

## Concerto Prizewinner Showcase Series: Berwald and Dvořák

# *Gravities of Homes*

*“Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam  
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home”*

John Howard Payne

That the youngish Swedish composer, **Franz Adolf Berwald** (1796-1868), would utilize the universally recognized melody ***Home, Sweet Home*** (from Henry Bishop’s light-opera *Clari*) – a song co-penned by a British composer and an American actor-lyricist (John Howard Payne) – as the emotional thematic centerpiece for his 1827 ***Konzertstück for Bassoon, Op. 2***, speaks both to the immediate popular appeal of the 1823 song, but also to the expanding global interconnections of the classical music tradition writ large. Berwald’s early composition demonstrates a budding musician still in transition from an orchestral violist (in the Royal Opera Orchestra, until 1828) to full time composer, yet it demonstrates a unique stylistic emulation of Mozart and early Beethoven in touchingly compelling ways. In Berwald’s mature romantic-era works – particularly his four symphonies from the 1840s – his music would eventually influence later Scandinavian composers, most significantly, Danish composer Carl Nielsen.

Third year YST student, Stephen Mak, a Malaysian bassoonist, and a 2021 Conservatory Concerto Competition Prizewinner, performing the music of **Berwald**, seems like an aptly serendipitous Scandinavian connection, just as we welcome Dr Peter Tornquist as the new YST Dean, and also suggests the kind of global resonances and interconnections that continue to be essential to the vibrancy of classical music – and the institutions that support its cultivation – almost 200 years since ***Home, Sweet Home***, and the ***Konzertstück*** it inspired, were first penned.

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Having established himself as one of the world’s leading contemporary composers **Antonín Leopold Dvořák** (1841-1904), arrived in New York City from his Czech homeland, in September 1892, to take up the Director post of the recently established ***National Conservatory of Music of America*** (a now defunct school that existed in Manhattan from 1885-1952). The Conservatory’s forward-looking inclusivity (in addition to being mixed-gender, the student-body included ethnic minorities, musicians with special needs, and a high percentage of international students), certainly fit Dvořák’s cosmopolitan progressivism, and reflected the ever-widening global appeal of classical music at the end of the nineteenth-century that was starting to take root in the United States. Perhaps ironically from today’s perspectives, it was through the lens of

'nationalist' identities that numerous composers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries found their greatest international appeal.

And yet this is arguably one of the greatest powers of the classical tradition: to translate local idioms, styles, and sentiments into a universal musical language: to make the foreign, familiar. Indeed, through composers' imaginations, the tradition's best music creates an internal artistic logic in which the audience is empowered to hear multiple modes of lived experience, often ones including the emotional pull of the composer's individual identity expressing the perennial and universal human need for community and belonging: the **gravities of homes**.

Famously, for Dvořák, these interwoven multiplicities of home and identity are central to the success of his Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," (1893) composed whilst living the United States. Fully formed in his late compositions, this global-nationalist bent had been developing throughout Dvořák's entire compositional career, including the Bohemian-infused (with a dash of pan-Slavic Tchaikovsky) **Symphony No. 8 in G-major** (1890), that we'll hear this evening.

#### I.

Symphony No. 8 begins with a soulful lament in G-minor, perhaps evoking a serene and idyllic Bohemian landscape with a tinge of nostalgia. A distant bird call is sounded by the flute before it develops into an exuberant first theme. The exchange between the woodwinds and strings in the second theme is reminiscent of a rustic village dance with echoes of Russia – perhaps linked to Dvořák's budding friendship with Tchaikovsky (from 1888) as well as Pyotr Ilyich's invitation for Antonín to perform his compositions in Russia.

As the movement progresses, the mournful music of the introduction returns before the mood takes a dramatic turn towards turmoil and darkness. Dvořák develops the melodic and rhythmic motifs from the exposition, transforming them from a seemingly innocent and uplifting melody into fragments of doubts, highlighted by intensively emotive developmental exchanges between the contrasted themes. The movement eventually escapes these dark passing shadows, and arrives at its climax with tutti orchestra, led by the brasses, exalting the introductory chorale now in full glory as a triumphant fanfare.

#### II.

Dvořák reveled in pastoral environments, and the *Adagio* recreates in vivid sonorities the garden atmospherics in Vysoká, his country home in Southern Bohemia, where the surrounding woods were rich in flora and fauna, offering peace and a refreshing vigor of mind. The sunny disposition of the previous movement gives way to austerity here, set in a key and structure not dissimilar to the slow movement of Beethoven's *Eroica*, only that Dvořák opens briefly in E<sub>b</sub>-major before settling into its darker counterpart of

C-minor (the same key as Beethoven's movement), as one ventures deeper into the forest through deep contemplation.

What follows is an episodic series of pastoral soundscapes characterized by Dvořák's deliberately contrasting moods, themes, and instrumental timbre, carefully juxtaposed. Within the sonic diorama is a collection of woodwind birdcalls, amidst the interjecting strings perhaps suggesting a morning mist. A mist which lifts into the heart of the movement – a buoyant, uplifting series of pizzicatos, descending scales, and gentle pulsing, built around a children's folksong. A sudden cloudburst appears, with the brass interrupting the idyllic scene as they lead the full orchestra's angrily detached chords. This momentary summer thunderstorm eases back into cheerfulness with the reprise of the main theme, and the movement thrives majestically like the midday sun before dissipating back into serenity.

### III.

Although a *scherzo* in name – following the tradition of Beethoven – this elegantly melancholic waltz is more Brahmsian (who was Dvořák's elder-champion) in character as opposed to the ebullient intensity associated with Beethovenian *scherzi*. Although the 'trio section' of the movement moves away from this melancholic temperament by introducing a more buoyant march theme reminiscent of the previous movements, the sentimentality of the opening gradually returns eventually leading to the repeat of the opening '*scherzo*' section. The elegant character of the waltz seems to be Dvořák's nod to Tchaikovsky, who similarly used the dance form eloquently in his symphonies, particularly in the third movement of the Russian composer's Symphony No. 5 (1888).

As the movement winds down, it unexpectedly breaks into a light and playful Bohemian folk dance, a mood one might associate with a traditional *scherzo*. Indeed, through this symphony, Dvořák's ability to amalgamate multiple stylistic identities is on full display here, with the incorporation of German and Russian elements through the lens of Czech folk music. By combining contrasting lenses, Dvořák's music sheds unique light on his Czech roots refracted through multiple stylistic identities.

### IV.

From the towers of Prague's Charles Bridge, it was a tradition that court trumpeters would sound lively fanfares to announce royal activity and festivities. The finale of Dvořák's G-major symphony opens with this kind of fanfare, evoking a kind of joyful Czech exuberance, suggesting as the great conductor Rafael Kubelík once shared that "in Bohemia, the trumpets never call to battle, they always call to the dance!"

Indeed, the set of theme and variations that follows, based on a children's tune first introduced by the cellos (and mimicking the opening triadic theme of the symphony's first movement), quickly breaks into exuberant dance. This lively music is contrasted throughout, sometimes with poignant reflective tenderness, before the infectious dance music ultimately marches the symphony towards its festive and ecstatic conclusion.

*Programme notes from the M.Mus conducting students of the YSTOI: Ignatius Wang, Choy Siew Woon, Koh Kai Jie, and Lester Kong. Compiled and edited by Assoc. Prof. Brett Stemple.*