

# vítězslav novák

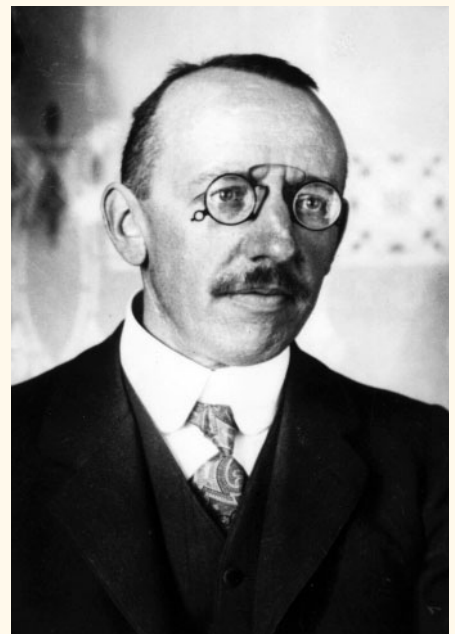
5<sup>th</sup> december 1870 – 18<sup>th</sup> july 1949

## Life and Work

Following the founding generation of composers of new Czech music (Bedřich Smetana, 1824–1884; Antonín Dvořák, 1841–1904) a group of other important composers came to the fore in the last decade of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Throughout Europe programmes and individuals were emerging all loosely linked by various concepts of modernity, involving reflection on all areas of life – politics, economics, technology, science, the position of man, culture and art – and critical reaction to change in the past century. In the Czech Lands one aspect of the new wave was a new philosophy among poets and writers (known as the Manifesto of the Czech Modern Movement, 1895), who believed that the main imperative of their art should be to overcome traditional idyllism and narrow patriarchal nationalism through freedom of creation, critical thinking and stress on individualism: *“artist, give your work your blood, your brain, your whole self – you, your brain, your blood will live and breath in it, and it will live through them...”* The idea of constant progress, expressing itself in the conquest of ever new areas of subject-matter and spirited innovation in technique, was also elevated to a principle by the aesthetician and musicologist Otakar Hostinský (1894).

In this process of reorientation **Vítězslav Novák** was in his way a central and (together with Josef Suk, 1874–1935) leading figure. It also, of course, involved the older composers Josef Bohuslav Foerster (1859–1951), who joined the movement in a rather more traditionalist spirit, and Leoš Janáček (1854–1928), who at a late age (essentially not until after 1916) surprisingly became a trailbreaker in 20th-century Czech music. (The younger Otakar Ostrčil (1879–1935) only matured in the years after the 1st World War). Nonetheless, at the very least up to the end of the 1930s it was Novák who fulfilled the special function of “axial personality” of the Czech modern movement in music in the sense that it was he who was the meaningful epicentre of the polarisation of the Czech composers of the day. To put it in simplified terms, we might say that Novák’s friendly rivalry with J. Suk, “friendly antagonism” with L. Janáček and persevering parallel efforts in the field of vocal music with J. B. Foerster etc. has deeper meaning for the three-dimensional relief and dynamics of the music of the time. By comparison, the Suk – Janáček – Foerster relationships are mutually tangential and tell us little.

Novák’s **biography** is not particularly dramatic in any way, and perhaps we can simply note that his path to music and musical edu-



cation was rather more complicated than that of Suk or Foerster, whose own father was a musician and a composer.

Vítězslav Novák was born on the 5th of December 1870 in Kamenice nad Lipou in South Bohemia. He was christened Viktor (Augustin Rudolf), and only later adopted the name Vítězslav as a professional “pseudonym”. He grew up in the not very affluent family of a small-town doctor (his father Jakub Novák died in 1882). He attended academic high school 1881–1889 in Jindřichův Hradec, and in 1882 his mother and two siblings moved there as well. His first attempts at composing songs and piano pieces, more or less just sketches, probably date from 1886. After he completed his schooling in 1889, the family moved to Prague, where Novák was to live in various places until his death. Novák studied first at the Law Faculty (1889), and then the Philosophical Faculty (1890–1893), where he attended the lectures of O. Hostinský in particular; he graduated without a doctorate. At the same time, however, he was allowed to enter the conservatory where he

studied composition (1889–1892) and piano (1891–1896 with Josef Jiránek). Two years of composition studies with very conservative theoreticians (K. Knittl, K. Stecker) left Novák an unsuccessful and disillusioned student, but Stecker seems to have noticed his talent and in the autumn of 1891 recommended him to the class of Antonín Dvořák. Dvořák understood and respected his new pupil, and Novák soon became (alongside Josef Suk) one of his favourite students, although there were often clashes of opinion between teacher and pupil, given their very different personal and creative temperaments. After graduating in composition (1892, *Sonata in d minor for Violin and Piano*) and from the Philosophical Faculty, Novák, who had been living on various modest grants and scholarships, had to support his whole family. He therefore gave private lessons in piano, and later in harmony, counterpoint and composition, and in time – with his growing successes as a composer – became the leading teacher of composition in Bohemia. He was appointed professor of a master class at the Prague Conservatory in 1909 and worked there until his retirement in 1940. (In the years 1920–1921, 1921–1922 and 1927–1928 he was rector of the conservatory, which became a state institution in 1920) Novák, who had a thorough knowledge of all music written (at the least) from the 18th century, and of music theory, was famous as a strict teacher who was nonetheless tolerant of the different creative directions of his pupils. During his almost forty-year teaching career he taught roughly 100 musicians, and most of them later occupied important positions in musical life. These included leading Czech composers (e.g. V. Štěpán, L. Vycpálek, A. Hába, V. Kaprálová) and after 1918 composers from Slovakia (e.g. J. Cikker, E. Suchoň, A. Moyzes and others), the then Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Rumania and the Ukraine. Novák's school also produced many musicologists, music theorists, conductors and pianists.

From his youth, then, Novák's life was moulded by "the rhythm of the school year" during which he systematically taught and then composed every afternoon. In the time that remained he keenly followed the theatre, concert and opera season, made music himself (in the form of the then popular four-handed play with various partners, and more ambitiously, from 1901 with discussion of the pieces played in a circle of close friends known as the "Podskalská Philharmonic"), studied music, languages and liked to read fiction. (In 1912 he married his former student Marie Prášková, which seems to have been the reason why he refused a professorship at the Academy of Music and Drama in Vienna. In 1914 his only child Jaroslav was born.) Summer vacations, right up to his last years (up to the beginning of the 2nd World War) he would devote to intensive travel with friends – from 1896 he would take regular trips to Moravia and Slovakia, and gradually extended his tourist adventures (and mountain climbing!) to the Tatras, Alps and Dolomites, and to the main cities of Europe

where he admired the architecture and art. He travelled to all the European countries with the exception of Russia.

From the beginning of the 20th century to his death Novák was a generally known and respected figure in Czech (later Czechoslovak) culture. In 1906 he was appointed a member of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts, and in 1907 a member of the jury in its 4th Class. His works (especially his lengthier works) were regularly honoured with awards and state prizes, and many were published by distinguished European publishing houses (from 1895 on Brahms's recommendation by Simrock, and from 1911 in the Vienna Universal Edition). In 1928 he was given an honorary doctorate by the Comenius University in Bratislava, and in 1945 he was awarded the title "National Artist" before these titles of honour were profaned by the communist regime. Vítězslav Novák died on the 18th of July 1949 in Skuteč in East Bohemia, where he had often spent his summer holidays in the last years of his life. He left several incomplete pieces on his desk... At this point the encyclopaedias usually start on a catalogue of **works**. We could easily do the same here, commenting that Novák made contributions to more or less all the musical genres of his time. He composed four operas (e.g. *Karlštejn*, 1916), two ballet pantomimes (e.g. *Signorina Gioventù*, 1930), two cantatas (*Bouře [The Tempest]*, 1910; *Svatební košile [The Wedding Shirt]*, 1913), two symphonies (1934, 1943), twenty or so orchestral works, a dozen chamber works, a series of piano pieces and cycles, and several dozen choral and song cycles... A list of this kind cannot, however, capture the basic character and continual stylistic transformations of his work over a half century. We shall try a different approach in the following sections, which have rather metaphorical titles.

### Poetry in Tones

In terms of creative temperament Novák was supremely the subjective romantic – with very few exceptions his compositions are programmatic and practically all his major works are sui generis autobiographical. Of course, we are aware that at least from the beginning of the 19th century (for example from Beethoven's *Eroica*) composers did not write symphonies or quartets "by the dozen" to external order, but from impulses deriving from their lives and internal reflections. On the other hand, in Novák's mature works this trend acquired "extreme" form in the sense that what we find here are not inspirations broadly spread out on interesting literary themes (Liszt, R. Strauss), but most often a kind of direct "musical arrangement of the self" in which the basic role is played by Novák's personal and immediate relationship to the theme (the symphonic poem *O věčné touze [On Eternal Longing]* op. 33 based on Hans Christian Andersen) or a covert, and later sometimes explicit "personal programme" (2nd String Quartet in D Major op. 35). It is in this light that we have to understand Novák's response to his key sources of inspiration –

eroticism, nature (in all aspects of the term) and later the fateful moments in the history of his native land.

On the other hand, Novák's creative approach is at the same time strikingly rational, as is very clear from an analysis of his melodic (treatment of themes that is akin to the "entwickelnde Variation" type, conscious monothematism), the distinctive structuring of pieces and intensive exploitation of polyphony in a way that is not so much a matter of complex use of familiar forms (fugue, passacaglia), but often of virtually spontaneous methods of imitation and canonical development. Novák's harmony underwent important transformations, but in general his pieces are anchored in tonality (in his later period expanded tonality or sometimes polytonality).

Given the autobiographical character of Novák's music, an outline of its development over time is essential. In his earliest period Novák in no way deviated from the stylistic current of Late Romanticism. Romantic literature (e.g. Lord Byron) is the source of inspiration for his first student experiments (the *Korzár [Corsair]* Overture, the piano ballade "*Manfred*" in e minor). His chamber pieces, piano music, and songs (the *Pohádka srdce [Fairytale of the Heart]* op. 8) are full of weltschmerz and youthful exaltation, and the old adage *cherchez la femme!* applies everywhere. Autobiographical inspiration is very obvious in the piano cycle *Vzpomínky [Recollections]* op. 6. However strange it may be for a twenty-four-year-old youth to be engaged in recollections, the cycle reflects Novák's joyless childhood without comfort and the warmth of home (*Triste*), restless adolescence (*Inquieto*) and a poetic evocation of juvenile platonic love (*Amoroso*). Elsewhere the composer on the contrary shows a lightly sentimental diction on the borders of the salon production of the time (*Serenade in F major* for small orchestra, the piano *Serenades* op. 9 and *Barquerolles* op. 10), although technically these are very accomplished compositions, which make inventive use of the possibilities of chromatics in the harmonies.

Chance opened up a path for Novák to develop a more distinctive and individual style. In the summer of 1896 he was invited to a distant corner of Eastern Moravia, Velké Karlovice in Moravian Wallachia, and here the hitherto "urban man" was spellbound by nature, the rural people and their music and song. Back in Prague in the autumn he immediately embarked on a detailed study of collections of Bohemian, Moravian and Slovak folksongs, analysing them from every angle and undoubtedly exploring the "distinctive" and even "exotic" features of their melody, rhythm and modality. (Let us not forget that at the same time Debussy, Ravel Janáček and later Bartók were all finding a way out of cosmopolitan Romantic musical thinking via such "exotic" folk music!) These studies and further trips to the Moravian and Slovak regions enabled Novák to transform his musical idiom. First he arranged songs, and then he tried to imitate them (*Songs*

on *Words from Moravian Folk Poetry* op. 16, 17, 21 dating to 1897–1898). The then influential musicologist Zdeněk Nejedlý condemned it as “faking folk songs” but he failed to understand that the experiment was a creative workshop in which the composer was bringing a new form of musical expression to birth. Novák soon found a deeper way of integrating elements of Moravian and Slovak song with his own melodics and (ever more individual and audacious) harmonic imagination, directly quoting only rarely, and instead simply finding inspiration in particular melodic phrasing, modality or rhythm. While initially his pieces “overtly and unashamedly” mirrored folk sources (twice in the *Two Ballads on the Words of Moravian Folk Poetry* op. 19, 23), in the years 1900–1911 his new style developed in the direction of new forms and subject matter. Around 1900 he was using folk ballads to tackle his internal crises and disappointment in personal and love life – as if appeal to timeless national (!) poetry made it possible for him to objectivise these crises and carry out a kind of psychological auto-therapy through all these themes of ruin, pain, unhappy love and so forth... We still find pessimistic tones of despair in his song cycle *Melancholy* op. 25 (1901) and in the *Balladic Piano Trio* op. 27 (1902). The song texts here are taken not from the “classics” of Czech poetry but from Novák’s modern contemporaries, and some of their decadent features reflect – in a way that is unique for Czech music of the time – a *fin de siècle* atmosphere, although at the same time a new symbolist view of nature. In the *Balladic Trio* Novák tackles the problem of the monothematic four-movement cycle in one sonata movement in a highly individual manner.

We can be certain, however, that not even in this period were the horizons of Novák’s music permanently clouded and gloomy. Already in 1900 a melodics close to his balladic works provided the basis for his piano *Sonata Eroica* op. 24, in which he contemplates the sufferings of the oppressed Slovak people and evokes their heroic resistance and future victory. The popular *Slovácko Suite* op. 32 (1903) represents characteristic episodes of a Sunday in a Moravian village. Nature played an ever more frequent major role in Novák’s music, whether in dramatic forms (the symphonic poem *V Tatrách [In the Tatras]* op. 26, 1902) or lyrical forms – the 2nd *String Quartet in D Major* op. 35 (1905) is an idyllic summer meditation (in the form of a fugue), interrupted for a moment by memories of the sorrows and small joys of ordinary days, while the song cycle *Notturna* op. 39 (1908) glows with all the shades of nocturnal moods in the texts of German Romantic poets...

In the culminating works of this period Novák’s key inspirations are conjoined. Unfulfillable erotic longing lights up the Symbolist song cycle *Údolí Nového Království [The Valley of the New Kingdom]* op. 31 (1903) and forms the main idea of the symphonic poem *O věčné touze [On Eternal Yearning]* op. 33 (1905), which – but only on the surface – is the moon’s story about sea and an exhausted



swan (H. Ch. Andersen). In the same way a “folk” ballad by F. L. Čelakovský provided Novák simply with the frame for a tragedy of jealousy, betrayal and self-destructive passion in his symphonic poem *Toman a lesní panna [Toman and the Wood Maiden]* op. 40 (1907). Nature here is not a self-sufficient “impressionistic” image, but an important element of the expressive drama: in the long cantata (“sea fantasy”) *Bouře [The Storm]* op. 42 (1910) the stormy ocean finally swallows up all the actors with their pure devoted love and sexual obsessions, the boy at the mast and the defiant sailors. The hymnic conclusion is transcendent in its awareness of the fleetingness of life, but also of the eternal renewal of hope and the regeneration of nature. Novák’s declaration of faith in natural pantheism crowns the cyclical piano “poem in notes” *Pan* op. 43 (*Prologue, Mountains, Sea, Forest, Woman*; 1910).

When the latter works were premiered Novák’s music was very much in line with the mood of his time and was favourably, even enthusiastically, received by the public. After 1912 the situation began to change. Novák suppressed the autobiographical element in his works and was perhaps seeking for a new idiom based more on “Bohemian melodics” (as opposed to those of Moravia and Slovakia) in his cantata *Svatební košile [The Wedding Shirt]* op. 48, and first two operas. But in the period of the “fights over Dvořák”, whom Novák then supported, these works were ruthlessly and harshly rejected by Z. Nejedlý and his anti-Dvořák “camp”.

Later, in the post-war years, new stylistic principles and movements that were in many respects contrary to Novák’s musical temperament were emerging all over Europe. (Perhaps in a somewhat autobiographical



spirit he sought inspiration in the „world of childhood“, which was the subtitle of his song cycle *Jaro [Spring]* op. 52, and also an impulse in the *Six Sonatinas for Piano* op. 54 and minor piano piece *MLádí [Youth]* op. 55; these are all compositions in the utterly distinctive Novákian style, but „moderated“ and shorn of his former passionate combativeness.) Not until 1930 is there a new creative surge in Novák's work, once again subjectively motivated by his "farewell to Youth" (the ballet pantomime *Signorina Gioventù* op. 58, 1928; the vocal-orchestral *Podzimní symfonie [Autumn Symphony]* op. 62, 1934 with original Moravian-Slovácko "scherzo"; the *3rd String Quartet* op. 66, 1938). In all these pieces Novák was also in his way coming to terms with contemporary music: once again we find the echoes of Moravian song and also plentiful self-quoting, but these are treated on the basis of a rougher dissonant harmony and complex polyphony. He returned to his native landscape in his *South Bohemian Suite* op. 64 (1937) and during the Nazi Occupation reacted to the tragic situation of the Czech nation with a symphonic poem *De profundis* op. 67 (1941) and the organ *St. Wenceslas Triptych*, which he later instrumentated (1942).

This glancing view of the world of poetry in Novák's music (and its interior poeticism) is inevitably incomplete. He arranged a huge

number of poems in his vocal compositions – in so many song cycles and dozens of male, female and mixed choir compositions that I have not even mentioned. A vast range of poets provided the impulse for Novák's musical poetry, from the unknown authors of folk texts to the older and in their time "classic" Czech poets (Mácha, Neruda, Sládek, Čech, Vrchlický and others) to the German poets (Lenau, Dehmel, Uhland and others) to the Czech Modern movement (Sova, Machar, Březina). He did not simply passively clothe this poetry in notes. On the contrary, it became a life-giving element in his own original poetic music. To appreciate the point, you must just listen to it.

#### JAROMÍR ČERNÝ

#### Vítězslav Novák – Selected Discography

*Eternal Longing*, symph. poem op. 33 – *In the Tatras*, symph. poem op. 26 – *Moravian-Slovak Suite*, op. 32  
Czech Philharm. Orch., Brno State Philharm. Orch., cond. Karel Šejna; Supraphon 1992

*South Bohemian Suite*, op. 64 – *Lady Godiva*, ouv. op. 41 – *De profundis*, symph. poem op. 67  
Brno State Philharm. Orch., cond. Jaroslav Vogel; Supraphon

*String Quartet no. 2 in D major* op. 35.  
(+L. Janáček, *String Quartet no. 1*)  
Janáček Quartet; Supraphon 2000

*The Storm, the Sea Fantasy... for Soloists, Mixed Chorus and Orch.* op. 42  
Czech Philharm. Orch., Czech Philharm. Chorus, cond. Zdeněk Košler; Supraphon

*Slovak Songs – Piano Quintet in A minor* op. 12 – *Songs of a Winter Night for piano solo* op. 30  
M. Kožená (mezzo-soprano), Radoslav Kvapil (piano), Kocian Quartet; ASV Ltd. London 1998

*Pan. A Poem in Tones*, op. 43.  
(+B. Smetana, B. Martinů)  
František Maxián (piano); Supraphon 1998