

Cultural Daily

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A Feisty Dvořák at the Hollywood Bowl

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, August 8th, 2018

There was a pair of firsts at the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Dvořák and Saint-Saens performance on August 2. It would be the first time the orchestra would be playing Antonín Dvořák's Overture to Vanda as well as Camille Saint-Saëns' Violin Concerto No. 1 in A major.

LA Phil's assistant conductor Paolo Bortolameolli noted the fact at the top of the performance, and also offered a provocative survey of the night's main course: Dvořák's Symphony No. 7 in D minor, describing its emotive lyrical themes tempered by edgier somber tones.

Dvořák had recently lost both his eldest child and mother and added this telling footnote to the second movement: "From the sad years."

Patriotic fervor

The symphony ends with vigor, a type of patriotic fervor that paired with the composer's hopes for his Czech homeland. The Bortolameolli-led orchestra attacked the passages with finesse, drawing out the sunnier passages with exuberance and a kind of delight. Maybe it was the balmy evening, the stars – but moments turned ineffable, especially during Saint-Saëns' violin concerto.

Violinist Martin Chalifour, also the LA Phil's principal concertmaster, evoked ambrosia from passages, evoking a few gasps from the audience. He also performed Saint-Saëns' Havanaise, written for the Cuban violinist Rafael Diaz Albertini. The composition riffs on habanera rhythms of Cuba, although the story goes that a crackling fire on a cold night in Brest triggered the piece for Saint-Saëns.

Dvořák's operas

Dvořák's Overture to Vanda (a five-act tragic opera) led the evening. Dvořák wrote 14 operas from 1870 to 1903. The one that survived with any true significance was the fairy tale Rusalka, composed in 1900.

Back to the Dvořák's symphony: it was the only one the composer had done under a commission, and it entailed some artful negotiation. Dvořák's publisher, Fritz Simrock (he published most of Johannes Brahms and Dvořák's music) had complained that Dvořák's larger works didn't go viral (to use today's parlance) as much as his shorter works did.

An artful negotiation

Simrock said he would pay Dvořák \$500 (in today's dollars) to compose the symphony, if he would only toss in a set of Slavonic Dances, the first set of which were highly popular, racking up substantial profit.

Dvořák told Simrock that others were offering him double, said that such larger works will have a longer shelf life (certainly true in this case), and if he followed the publisher's reasoning, he would write only piffle and nothing of true importance.

"Well, as an artist who wants to amount to something, I simply cannot do it!" wrote Dvořák. How's that for artisticchutzpah?

Dvořák also pulled the poor artist card: "Remember, I pray you, that I am a poor artist and the father of a family, so do not wrong me."

Simrock paid him double.

Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

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