

Program notes for the Czech National Day commemorative concert

Duo Ventapane

Sunday, October 29, 2023 2 PM

Muttart Hall, Alberta College Campus MacEwan University
10050 MacDonald Drive NW Edmonton, AB T5J 2B7

Antonin Dvořák (1841–1904)

Sonatina in G major, Op. 10

1. Allegro risoluto; 2. Larghetto; 3. Scherzo. Molto vivace. 4. Finale: Allegro

Antonin Dvořák, undoubtedly the internationally best known Czech composer of all time, owes his fame to the extraordinary melodic richness of all his music. Inspired by his deep love for the Czech countryside and its musical sounds, it has a broad international appeal. His first international success as a composer came with the publication of the first row of Slavonic Dances, combining the folk song and dance approach with the “popular” or “light classic” musical form. The Czech folk dance elements and the melodic inventiveness became a landmark of Dvořák’s music in general. The Sonatina for violin and piano was composed in the fall of 1893, during the second year of his tenure as the Director of the National Conservatory of Music of America in New York. It was, in his own words, “...written for youth... but even grown-ups should be able to converse with it.” It is dedicated to his children Otilka and Tonik (15 and 10, resp. years old then, who played violin and piano). It is a good example of Dvořák’s mastery in creating enchanting music using the most economical compositional technique, such as the “water droplets theme” from the 2nd movement, one of the most notable moments in this work. It is said that the inspiration for this passage came to Dvořák when standing in front of the Minnehaha Falls in Minneapolis, on the way back to New York from his summer vacations in the village of Spillville in rural Iowa. The final movement starts with a rollicking mood that was described as “hoe-down music with Czech accent!” The whole work exudes life optimism, possibly inspired by Dvořák’s happy summer vacation time in Spillville. The private premiere of the piece took place in December 1893 in New York, with his children playing the violin and piano parts; the first public performance took place in 1896 in Brno, capital of Moravia now in the Czech Republic.

Stewart Grant (b. 1948)

Sonata Op. 35 1. Allegro agitato – con forza; 2. Andante tranquillo. Allegro scherzando

Stewart Grant, born in Fort William, Ontario, grew up and received his early musical training in Montreal, graduating from the Faculty of Music at McGill University and the Conservatoire de musique du Québec. Further training followed with summers at Tanglewood, at the Aspen Music School and as a member of the National Youth Orchestra of Canada. In 1972, Mr. Grant joined the National Arts Centre Orchestra in Ottawa, deciding during this time to pursue a career as a composer and conductor. In 1978, he was named Music Director of the Lethbridge Symphony Orchestra in Alberta. Over the sixteen years in this position, he founded the Southern Alberta Chamber Orchestra, and was teaching at the Banff Centre. Mr. Grant has composed commissioned works for various artists and organizations. His music - contemporary, personal and distinct - is rooted in his long interest in yoga and meditation, his love of nature, and his many years of experience as a conductor and oboist. The Violin Sonata Opus 35 is from 1998 and was commissioned by Canadian violinist Martin Beaver. This contemporary gem has been described as elegant and dramatic, virulent, dancing and poetic.

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Nocturne and Tarantella Op.28: 1. B minor; 2. E minor

The Polish composer Karol Szymanowski occupies an important place in the artistic circles of the early 20th century. His contributions were characterized by one critic as “a body of work representing a dazzling personal synthesis of cultural references, crossing the boundaries of nation, race and gender.” He was a composer first and foremost, but also a novelist, publisher and later a Director of the Warsaw Conservatory. His orchestral compositions include four symphonies, two violin concertos, ballets and operas, of which the King Roger is the most popular one; when staged in Prague on 21 October 1932, it was a huge success. His chamber music output includes much piano music, as well as works for violin

and piano, two string quartets, a sonata for violin and piano, and other works. The Nocturne and Tarantella Op. 28 is a virtuosic piece that was sketched during an evening of drinking with Szymanowski's friend, the great violinist Pawel Kochánski. The exotic Nocturne is alternately languid and febrile, filled with colors and perfumes. It has mainly long elegant lines soaring high above the piano accompaniment. It is followed by the fiery Tarantella, depicting Dionysian frenzy projected with violin wizardry and sheer visceral intensity. The Op. 28 has been recorded numerous times by some of the famous international celebrities. The pieces have impressionistic overtones reminiscent of Claude Debussy.

Bedřich Smetana (1824 – 1884) From My Homeland (Z domoviny)

Two Duos for violin and piano: 1. A major: Moderato; 2. G minor: Andantino – Moderato

In his homeland, Smetana is widely regarded as the father of Czech music. His musical style became closely identified with his land's aspirations to independent statehood. Internationally he is best known for his opera "The Bartered Bride" (*in Czech*: Prodaná nevěsta) and for the symphonic cycle "My Homeland" (*in Czech*: Má vlast). However, according to the foremost Canadian pianist of Czech origin Antonin Kubálek, "... it is the body of his piano works that truly represent the vintage Smetana.... Some of his almost 100 compositions written for piano are marvelous virtuoso showpieces, at least equal in technical demands to those of Liszt." In contrast, Smetana's chamber work output is meagre; only two string quartets (including the famous First String Quartet "From My Life"; *in Czech*: Z meho zivota), one piano trio, a juvenile fantasy on Czech national song for violin and piano, and the two duos "From my homeland" (*in Czech*: Z domoviny). This two-movement work was created in 1879-1880, not long after completion of the Má Vlast cycle and in the period of the worsening health of the composer (by this time he was completely deaf). It offers a mixture of melancholy and happiness with strong affinity to Czech folk material. The composer himself said about the work as "... written in a simple style, with a view to being performed in the home rather than at concerts.... genuinely national in character, but with my own melodies." The first movement follows the tradition of Moravian folk melodies of constantly shifting between major and minor. The second movement is much more complex. It opens with a mournful recitative-like passage, leading to dramatic leaps in the violin followed by yet another somber melody. An exuberant dance brings the piece to a spirited presto finale.

Bohuslav Martinů (1890 – 1959)

Sonata # 3 for Violin and Piano: 1. Poco allegro; 2. Adagio 3. Scherzo minor: 4. Lento – Moderato - Allegro

The youngest of the "four-leaf" of the Czech international musical giants, Bohuslav Martinů is still considered an enigma of the 20th century music. Only a small percentage of his enormous musical output is well known or understood, and just a few of his large orchestral works have entered the standard repertoire. These include the symphonies #1 and especially #6 (Fantasies symphoniques), also the Double Concerto for Two String Orchestras Piano and Timpani, The Field Mass (*in Czech*: Polní mše), or the large oratorio The Epic of Gilgamesh. In his home country, his best known composition is a beloved chamber cantata The Opening of the Wells (*in Czech*: Otvírání studánek) for soprano, alto and baritone solos, reciter, female chorus, two violins, viola and piano, written in 1955 as expression of his longing for the homeland. The catalogue of his chamber music compositions is remarkable, including many unusual combinations of instruments. Among the violin piano works the 3rd sonata is by far the most significant, and in fact constitutes one of the pinnacles of all his chamber music. It was composed in 1944 during his "double" exile in USA (not only from Czechoslovakia but also from his second home France, after the German occupation of Paris), under the cloud of the WW 2 and his sense of linguistic as well as geographical isolation. It is one of his most dramatic duo works, highly virtuosic for both instruments which are well balanced. The slow movement is an example of Martinů's lyrical side, almost reminiscent of Brahms but with Czech undertones. This large four-movement sonata (almost as long as some of his symphonies) is a *tour de force*, occupying a special place in all of Martinů's oeuvre.

Notes by Prof. Paul Jelen (Past president of Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences of Alberta SVU)
Texts based on *Wikipedia* and other publicly available sources.