

Friday Evening, February 10, 2017, at 8:00
Isaac Stern Auditorium / Ronald O. Perelman Stage
Conductor's Notes Q&A with Leon Botstein at 7:00



presents

Prague Central: Great 20th Century Czech Composers

LEON BOTSTEIN, *Conductor*

VÍTĚZSLAV NOVÁK	<i>In the Tatras, Op. 26</i>
BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ	Symphony No. 3 <i>Allegro poco moderato</i> <i>Largo</i> <i>Allegro—Andante</i>

Intermission

JOSEF SUK	<i>Scherzo fantastique, Op. 25</i>
ERWIN SCHULHOFF	Symphony No. 5 <i>Andante, ma molto risoluto</i> <i>Adagio</i> <i>Allegro con brio</i> <i>Allegro con brio—Allegro moderato</i>

This evening's concert will run approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes
including one 20-minute intermission.

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FROM THE Music Director

AFTER DVOŘÁK AND SMETANA: CZECH MUSIC IN THE 20TH CENTURY

By Leon Botstein

The four composers on this ASO program were major twentieth-century figures in the musical tradition of a region in Central Europe: the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, famed for contributions to European culture, particularly in music. The historic capital of Bohemia, Prague is now the capital of the Czech Republic. Before this, it was the capital of a nation spliced together after the end of World War I—Czechoslovakia—which existed from 1918 until the fall of the Soviet Empire just over a quarter of a century ago, when it was divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Prior to 1918, both major regions of today's Czech Republic—Bohemia and Moravia—had been part of the Habsburg Empire. The historic center of gravity in that dynastic and much maligned multinational Empire was Vienna. Already in the 18th century these regions were centers of German (not Czech) high culture. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was premiered in Prague. Franz Kafka is perhaps the best-known figure from the vital German-speaking Jewish community of Prague into which Erwin Schulhoff was born.

Indeed, from the Baroque era on, music was a distinctive component of Bohemian and Moravian life. In the mid-19th century, two Czech composers rose to international fame: Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana. Dvořák's career was assisted by support from Vienna through the advocacy of Brahms. Smetana—who wrote both the first famous Czech national opera, *The Bartered Bride*, and the best-known national cycle of tone poems, *Má Vlast*—was ironically far more comfortable in German than in the Czech language, and he spent an important part of his career in Sweden.

But despite their affiliation with German culture, both composers became associated with a burgeoning Czech nationalism that blossomed after the Habsburg defeat at the hand of the Prussians in 1866. Once the Habsburg Empire began to crumble, a Prussian-dominated German nation was configured which excluded the Habsburg lands, in which German was spoken, particularly Austria and the lands where these composers were born. Although they were citizens of the same empire as the

Germans and Austrians, Dvořák and Smetana came to be seen as Czech nationalists.

It is ironic in the context of the current revival of extreme nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe and the fragility of the European Union that, in retrospect, the multi-national Habsburg Empire may have been a far more promising framework than once thought for the expression of disparate linguistic and cultural autonomy within a tolerant, pluralist governing political structure. But in the late 19th century the Empire, which was centered in Vienna (and after 1867 in Budapest), was seen as archaic and oppressive.

In turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century Czech musical life, opposing camps emerged: one centered around Smetana (viewed to be the more radical nationalist voice) and one around Dvořák (a figure seen as more loyal, politically, to the Habsburg model). Two of the composers on this program were students of Dvořák: Josef Suk (his son-in-law) and Vítězslav Novák. Like Dvořák, on whose music both Brahms and Wagner exerted influence, Suk and Novák were acutely aware of their leading German-speaking contemporaries, Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler (who was born in Moravia). In the cross currents of political ferment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Prague became more than a place in which national sentiment flourished; it became a major center of modernist innovation in literature, art, and music.

Bohuslav Martinů (who spent a great deal of his career in Paris and the United States) was a Czech patriot who felt the trials of exile keenly. He was brilliant and prolific and more of his music deserves to be heard. Schulhoff, who began as an experimental modernist in the Kafka mold, eventually turned to communism.

His achievements can be rightly compared to those of his Czech-Jewish German-speaking contemporaries in other fields: Kafka and the writers Egon Erwin Kisch and Max Brod (who played a decisive role in bringing the great original Moravian-Czech composer of the previous generation, Leos Janáček, to international attention during the interwar years). But Schulhoff is now mostly remembered as a victim of the Nazis, and not the major European composer he was.

This concert offers the public an opportunity to sample the achievements of the music that emerged from a tumultuous era of political change. The post-Habsburg development of nationalism, democracy, fascism, anti-Semitism, and socialism all collided in the twenty years of Czechoslovakia after 1918. In 1938, democratic Czechoslovakia was dismembered by the Nazis; after 1945 it fell within the Soviet Empire.

However, the composers on this program all represented a sense of nationalism compatible with a vital cosmopolitan culture, both Czech and German. Their remarkable output is a welcome reminder of the urgent need for an alternative to the narrow xenophobic and provincial nationalisms that have, in recent years, reasserted their allure and power—nationalisms that are unlikely to offer the multi-faceted sources of inspiration that Suk, Novák, Martinů, and Schulhoff drew upon.

On a personal note, I would like to dedicate this concert to the memory of Rudolf Firkušný (1912–94), the consummate musician and phenomenal pianist, student of Janáček's, and ardent partisan of the democratic Czechoslovakia in which he grew up. It was through Firkušný, a close friend of Martinů's, that I first became acquainted with the music of the composers on this program, particularly the works of Suk and Novák.

THE Program

Vítězslav Novák

Born December 5, 1870, in Kamenice nad Lipou, Southern Bohemia

Died July 18, 1949, in Skuteč, Czech Republic

In the Tatras, Op. 26

Composed in 1902

Premiered on November 25, 1902 in Prague by the Czech Philharmonic
conducted by Oskar Nedbal

Performance Time: Approximately 25 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 1 English horn, 2 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 4 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, snare drum, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, glockenspiel), 1 harp, 18 violins, 6 violas, 6 cellos, 5 double basses

Vítězslav Novák was a gifted and prolific composer who was at the core of Czech musical life in the first decades of the 20th century. Composing in virtually every genre, he has been claimed by both modernists and neo-romantics as a founding figure. He was also at the very center of an ongoing series of artistic feuds about the direction of Czech music, which were a feature of musical life at the time.

In a forthcoming article about the composer, Lenka Krupková refers to his “South Moravian” Suite as a kind of “ethnotourism,” noting that unlike Janáček, Novák had little primary experience with folk culture. Thus according to her, his lovely work is a classic example of a composition by an outsider. Not so with *In the Tatras*! Novák was deeply familiar with the mountains and had scaled them as a kind of expert climber (he carped that Strauss’ *Alpine Symphony* was composed from an armchair, and, in fact, three years after composing *In the Tatras* he was almost killed in a dangerous fall while climbing them).

Mountain music, whether by Strauss or Ralph Vaughan Williams in his *Sinfonia*

Antartica, combines several prototypes or “topics.” First, the music conjures up images of the sublime: a vast, jagged, and open space which dwarfs a human scale and produces wonder and terror. This is readily apparent in Novák’s opening theme with its unison ascent followed by a leap. Second, it involves music of struggle, since such works not only seek to suggest the appearance and nature of mountains, but also engage the relationship of human beings to them. Finally, climbing mountains is not only a matter of engaging the physical challenges of the peak itself, but the kind of weather often encountered by mountaineers reaching toward high summits. So we also have a range of sounds throughout conjuring the music of cold, a kind of vocabulary developed over the centuries, from Purcell through Vivaldi and from Janáček’s “Voice of the Steppe” in *House of the Dead* to a broad range of cinematic effects associated with icy weather, such as high harmonics, tremolos, and the use of flutes and piccolos.

by Michael Beckerman

Bohuslav Martinů

Born December 8, 1890, in Polička, Czechoslovakia

Died August 28, 1959, in Liestal, Switzerland

Symphony No. 3

Composed in 1944

Premiered on October 12, 1945 in Boston by the Boston Symphony Orchestra
conducted by Serge Koussevitsky

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 1 English horn, 3 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, snare drum, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, tam-tam, triangle), 1 piano, 1 harp, 18 violins, 6 violas, 6 cellos, and 5 double basses

Before coming to New York City in 1941 as a political refugee, Czechoslovak composer Bohuslav Martinů obtained recognition internationally in a variety of musical genres and styles. Until his American residency, however, Josef Suk's former student avoided the conventional symphony. When he composed for the orchestra, he preferred to work in the neobaroque *concerto grosso* genre, which relies upon the alternations between groups of solo instruments and full orchestra. But Martinů, ever the consummate professional, attuned himself to the moods and tastes of his new wartime American market. He composed his first five symphonies between 1942 and 1946. The sixth came a little over a decade later. Martinů composed the Third Symphony without a commission in Ridgefield, Connecticut. It unfolds in three movements instead of the more conventional four.

In each movement, Martinů mobilizes what he called "germs," or endlessly generative, particle-like melodic cells. Similar to Suk's offering, the charm of Martinů's Third Symphony is equally attendant upon the composer's treatment of rhythm, meter, orchestral color (especially percussion), and dynamics as it is on harmonic and melodic planning. The contrasts of the

Allegro poco moderato's opening are representative of how such treatment cuts across the symphony.

Following an arresting *fortissimo* sonority and a subsequent brief, dramatic pause, Martinů commences an addition of melodic germs in the violins and woodwinds. Serving in a percussive capacity, the hushed piano and harp, sounding at low and high extremes of register, respectively, provide a steady pulse and sense of meter. However, Martinů's stacking of syncopated melodic germs fog such efforts at metric legibility. But the tables turn. The impulses of the charismatic woodwinds and strings become clear pulses, and the piano and harp hammer out descending, *fortissimo* impulses, obfuscating the meter once again.

From one perspective, Suk's scherzo being programmed beside Martinů's symphony provides Martinů's work with the jocular dance movement that it was missing. From another, Martinů's symphony is dressed up in the clothes of a fantastic scherzo. Therefore, the programing possibly offers two fantastic scherzi where once there was one.

by Jon Meadow

Josef Suk

Born January 4, 1874, in Křečovice, Czechoslovakia

Died May 29, 1935, in Benešov, Czechoslovakia

Scherzo fantastique, Op. 25

Composed in 1903

Premiered on April 18, 1905 in Prague at the Rudolfinum

Performance Time: Approximately 15 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 1 English horn, 2 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 French horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, percussion (crash cymbals, triangle, tambourine), 1 harp, 18 violins, 6 violas, 6 cellos, and 5 double basses

Canonic figures like Felix Mendelssohn (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture from 1826), Hector Berlioz (*Queen Mab* from the 1839 choral symphony *Roméo et Juliette*), and Paul Dukas (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* from 1897) assisted in bringing the concert hall genre known as the fantastic scherzo into its own throughout the 19th century. The fantastic scherzi of such luminaries grew in popularity because of how they showcased their composers' innovative use of sonic and formal parameters like orchestral color, rhythm, meter, dynamics, and phrasing. That less ink has been spilled in Josef Suk's name than, say, a Mendelssohn or Berlioz, and that he is currently known more for intimate, expressive piano cycles and the funereal *Asrael Symphony* (1905–06), does not detract from how the Bohemian composer, violinist, and educator forcefully drew the fantastic scherzo genre into the 20th century with his *Scherzo fantastique*. Suk's contribution serves as a powerful introduction to both an underrated composer and to the soundworld of an orchestral genre more broadly.

Scherzo is the Italianization of *Scherz*, a German word for joke. And within the context of the concert hall, the *fantastique* refers to the composer's production of a sort of wavering or hesitation in both the audience and the music's unfolding. For example, Suk cleverly toggles between the jocular and incongruous phraseology of the scherzo's first, woodwind-dominated theme and the well-defined triple meter of the balanced, waltz-like second theme, whose lyrical melody is divided between the cellos and violins. So, while contrapuntal as well as modal and chromatic harmonic innovations of the turn-of-the-century are present and accounted for, the *Scherzo fantastique* reveals its genre credentials less through harmonic and contrapuntal planning and symphonic thematic development and more through subtle shifts in orchestral color, dynamics, metric, and rhythmic conflicts at different temporal levels.

by Jon Meadow

Erwin Schulhoff

Born June 8, 1894, in Prague

Died August 18, 1942, in Würzburg, Germany

Symphony No. 5

Composed in 1938–9

Premiered on March 5th, 1965 in Weimar by the Weimar State Orchestra
conducted by Gerhardt Pfluger

Performance Time: Approximately 36 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 1 English horn,
1 clarinet, 1 bass clarinet, 1 bassoon, 4 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones,
1 tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, snare drum, suspended cymbal,
crash cymbals, xylophone, field drum, triangle), 18 violins, 6 violas,
6 cellos, and 5 double basses

There is no style shift more dramatic than that undergone by Erwin Schulhoff after his “conversion” to Communism in the early 1930s. Beginning his career as an apostle of the avant-garde, mixing jazz, surrealism, nihilism, and a dazzling panoply of national styles, he had established himself as a brilliant pianist and somewhat of an *enfant terrible*. He wrote a *Sinfonia Germanica* which is nothing more than a series of mutterings, shouts, and then a distorted version of the German national anthem; a *Sonata Erotica* which consists only of a woman coming to a climax; and a piece called *The Bass Nightingale* for solo contrabassoon. Nothing is more surprising, then, after listening to such pieces and some of his extraordinary and edgy chamber music from the 1920s, to confront works like his Second Symphony (written in 1932 at the same time as his setting of the *Communist Manifesto*), marking an almost complete turn away from the individuality of his earlier works, perhaps comparable only to the kind of break between Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and his *Pulcinella*.

The Fifth Symphony, though, is something different. Although it has a far more cinematic sound than the works of the 1910s and 20s, it was written in 1938–9 and captures some of the flavor of those years, with dramatic clashes, a full palette of musical

passages suggesting tension and forebodings, and, in keeping with the aesthetic of socialist realism, an overriding sense of hope for the future. This is found most notably in the triumphant conclusion to the final movement, but also in the sublime second movement *Adagio*. Thus Schulhoff’s Symphony No. 5 keeps company with such works as Martinů’s Double Concerto, which for that composer marked a turn to the dramatic and even tragic, and Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony* as epic and profound wartime musical canvases.

Although Schulhoff is often grouped with the “Terezin” composer who perished in Auschwitz, his fate was rather different. He was arrested not on account of his Jewish identity but for his Soviet sympathies and died of tuberculosis in a camp in Würzburg near Bavaria.

by Michael Beckerman

Michael Beckerman is the Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Music at New York University.

Jon Meadow is a Ph.D. student in Historical Musicology at New York University. His work is focused on the roles of humor and comedy in Bohuslav Martinů’s Great Depression theatre reforms.

THE Artists

LEON BOTSTEIN, *Conductor*



ERIC KALLAHER

Leon Botstein has been music director and principal conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra since 1992. He is also music director of The Orchestra Now, an innovative training orchestra composed of top musicians from around the world. He is co-artistic director of Bard SummerScape and the Bard Music Festival, which take place at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, where he has been president since 1975. He is also conductor laureate of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, where he served as music director from 2003–11. In 2018 he will assume artistic directorship at Grafenegg, Austria.

Mr. Botstein is also active as a guest conductor and can be heard on numerous recordings with the London Symphony (including a Grammy-nominated recording of Popov's First Symphony), the

London Philharmonic, NDR-Hamburg, and the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. Many of his live performances with the American Symphony Orchestra are available online. His recording with the ASO of Paul Hindemith's *The Long Christmas Dinner* was named one of the top recordings of 2015 by several publications, and his recent recording of Gershwin piano music with the Royal Philharmonic was hailed by *The Guardian* and called "something special . . . in a crowded field" by *Musicweb International*.

Mr. Botstein is the author of numerous articles and books, including *The Compleat Brahms* (Norton), *Jefferson's Children* (Doubleday), *Judentum und Modernität* (Böhlau) and *Von Beethoven zu Berg* (Zsolnay). He is also the editor of *The Musical Quarterly*. For his contributions to music he has received the award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and Harvard University's prestigious Centennial Award, as well as the Cross of Honor, First Class from the government of Austria. Other recent awards include the Bruckner Society's Julio Kilenyi Medal of Honor for his interpretations of that composer's music; and the Leonard Bernstein Award for the Elevation of Music in Society. In 2011 he was inducted into the American Philosophical Society.

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The orchestra's Vanguard Series consists of multiple concerts annually at Carnegie Hall. ASO has also performed at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College in Bard's SummerScape Festival and the Bard

Music Festival. The orchestra has made several tours of Asia and Europe, and has performed in countless benefits for organizations including the Jerusalem Foundation and PBS.

Many of the world's most accomplished soloists have performed with the ASO, including Yo-Yo Ma, Deborah Voigt, and Sarah Chang. The orchestra has released several recordings on the Telarc, New World, Bridge, Koch, and Vanguard labels, and many live performances are also available for digital download. In many cases, these are the only existing recordings of some of the rare works that have been rediscovered in ASO performances.

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