

RUSALKA

Composer Biography: Antonín Dvořák



Dvořák was born, the first of nine children, in Nelahozeves, a Bohemian (now Czech) village on the Vltava River north of Prague on 8 September 1841. He came to know music early, in and about his father's inn, and became an accomplished violinist as a youngster, contributing to the amateur music-making that accompanied the dances of the local couples. Though it was assumed that he would become a butcher and innkeeper like his father (who also played the zither), the boy had an unmistakable talent for music that was recognized and encouraged. When he was about 12 years old, he moved to Zlonice to live with an aunt and uncle and began studying harmony, piano, and organ.

He wrote his earliest works, polkas, during the three years he spent in Zlonice. In 1857 a perceptive music teacher, understanding that young Antonín had gone beyond his own modest abilities to teach him, persuaded his father to enroll him at the Institute for Church Music in Prague. There Dvořák completed a two-year course and played the viola in various inns and with theatre bands, augmenting his small salary with a few private pupils.

The 1860s were trying years for Dvořák, who was hard-pressed for both time and the means, even paper and a piano, to compose. In later years he said he had little recollection of what he wrote in those days, but about 1864 two symphonies, an opera, chamber music, and numerous songs lay unheard in his desk. The varied works of this period show that his earlier leanings toward the music of Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert were becoming increasingly tinged with the influence of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt.

Among the students Dvořák tutored throughout the 1860s were the sisters Josefina and Anna Čermáková. The musician fell in love with the elder sister, Josefina, but she did not reciprocate his feelings. The anguish of his unrequited love is said to be expressed in *Cypresses* (1865), a number of songs set to texts by Gustav Pfleger-

Moravský. In November 1873 he married the younger sister, Anna, a pianist and singer. The first few years of the Dvořáks' marriage were challenged by financial insecurity and marked by tragedy. Anna had given birth to three children by 1876 but by 1877 had buried all of them. In 1878, however, she gave birth to the first of the six healthy children the couple would raise together. The Dvořáks maintained a close relationship with Josefina and the man she eventually married, Count Václav Kounic. After several years of regular visits, they bought a summer house in the small village of Vysoká, where Josefina and the count had settled, and spent every summer there from that point onward. Dvořák composed some of his best-known works there.

In 1875 Dvořák was awarded a state grant by the Austrian government, and this award brought him into contact with Johannes Brahms, with whom he formed a close and fruitful friendship. Brahms not only gave him valuable technical advice but also found him an influential publisher in Fritz Simrock, and it was with his firm's publication of the Moravian Duets (composed 1876) for soprano and contralto and the Slavonic Dances (1878) for piano duet that Dvořák first attracted worldwide attention to himself and to his country's music. The admiration of the leading critics, instrumentalists, and conductors of the day continued to spread his fame abroad, which led naturally to even greater triumphs in his own country. In 1884 he made the first of 10 visits to England, where the success of his works, especially his choral works, was a source of constant pride to him, although only the Stabat Mater (1877) and Te Deum (1892) continue to hold a position among the finer works of their kind. In 1890 he enjoyed a personal triumph in Moscow, where two concerts were arranged for him by his friend Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. The following year he was made an honorary Doctor of Music of the University of Cambridge.

Dvořák accepted the post of director of the newly established National Conservatory of Music in New York in 1892, and, during his years in the United States, he traveled as far west as Iowa. Though he found much to interest and stimulate him in the New World environment, he soon came to miss his own country, and he returned to Bohemia in 1895. The final years of his life saw the composition of several string quartets and symphonic poems and his last three operas.

Adapted from: www.britannica.com