

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Suite from *The River*

VIRGIL THOMSON (1896-1989)

Vltava (“*The Moldau*”) from *Má Vlast* (“*My Country*”)
BEDŘICH SMETANA (1824-1884)

Composed in 1937; suite arranged in 1957.

Composed in 1874.

Premiered on April 4, 1876 in Prague, conducted by Adolf Čech.

Early in 1874, Smetana began to suffer from severe headaches. This symptom came and went, and he noted no other physical problems until October. “One night I listened with great pleasure to Leo Delibes’ *Le Roi l’a dit*,” he reported. “When I returned home after the last act, I sat at the piano and improvised for an hour on whatever came into my head. The following morning I was stone deaf.” Smetana was terrified. He wrote to his friend J. Finch Thorne that a ceaseless rushing filled his head: “It is stronger when my brain is active and less noticeable when I am quiet. When I compose it is always in evidence.” He tried many unguents, ointments and treatments during the ensuing months but they brought no relief — Smetana did not hear a sound for the last decade of his life. He continued to compose, but withdrew more and more from the world as he realized he could not be cured, eventually losing his reason (in the margin of score of the 1882 D minor Quartet he scrawled, “Composed in a state of disordered nerves — the outcome of my deafness”) and ending his days in a mental ward.

It is one of the great ironies in 19th-century music that Smetana conceived the first melody for *Má Vlast* (“*My Country*”), the cycle of six splendid tone poems inspired by the land and lore of his native Bohemia, at the same time that he lost his hearing. Had he not been able to look to the example of the deaf Beethoven, he might well have abandoned this work, but he pressed on and completed *Výšehrad* by November 1874 and immediately began *The Moldau*, which was finished in less than three weeks, on December 8th. *Sárka* and *From Bohemia’s Woods and Meadows* date from the following year; *Tábor* was finished in 1878 and *Blaník* in 1879. The first complete performance of *Má Vlast*, on November 2, 1882 in Prague, was the occasion for a patriotic rally, and, like Sibelius’ great national hymn *Finlandia*, this music has since become an emblem of its country’s national pride. *Má Vlast* is the traditional music played every year on May 12th, the anniversary of Smetana’s death, to open the Prague Spring Festival.

The Moldau (“*Vltava*” in Czech) is the principal river of Bohemia, rising in the hills in the south and flowing north through Prague to join with the Elbe. Smetana’s tone poem seems to trace its inspiration to a country trip he took along the river in 1870, a junket that included an exhilarating boat ride through the churning waters of the St. John Rapids. He first announced his intention to write a piece about the great river as early as 1872, as soon as he completed the opera *Libuše*, but he undertook another opera instead (*The Two Widows*), and had to postpone the tone poem for two more years. *The Moldau* is disposed in several sections intended to convey both the sense of a journey down the river and some of the sights seen along the way, as Smetana noted in his preface to the score:

“Two springs pour forth in the shade of the Bohemian Forest, one warm and gushing, the other cold and peaceful. Their waves, gaily flowing over rocky beds, join and glisten in the rays of the morning sun. The forest brook, hastening on, becomes the river Moldau. Coursing through Bohemia’s valleys, it grows into a mighty stream. Through thick woods it flows, as the gay sounds of the hunt and the notes of the hunter’s horn are heard ever nearer. It flows through grass-grown pastures and lowlands where a wedding feast is being celebrated with song and dance. At night, wood and water nymphs revel in its sparkling waves. Reflected on its surface are fortresses and castles — witnesses of bygone days of knightly splendor and the vanished glory of fighting times. At the St. John Rapids, the stream races ahead, winding through the cataracts, hewing out a path with its foaming waves through the rocky chasm into the broad river bed — finally, flowing on in majestic peace toward Prague and welcomed by the time-honored castle *Výšehrad*. [At this point, Smetana recalled the main theme of the complete cycle’s preceding tone poem, entirely devoted to depicting the ruined castle and its aura of ancient battles and forgotten bards.] Then it vanishes far beyond the poet’s gaze.”

“I was born in Kansas City, grew up there, and went to World War I from there. Then I was educated some more in Boston and Paris. In composition, I was a pupil of Nadia Boulanger. While I was still young, I taught music at Harvard and played the organ at King’s Chapel, Boston. Then I returned to Paris and lived there for many years, till the Germans came, in fact. Now I live in New York, where I am music critic of the *Herald Tribune*. My best-known works are the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (libretto by Gertrude Stein), *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River* (films by Pare Lorentz), though there are also symphonies and string quartets and many other works in many forms. I have made over a hundred ‘musical portraits,’ too, all of them drawn from life, the sitter posing for me as he would for an artist’s portrait.” Thus did Virgil Thomson encapsulate his career, one of the most significant in 20th-century American music, to the time of the premiere of his *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* in 1945. In his *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Nicolas Slonimsky called Thomson a “many-faceted composer of great originality and a music critic of singular brilliance.” Chief among Thomson’s many distinctions were the *Legion d’honneur* in 1947, the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 (for his film score to *Louisiana Story*), and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Kennedy Center in 1983.

Thomson’s music achieves a unique synthesis of the homespun Americana of his native Midwest and the sophisticated, knife-edged Neo-Classicism in which he was steeped during his many years of residence in Paris. “I wrote in Paris music that was always, in one way or another, about Kansas City,” he once explained. “I wanted Paris to know Kansas City, to understand the way we like to think and feel on the banks of the Kaw and Missouri.” Though he was little concerned with style *per se* (“The way to write American music is simple,” he said. “All you have to do is be American and then write any kind of music you wish”), his creations embody the spirit, ethos and musical roots of this country as surely as do those of Ives or Copland or Gershwin or Bernstein. His straightforward sense of melody, grown from and often quoting folk songs and Baptist hymns, his stark simplicity of harmonic motion, synthesizing Satie and Sunday school, his buoyant rhythmic figurations, blending Stravinsky and hoe-down, mark him as one of the most distinctive voices in American music. “Thomson has the gift to be simple; his notes come down where they ought to be, in the place just right,” wrote Andrew Porter in *The New Yorker* with a astute double reference to the Shaker tune *Simple Gifts* and Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*. “His simplicity is not artless, but rather it is careful, refined and purified, by a process that has not destroyed its zest.”

The “New Deal” was a series of visionary programs initiated in 1933 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and supported by Congress to remedy the terrible effects of the Great Depression by providing relief for the country’s unemployed and poor, restoring the general economy, and reforming the banking system. It was controversial at the time and remains so today, but its legacy — Social Security, Federal Housing Administration, Securities and Exchange Commission, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Tennessee Valley Authority, development of the national parks, and major infrastructure improvements nationwide — did much to shape modern America. In 1935, a Farm Security Administration was organized to assist and relocate struggling families. The FSA was run by Rexford G. Tugwell, a Columbia University professor and advisor to President Roosevelt, who realized that the still-new medium of sound film could be a valuable tool to gain support for the program and publicize its work. Tugwell learned that Pare Lorentz, a prominent columnist and movie critic who had voiced his support for the New Deal in *The New Yorker*, *McCall’s* and other leading publications, had been gathering material for a documentary film about the Dust Bowl of the Great Plains, whose ruinous conditions John Steinbeck was to immortalize in the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. When they met in Washington, Lorentz explained that he envisioned a thirty-minute film — titled *The Plow That Broke the Plains* — that would use images, narration and music to show how ill-considered

farming practices and the climate of the region had led to the Dust Bowl. Tugwell arranged a small budget for the project, and Lorentz engaged an experienced team of cinematographers to do the filming and Virgil Thomson to compose the music; Lorentz wrote the narration himself. Though Lorentz had great difficulty getting the film distributed — the studios owned most of the theaters in those days and saw this government-funded project as unwelcome competition — *The Plow That Broke the Plains* was both a critical and public success upon its release in May 1936, and it still stands as a powerful record of one of the nation's most trying times; it was accepted by the Library of Congress into the National Film Registry in 1999.

The following year, Tugwell and Lorentz agreed to do a similar project about the frequent devastating floods along the Mississippi River Valley that resulted from soil erosion, deforestation and badly planned development, and Thomson was again brought in to supply the music. The project was given special urgency — and a unique opportunity for dramatic footage — by the catastrophic Mississippi flood of late winter 1937, which the Red Cross claimed shattered all records for a natural disaster in the United States and caused the Coast Guard to mount its largest relief effort to that time. *The River* opened in wide distribution in February 1938 — the studios had seen the value of such documentaries as a supplement to their commercial programming — and was widely praised; it was named Best Documentary at the Venice Film Festival that year, beating out Leni Riefenstahl's propagandistic *Olympiad*, and the publication of Lorentz's Whitmanesque text was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in poetry. (An Academy Award for documentaries was not instituted until 1942.) For those who would like to experience this classic of American history and filmmaking, *The River* is available on YouTube.

Thomson rooted his score, which runs continuously throughout the 32 minutes of *The River*, in traditional songs, hymns and spirituals of the Mississippi Valley that he culled from published collections and consultations with the pioneering folklorist John Lomax, whose research and thousands of field recordings were seminal additions to the Archive of American Folk Culture at the Library of Congress; when pressed by Lorentz for music for a section of the film that had not yet been edited, Thomson also included extended passages from the *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* (based largely on the Southern Baptist hymn *How Firm a Foundation*) he had written in 1926-1928 but could not get performed until 1945. In 1957 he arranged a concert suite from the complete score that summarizes the film's progress, as indicated with the following excerpts from Lorentz's poetic narration.

I. *The Old South*. "The Mississippi River runs to the Gulf. Carrying every drop of water that flows down two-thirds the continent ... Men and mules, mules and mud ... New Orleans to Baton Rouge, Natchez to Vicksburg, Memphis to Cairo ... A thousand miles up the river ... And we made cotton king ... We fought a war. We fought a war and kept the west bank of the river free of slavery forever."

II. *Industrial Expansion in the Mississippi Valley*. "We rolled a million bales down the river for Liverpool and Leeds. 1860: We rolled four million bales down the river, cotton for the spools of England and France.... Ten million bales ... Fifteen million down to the Gulf ... Cotton for the spools of Italy and Germany."

III. *Soil Erosion and Floods*. "But we left the old South impoverished and stricken. Doubly stricken, because, beyond the tragedy of war, already the frenzied cotton cultivation had taken toll of the land ... We built a hundred cities and a thousand towns ... But at what a cost! We cut the top off the Alleghenies and sent it down the river; We cut the top off Minnesota and sent it down the river; We cut the top off Wisconsin and sent it down the river. We left the mountains and the hills slashed and burned, And moved on ... The water comes downhill, spring and fall; Down from the cut-over mountains, Down from the plowed-off slopes, Down every brook and rill, rivulet and creek, Carrying every drop of water that flows down two-thirds the continent ... And poor land makes poor people. Poor people make poor land. A generation facing a life of dirt and poverty, disease and drudgery; Growing up without proper food, medical care, or schooling, And in the greatest river valley in the world."

IV. *Finale*. "And the old river can be controlled ... to develop navigation, flood control, agriculture and industry in the valley; a valley that carries more rainfall than any other in the country ... Control enough to put the river together again before it is too late ... Before it has picked up the heart of a continent and shoved it into the Gulf of Mexico."

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 97, "Rhenish"

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Composed in 1850.

Premiered on February 6, 1851 in Düsseldorf, conducted by the composer.

Robert Schumann arrived in Düsseldorf on September 2, 1850 to assume his new duties as conductor of the local orchestra and choral society. He seemed pleased with the situation: the musical forces were skilled enough to present an annual music festival that had been conducted by such luminaries as Mendelssohn; Schumann's home life with his beloved wife, Clara, was happy; he had been composing a steady stream of new music for nearly two decades; and his position offered him the chance to live in the heart of the Rhineland, on the legendary river itself, a region for which he had harbored great fondness throughout his life. During the three months following his move to Düsseldorf, he wrote two important works — the Cello Concerto and the "Rhenish" Symphony.

The immediate inspiration for the Symphony came from the Schumanns' visit to Cologne on September 29, 1850. The city and its great cathedral, still unfinished centuries after its inception, made such a powerful impression on the composer that he determined to write a work which, he said, "mirrors here and there something of Rhenish life." Though he provided only the fourth of the Symphony's five movements with a programmatic title, the second and last movements reflect the spirit and style of peasant dances, while the first shows the confidence and joy Schumann felt in his new surroundings and the third the deep contentment he found in living close to the Rhine. The fourth movement was originally titled, "In the character of an accompaniment to a solemn ceremony," though Schumann later deleted the heading, saying that "the general impression of a work of art is more effective [than a specific extra-musical reference]." This great movement, which stands at the pinnacle of Schumann's symphonic achievement, grew from the ritual the composer observed at the Cologne Cathedral on November 12, 1850, when Archbishop Johannes von Geisel was elevated to the rank of Cardinal. So overwhelmed was Schumann with the magnificent service in that great church that he produced what the noted British musicologist Sir Donald Tovey later dubbed "one of the finest pieces of ecclesiastical polyphony since Bach." Schumann, who revered and studied Bach's music for all of his life, would have been immensely pleased with Tovey's evaluation.

The opening movement of Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony launches without introduction into its main theme. This striding melody, characterized by its buoyant syncopations and bright vitality, precedes a vigorous scalar motive and a lyrical second theme, all of which are combined with considerable craft in one of Schumann's most elaborate developmental sections. The second movement, notable for its rich harmonic palette and its two-trio structure, resembles a slow *Ländler*, the peasant dance that was the forerunner of the waltz. The brief third movement, only 54 measures long, is a songful interlude similar in spirit to the many mood paintings that abound in Schumann's works for solo piano. The penultimate movement is the composer's depiction of the majestic ceremony in Cologne Cathedral. Its mystical atmosphere is as much the product of its exquisite sonority — horns and bassoons enhanced by the noble voices of the trombones, heard here for the first time in the Symphony — as of its strict contrapuntal style. The finale exudes the aura of a folk festival, as though Schumann had left the misty Gothic interior of the Cathedral to find a sun-lit square filled with carnival revelers immediately outside. At the climax of the movement, the Cathedral music again bursts forth from the winds and brass, and the work closes with an energetic coda alluding to the theme of the first movement.

THE IRIS ORCHESTRA
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February 4-5, 2017

Michael Stern, Conductor

SMETANA *The Moldau*

THOMSON Suite from *The River*
The Old South
Industrial Expansion in the Mississippi Valley
Soil Erosion and Floods
Finale

— INTERMISSION —

SCHUMANN Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 97, "Rhenish"
Lebhaft
Scherzo: Sehr mässig
Nicht schnell
Feierlich
Lebhaft