

Antonín Dvořák

(1841-1904)



- Piano Concerto in G Minor, Op. 33** (40:13)
- 1 I. Allegro agitato (18:50)
 - 2 II. Andante sostenuto (9:41)
 - 3 III. Allegro con fuoco (11:32)

Vassily Primakov, piano
Odense Symphony Orchestra
Justin Brown, conductor

- Poetic Tone-Pictures, Op. 85** (28:27)
- 4 No. 1 On the Road At Night (5:57)
 - 5 No. 3 At the Old Castle (5:50)
 - 6 No. 8 Goblin's Dance (3:32)
 - 7 No. 6 Sorrowful Reverie (4:22)
 - 8 No. 12 At a Hero's Grave (8:29)

Vassily Primakov, piano



Antonín Dvořák wrote four concertos in all, but it is the last, the Cello Concerto of 1894-5, which is incomparably the best known. His very first essay in the genre was also a Cello Concerto, in A major, which he sketched in 1865 but which remained unorchestrated – and unknown until 1929, when it appeared in a somewhat speculative orchestral edition by Günther Raphael. While this remains simply a curiosity, his next concerto – the **Piano Concerto in G minor, op. 33**, has maintained a tenuous foothold in the repertoire. Its comparative neglect (which now seems to be coming to an end with an increase in performances and recording since the 1980s) was never really just, for it is an enjoyable and at least partly characteristic work.

Dvořák composed the concerto in 1876 at the request of the Czech pianist Karelze Slavkovský, who gave the premiere at a special 'Slavonic Concert' in Prague on 24 March 1878 under

the baton of Adolf Čech. The evolution of the work cost Dvořák considerable effort. He himself was a string player rather than a pianist, and though his piano parts in concerted chamber music are almost invariably effective and well-written, in some of his solo piano works, and certainly in this concerto, his desire to create impressive keyboard writing sometimes leads him into clumsy or unidiomatic writing, thickening the texture and doubling the part-writing in ways that lie extremely uncomfortably for the hands. He himself became aware that the solo part of the Concerto had definite shortcomings, but though he often expressed a desire to revise it he never did so, and the fact that pianists have found the work somewhat ungrateful to play undoubtedly contributed to its neglect – a neglect that has little to do with its actual musical substance. In the 20th century the work generally became known through a succession of ‘performing versions’ that attempted to expunge the solecisms from the piano part, the best known being that by Wilém Kurz. In recent decades, however, some pianists – notably the late Svyatoslav Richter – began to go back to Dvořák’s original score. Richter later asserted it was the most difficult concerto he had ever had to learn; and even Kurz’s version, though much more playable, does not minimize the technical challenges. On this disc Vassily

Primakov plays Dvořák’s original piano part almost in its entirety, with just a few slight modifications.

There are other features which have tended to count against the Piano Concerto in critical esteem, such as Dvořák’s over-reliance on reminiscences of Beethoven, and his tendency to let repetition of themes do the duty of actual development – even though he was, by 1876, an experienced composer who had already produced five symphonies. Nevertheless the work has many attractive features, starting right away with the opening theme, a melody of which Dvořák was very fond and which dominates the *Allegro agitato* first movement. Heard on dark-coloured instruments at the start of the opening tutti, it is taken up by the piano in various keys before stabilizing in the tonic G minor. A more pastoral second group in two parts (the second part resembling a chorale) appears in the relative major, B flat. The development section is somewhat perfunctory, though it makes good use of a dotted-rhythm heard during the exposition, and the recapitulation issues in a grandiloquent, rather Brahmsian cadenza before a stormy coda.

The central *Andante sostenuto* in D major is the most spontaneous-sounding of the three movements, a lyric invention in the mood of woodland pastoral, a genre that Dvořák always

handled naturally and freshly. It is a free rhapsody on two themes, the first of which is heard romantically on the horn, echoed by flute, the second stated by the piano in Chopinesque tracery and then taken up by bassoon. Almost throughout, the movement is a peaceful, meditative reverie, disturbed only by a couple of very brief dramatic interjections and reaching a delicate close.

The *Allegro con fuoco* finale is in Dvořák's most characteristic 'Czech nationalist' vein, beginning with a highly rhythmic theme that serves as a kind of fanfare punctuating the movement's various sections. The principal theme is in fact a playful dotted-rhythm Bohemian dance, which appears at first in the 'wrong' key of F sharp minor rather than the concerto's main key of G, to which it soon gravitates. The second subject also appears in an unorthodox tonal relation to the first, being in B major: this is a sinuous, oriental-sounding tune whose plangent augmented seconds bring a whiff of exoticism to the proceedings. The development is concerned mainly with the dancing first subject, however, and though the oriental tune makes a reappearance in the recapitulation the joyful coda, after a 'quasi cadenza' of wide-spread chords, confines itself to the first subject and the initial 'fanfare', which now becomes dance-like in its turn.

The Concerto was the largest work in which Dvořák featured the piano as a soloist, and though he wrote a respectable amount of solo piano music, he did not essay any of the large forms for it, such as the piano sonata, with the partial exception of his fine *Theme and Variations* in A flat, op. 34. Rather he preferred to compose sets of dances or suites of lyric character pieces, and by common consent the finest of these latter is the cycle of 13 pieces entitled in *Czech Poetické nálady*, and generally rendered in English as *Poetic Tone-Pictures*, op. 85. Begun in Prague in April 1889, they were completed at Dvořák's country retreat at Vysoká on 6 June, and were issued in three books before the end of the year. The 'picture' element in the title should be taken fairly literally: the pieces are essentially romantic scene-painting. 'It is programme-music of a kind, but in the Schumann manner,' Dvořák wrote to his publisher Simrock. 'But I must add immediately that they don't sound at all Schumannesque.'

In these pieces Dvořák found the perfect union of his personal and idiosyncratic piano style with poetic expression and mildly Czech-nationalist tonal tincture. The first piece, 'On the Road at Night', is one of Dvořák's finest pianistic inspirations: a delicately-painted moonlight scene, almost with something of the

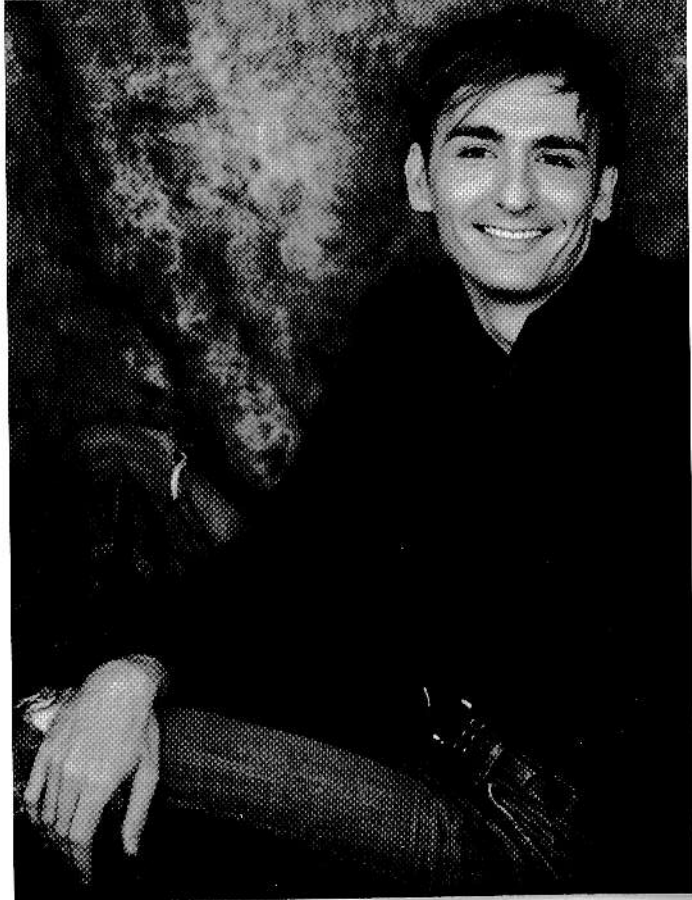
air of a late Brahms *Klavierstück* in its quieter passages, though with a sparkle all its own in the contrasting, more agitated ones. No. 3, 'At the Old Castle', has a hint of Brahms's *Ballades* in its thoughts about long-past, knightly deeds, though Brahms would not have written the chromatic tendrils which seem to cling to the stonework like ivy.

A dance – this time for a goblin – follows in No. 8: it has its grotesque touches but is more distinguished by its lively cheerfulness. The sixth piece of the cycle, 'Sorrowful Reverie', is like a slow, melancholic mazurka, intensely memorable in its wistful simplicity. Finally the cycle's penultimate number, 'At a Hero's Grave', opens with a stirring, dignified melody presented rather in the manner of Liszt's second *Hungarian Rhapsody* but developed quite differently in a mingled mood of reverie and heroic melancholy. The subtle, elegiac modulations give the piece a seriousness and sensitivity that one would hardly anticipate from its opening.

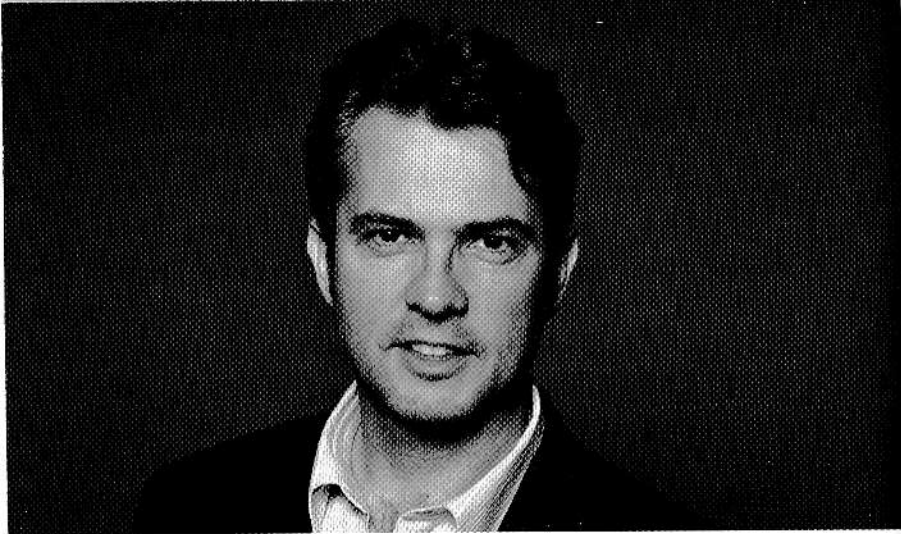
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Vassily Primakov has enriched the current concert scene with deeply personal playing. At his concerto debut Jeremy Eichler of the *New York Times* reported that Primakov "gave a fiery performance of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, with bold, expressive phrasing and dramatic commitment that brought the audience to its feet." Indeed, cheering audiences have become a hallmark of Primakov's platform appearances. As a young prizewinner of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, Primakov was cited by Donald Rosenberg of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* for his idiomatic mastery: "Primakov once again played Chopin's Sonata No. 3, showing why the jury awarded him the Chopin Prize. How many pianists can make a line sing as the 19-year-old Moscow native did on this occasion? The slow movement overflowed with dreamy lyricism shaped with a patient and colorful hand. Every poignant phrase took ethereal wing. Elsewhere the music soared with all of the turbulence and poetic vibrancy it possesses. We will be hearing much from this remarkable musician."



Vassily Primakov was born in Moscow in 1979. His first piano studies were with his mother. He entered Moscow's Central Special Music School at the age of eleven as a pupil of Vera Gornostaeva. At seventeen, after a summer at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, he came to New York to pursue studies at the Juilliard School with the noted pianist Jerome Lowenthal. At Juilliard Mr. Primakov won the William Petschek Piano Recital Award, which presented his debut recital at Alice Tully Hall. While a student at Juilliard, aided by a Susan W. Rose Career Grant, he placed among the won both the silver medal and the Audience prize in the 2002 Gina Bachauer International Artists Piano Competition. Later that year Primakov won First Prize in the 2002 Young Concert Artists (YCA) International Auditions, an award which presented him in solo and concerto performances throughout the USA. In 2007, he was named the Classical Recording Foundation's *Young Artist of the Year*. Vassily Primakov's recordings for Bridge Records include Beethoven Sonatas (BRIDGE 9251) the Chopin Concertos (BRIDGE 9278); Tchaikovsky: "The Seasons" and "Grand Sonata" (BRIDGE 9283); Chopin: 21 Mazurkas (BRIDGE 9289); and Schumann: Carnival, Kreisleriana, Arabeske (BRIDGE 9300).



Justin Brown is Music Director of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, and General Music Director of the Badisches Staatstheater, Karlsruhe. He studied at Tanglewood with Seiji Ozawa and Leonard Bernstein, assisted Bernstein and Luciano Berio, and made his conducting debut with the British stage première of Bernstein's *Mass*.

In the UK and Europe, Justin Brown has worked with the BBC Symphony, Royal Philharmonic, London Symphony, Oslo Philharmonic, Finnish Radio Symphony, Bergen Philharmonic, Lahti Symphony, Dresden Philharmonic, Iceland Symphony, Berlin Symphony, St Petersburg Philharmonic and Swedish Chamber Orchestras, and the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse. Further afield he has conducted the Malaysian and Tokyo Philharmonic and Sydney Symphony Orchestras, and in the US the Indianapolis Symphony and the Dallas Symphony Orchestras.

Renowned for his work in opera, he has conducted English National Opera, Teatro San Carlo Lisbon, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Alte Oper Frankfurt and Den Norske Opera in repertoire including *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Carmen*, *Madama Butterfly*, *La Bohème*, *La Traviata*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Falstaff*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *Wozzeck*, *Fidelio*, *The Love for Three Oranges* and *Porgy and Bess*.



The **Odense Symphony Orchestra** was formally established in 1946, but its roots go back to 1800. The orchestra gives approximately



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