the composer's direction.

It is remarkable that despite its chamber-music quality, the concerto has a certain symphonic grandeur one doesn't find in most other Romantic cello concertos (Schumann, Saint-Saëns). Dvořák continues the Beethoven-Brahms tradition in which solo passages (including several prominent ones for the flute) are balanced by full-fledged orchestral statements. The orchestra's role is not restricted to mere accompaniment: it always shares the limelight with the soloist and often even takes center stage. That is because, clearly, this concerto is much more than a virtuoso showpiece for the soloist. It is in many ways a dramatic, even tragic, work, from its somber opening to the unprecedented closing section of the finale. Brahms, his friend and benefactor, commented: "Why in the world didn't I know one could write a cello concerto like this? If I'd only known I'd have done it long ago!"

We have a great deal of evidence to show that Dvořák was grappling with important life issues as he was writing it. The concerto memorializes Dvořák's sister-in-law Josefina Kaunitzová, who became seriously ill shortly after the composer had begun work on the concerto. It is no secret that, as a young man, Dvořák was deeply in love with Josefina but their union was not to be; instead, the composer ended up marrying Josefina's sister.

The first movement played tonight introduces two of Dvořák's most memorable themes. The one at the beginning—low clarinet, joined by bassoons, with a somber accompaniment of violas, cellos, and basses—lends itself to a remarkable series of oblique, multi-faceted harmonizations, and the other, more lyrical, is one of the loveliest horn solos in the literature.

*--Stephen Larmore*