

VÍTEZSLAV NOVÁK

(1990)

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

I never understood at first why a Czech composer would want to compose a work based on the story of Lady Godiva. Was it the voyeurism and erotic story that brought out the normal red-bloodedness masculinity? The story itself is almost certainly untrue.

It was the writer Jaroslav Vrchlicky who, when invited to present a play for the opening of the new Vinohrady Theatre in Prague in 1907, chose this story. How they dealt with the subject I cannot say. However, Novák was a great admirer of women.

Lady Godiva was an 11th century kind benefactress who, according to tradition, in 1040, rode naked through the market place of Coventry in order to get the excessive taxes imposed by her husband, Leofric, rescinded as they were too much of a burden for the townsfolk.

For the opening of the theatre, J.B. Foerster wrote his Festive Overture, Op 70, but Novák was commissioned to compose the overture to the play to which overture he allocated his opus 41. To accommodate the political correctness of the time the play presented Godiva as a virtuous woman making a sacrifice to display herself and also to show her husband up as unjust and uncaring. Hence the music has a conflict and tension. Leofric is represented in angry C minor in the lower strings and brass, and Godiva is portrayed by a tender E flat key and it is she and her music that triumphs at the end. The work was apparently written in two days and it is a fine piece with very effective orchestration.

My interest in Novák arose because of the neglect of his Piano Concerto in E minor of 1895 apparently not performed until about 20 years later. It is reported that Novák referred to it as a monster but it is difficult to understand why. His piano music is generally very fine and so the Concerto must not languish in oblivion.

Vítězslav (Viktor) Augustin Rudolf Novák was born on 5th December 1870 in Kamenice and Lipou in southern Bohemia. His musical talent was encouraged by the local choirmaster, Vilem Pojman. Novák's doctor father died when the boy was eleven and so he became the reluctant head of the house at that early age. In 1889 the family moved to Prague and Vítězslav was destined to study law at Charles University. When he arrived there, he spent more and more time at the Conservatory studying music. His music teachers were somewhat hostile towards him but he was eventually recommended to join Dvorák's composition classes. Here he also met Josef Suk (1874–1935) and Rudolf Reissig who became a lifelong friend and introduced Novák to walking in the Tatra Mountains where he imbibed folk music and, around this time, met Janáček.

Dvorák helped Novák considerably and encouraged him to study philosophy as well. But, by the mid 1890s, Novák was in crisis. He could not find an original voice for his music and despaired sinking into depression. He travelled to a remote region on the borders of Bohemia and Moravia and fell in love with Slovak folk songs which lifted his spirits. He collected many of these songs and seem to fuse them within his own work. It was this contact with nature that inspired him and he felt freed from traditional forms as in the work of the great masters and, indeed, in Dvorák. Novák's mature music probably owes most to Richard Strauss.

His early works shows a debt to Brahms with his Serenade in F for orchestra of 1894 and the Orchestral Bohemian dances of 1897. He revised the serenade in the last year of his life.

The rejuvenation lead to the Symphonic Poem: In the Tatra Mountains, Op 26, of 1902. The opening has a notable sadness and poignancy and the central section describes the treacherous chasms and the towering and forbidding peaks. The final section seems to deal with the beauty of the mountains and is portrayed in radiant but fading colours.

Nature is also expressed in Eternal Longing, Op 33, in which the astute listener can detect silver water in the moonlight, the awakening of life from the plants to the flying birds and a section which produces unexpected harmonies as if the composer was the great Arnold Schoenberg. There is a rich variation of



colour and tone from the serene to the angry and there is that heart beating solo violin. But the work is not really about nature. It was inspired by a girl called Ruzena who used to visit Novák for harmony lessons and she was the object of his silent admiration or so he said. As to that heart beating violin soaring...

The affinity of man and nature is also inherited in his Slovak Suite Op 32 of 1903. It is scored for a small orchestra and the titles of the five movements give away the composer's intentions. The movements are At Church, Children's Scene, The Lovers, The Ball, and The Night. It suggests a whole life from the cradle to the grave which final resting place is represented by night and darkness. We begin with the Catholic religious character and proceed to a final song where the music seems to tremble and stagger into night but, before that, we have the decorative devices of Slovak fiddlers and cembalo players portrayed with great vividness.

The Symphonic Poem: Toman and the Wood Nymph, Op 40 dates from 1906-7 and was often paired with Eternal Longing in concerts under the title Desire and Passion. Novák was preoccupied with all aspects of womanhood. Some have said that this was engendered by Richard Strauss's Salome of 1905 but Toman did not go down well with Prague audiences who thought the music was somewhat dissonant. Toman is a Czech legend which tells of the destructive power of women. The music is often very strong and dramatic but often seems to meander into introspection. The work was first performed on 5th April 1908 in Prague by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra under Karel Kovarovic.

After about 1910 Novák's music seemed to become less popular. This may be due to the fact that from 1909-1939 he was professor of composition at the Prague Conservatory and busy with academic studies.

But, by far, the most impressive symphonic poem is De Profundis Op 67 of 1941 written during the Nazi occupation. Novák made it clear that he hated the Nazis and could have been arrested for his outspoken views. The title comes from Psalm 130, "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord." and the score is headed up, "consecrated to the suffering of the Czech people during the German reign of terror 1939-1945." The large orchestra includes a part for organ played by Jiri Reinberger at the premiere in Brno on 20 November 1941 with the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra under Bretislav Bakala. In Brno, Czech people were still being shot and hung simply for the amusement of the German people.

At the end of the war Novák completed his May Symphony celebrating the liberation of his country and it is dedicated to Stalin whom he hailed as Czechoslovakia's saviour. The symphony has vocal soloists, a choir as well as a large orchestra.

He had composed another large scale symphony between 1931-1934 called the Autumn Symphony which is a choral symphony. But his finest choral piece is generally agreed to be The Spectre's Bride of 1912-1913.

His best set of songs may be the Melancholic Songs of Love Op 38 of 1906 originally written for voice and piano and later orchestrated. These are not to be confused with the earlier song cycle Melancholie Op 25.

His chamber music includes some fine piano music such as the variations on a theme of Schumann of 1893, the Sonata Eroica of 1900, Exotica of 1911, the six sonatinas of 1919-1920 and Pan, op 43 an important work left out of Michael Kennedy's inadequate Oxford Concise Dictionary of Music. There are the Reminiscences Op 6 of 1884 and Songs of a Winter Night Op 30, the final burlesque of which is a foot-tapper, and, in 1920, Novák put together twenty-one short piano pieces which he entitled Mladi (Youth) with the Opus number 55.

Most of his chamber music are early works and include two piano trios in G minor of 1892 and D minor of 1902, a Piano Quartet revised in 1899, a Piano Quintet revised in 1897, three string quartets (1899, 1905 and 1930), and a Cello Sonata of 1941.

His four operas caused him some problems as he revised the last three. The first The Imp of Zvikov Op 47, a comic opera, was completed in 1914, Karlstejn, Op 50, of 1916 was revised twice in 1925 and 1930 respectively, The Lantern, Op 56 of 1919-1922 was revised in 1930 and Grandfather's Legacy of 1926 was revised in 1942.

If there is a weakness in Novák's music it is the result of his turning his back on form and structure as, for example, in Brahms. Novák's music is sometimes episodic, stop and start music although it has a very great deal to commend it, but the problems of continuity causes the music to lack structural coherence and logic. This is the problem with programmatic music. He often has great restraint in his music and it is unashamedly romantic. But his music does not have the originality of Janáček, for example.

His best work will last since it has the requisite qualities and his lesser known works must be made

available, It is criminal that, at the time of writing this introduction, we do not have a recording of The Spectre's Bride or the Piano Concerto.

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