

# CZECH PHILHARMONIC 2014-2015 NATIONAL TOUR





## The Czech Philharmonic: A History

In 2014/2015 the **Czech Philharmonic embarks upon its** 119th season. Since its first concert in 1896 the **Czech Philharmonic** has been made up of, and directed by, outstanding musicians, all of whom have contributed to the **orchestra's** excellent reputation at home and internationally. The life of the orchestra has frequently reflected the artistic, cultural, and political changes of the era, resulting in a fascinating and gripping history.

### Antonín Dvořák and the Czech Philharmonic

The Czech Philharmonic's historic first concert took place on Saturday 4 January, 1896. The great Czech composer, Antonín Dvořák, conducted the orchestra in performances of his own works: the third *Slavonic Rhapsody*, the world-premiere of his *Biblical Songs*, Nos.1-5, the *Othello* overture, and his *Symphony No.9*, 'From the New World'.

The venue was Prague's Rudolfinum, where the largest concert hall was later named after Dvořák himself, and where the Czech Philharmonic still resides today. The influence of another great Czech musical figure, Bedřich Smetana, was also apparent at this concert: the composer had wanted to create a tradition of symphonic concerts for Czech audiences as far back as the 1860s, but had died in 1884. Also present were founding members of the 'Society for the Maintenance of a Large Orchestra in the City of Prague', an organisation established in 1882. Its objectives had at last been realised thanks to the Czech Philharmonic and Dvořák.

### The foundation of the Czech Philharmonic

On 7 June, 1894, the Czech Philharmonic was founded with the official approval of the Governor's Office in Prague. The orchestra was defined as 'an organisation for the enhancement of musical art in Prague, and a pension organisation for the members of the National Theatre Orchestra in Prague, its widows, and its orphans.'

Until 1901, the Czech Philharmonic remained a forum for National Theatre musicians, who were committed to giving at least four large symphonic concerts each year. The money these concerts raised went into a fund created to support members of the organisation who could no longer play, as well as the immediate survivors of deceased musicians. Members of the organisation were required to participate in rehearsals and concerts, with a high level of attendance expected. Musicians who arrived at rehearsals more than 15 minutes late received penalty payments of one gold piece, and unexplained absences at concerts were punishable by payment of five gold pieces.



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During these early years, the Czech Philharmonic did not have a permanent Chief Conductor; rather, its concerts were led by conductors such as Adolf Čech and Mořic Anger (both from the National Theatre), Karel Kovařovic, Oskar Nedbal (then the violist in the Bohemian Quartet), and composer Zdeněk Fibich.

### **The orchestra becomes independent**

On 9 February, 1901, the National Theatre Orchestra – whose members were also in the embryonic Czech Philharmonic – went on strike, protesting against the head of the National Theatre Opera, Karel Kovařovic. On 15 February, the strikers were dismissed from their orchestral positions, and Kovařovic began to build a new theatre orchestra.

The displaced musicians decided to establish the Czech Philharmonic as an independent symphony orchestra. 31-year-old Ludvík Vítězslav Čelanský (1870-1931) was elected as the first Chief Conductor. A fight for survival then began, and the orchestra performed continuously in order to establish its reputation. Between October and December 1901, the Czech Philharmonic gave 49 concerts: 22 in Bohemian and Moravian cities, and 15 in Prague. The orchestra even performed in the brewery in Smíchov, where it gave its first full rendition of Smetana's *Má Vlast* on 8 December, 1901. The Czech Philharmonic's debut appearance abroad took place in Vienna, with conductor Oskar Nedbal directing an orchestra of 62 musicians.

### **A tour to London, Czech premieres, and collaboration with Mahler**

Fresh challenges faced the Czech Philharmonic when Ludvík Vítězslav Čelanský unexpectedly resigned in April of 1902. Oskar Nedbal turned down the offer to become the orchestra's Chief Conductor, but he did lead the Czech Philharmonic on a significant tour to England during May and June of 1902. World-famous Czech violinist Jan Kubelík accompanied the orchestra, which travelled under the title 'The Kubelík Bohemian Orchestra'. Nedbal wrote to his friends from London that, "this is the first time that an orchestra from the Continent has settled in London for a longer period of time. The London Philharmonic is allegedly raging..."

In January 1903, Vilem Zemánek (1875-1922) became the orchestra's Chief Conductor. Under his leadership, the Czech Philharmonic offered regular subscription concerts, as well as concerts of popular music. In addition to performing music by composers from around the world, the orchestra gave premieres of significant works by Czech composers including Janáček, Suk, and Novák.

On 19 September, 1908, Gustav Mahler conducted the Czech Philharmonic in the premiere of his own Symphony No.7. Nevertheless, financial ruin remained a threat to the orchestra, which supplemented its income by playing in restaurants, alongside bold projects such as a five-month tour of Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 1904.

### **Political change**

Matters eventually came to a head when the orchestra deposed its Chief Conductor, Vilem Zemánek, on 16 April, 1918. Yet Zemánek had brought order to the Czech Philharmonic, and conductor Václav Talich later paid tribute to his contributions: "...without the passionate, dogged persistence of Zemánek, there would be no Czech Philharmonic. He worked for what the orchestra needed and truly pushed it".

Later in 1918, on 28 October, the orchestra's dress rehearsal for the world premiere of Josef Suk's new symphonic composition, *Zrání*, took place in the Municipal House in Prague. The streets of Prague were simmering, as rumours abounded that an independent Czechoslovak state would soon be declared. The then relatively-unknown 35-year-old conductor Václav Talich was working with the Czech Philharmonic. He recalled:

*When we were in full fire, Hubička, then the executive director of the Czech Philharmonic, ran into Smetana Hall with cries of, "We're free! Everyone to the streets!" In the heat of our work we were unable to immediately feel and experience the range of meaning brought by Hubička's news, so I said: "That's nice, but we must rehearse!" We did not know what was happening in the streets, we did not hear because Smetana Hall was full of the sounds of Suk's Zrání, and so we continued with our rehearsal. At once when we emerged into the streets, we experienced and felt what had actually happened! And that feeling of intoxication was so strong that I could not imagine how I might reunite the entire orchestra in order for a concert to take place.*

The premiere did take place, on 30 October, 1918, and represented the first concert given by the Czech Philharmonic in the new Czechoslovak Republic. *Zrání* was a success, as was Václav Talich, who proved to be an exceptionally energetic and persuasive orchestral director.

## **Václav Talich**

"You hate routine, pattern, comfort. You like to discover." So wrote Stanislav Novák, concertmaster of the Czech Philharmonic between 1917 and 1936, to Václav Talich, one of the most important figures in the history of the orchestra.

During the 22 years during which Talich directed the Czech Philharmonic (1919-1941), a provincial ensemble evolved into a world-class orchestra. Talich was the first conductor to work consistently and purposefully with the orchestra. He strove to bring into the orchestral sphere the interpretational ideals he had developed during his time with the legendary Bohemian Quartet. Talich emphasised individuality and spontaneity, the balancing of voices within the orchestral sonority, and respect for each composer's intentions. Aware of the innate musicianship and sincerity of his musicians, he strove to develop their technical precision and discipline.

Talich regarded the performance of Czech works as an essential part of the orchestra's ethos, and in the first years of his leadership led the orchestra through a detailed inventory of his country's music. In the 1921-1922 season Talich focused on Czech symphonies, and in the following two seasons on Czech symphonic poems. He also brought French Impressionist music, Mahler symphonies, and the works of Bartók, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich, to the core of the orchestra's repertoire.

## **Acts of service, at home and abroad**

Václav Talich wanted the Czech Philharmonic to help cultivate a Czechoslovak public space. He strove for excellence in the orchestra's performances, while also pioneering concerts for workers, young people, and a variety of organisations, including the Czechoslovak Red Cross, the Czechoslovak Sokol (a sports organisation for young

people), and the Union of Slavic Women. In 1923, the orchestra gave a series of three benefit concerts for Russian, Austrian, and German orchestral players, “intending to accentuate human cohesion alongside the suffering of other nationalities – cohesion which the politics of the day cannot affect.”

The Czech Philharmonic’s tours in the years 1918-1928 were particularly special: the orchestra became a cultural ambassador for the young republic. In 1922, the orchestra travelled with Talich to Italy and to Vienna, and in 1926 to Slovenia and again to Italy. Three tours to western Europe were especially outstanding: Talich took the orchestra to Great Britain, Belgium, and France in 1935; and Rafael Kubelík directed the orchestra in trips to England, Scotland and Belgium in 1937, and again to Great Britain in 1938.

### ***Má Vlast* in the shadow of War**

Smetana’s *Má Vlast* became a particularly potent part of Czech musical life during the Nazi occupation of 1939 to 1945, when the work was performed with great frequency across the country. On some occasions it incited such strong patriotic feeling that its performances were prevented, and two of the cycle’s symphonic poems, *Tábor* and *Blaník*, were banned altogether.

On 11 and 12 February, 1941, Joseph Goebbels demanded that the Czech Philharmonic perform in Berlin and Dresden. In a brave and provocative move, Talich put the entire *Má Vlast* cycle on the programme. The Czech Philharmonic continued to give concerts for different political groups: in March, 1942 it played *Má Vlast* for the Czech National Socialist Union, whereas in April of 1944 it was compelled to give a concert to celebrate “the 55<sup>th</sup> birthday of Führer Adolf Hitler”.

On 8 February, 1945, the 31-year-old violist Zdeněk Němec was murdered by the Gestapo. He had written about a Czech Philharmonic concert featuring *Má Vlast*, in which “...the triumphant march of the Knights of Blaník heard during some of the nation’s most difficult moments brought salvation and rescued the nation from the shackles of darkness and bondage. Thus Smetana’s work fulfilled its purpose during the First World War and continues to do so today.”

### **Rafael Kubelík**

Rafael Kubelík (1914-1996) became Chief Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic in the autumn of 1941, although he had conducted the orchestra for the first time in January 1934 at the age of just 19. During the War, Kubelík primarily conducted works which he believed would bring hope and faith to the people: Novák’s *Svatováclavský triptych*, Janáček’s *Taras Bulba*, and, of course, *Má Vlast*. The orchestra performed *Má Vlast* in a newly-liberated Czechoslovakia at a Concert of Thanks on 21 June, 1945.

Kubelík’s programming sought to right the orchestra’s wartime controversies with Russian, French, and Anglo-American music. He conducted Britten’s *Sinfonia da requiem* in a concert in November 1945 given in honour of the Nazi-exterminated towns of Lidice, Ležáky, and Javoříčko. Kubelík also restored the Czech Philharmonic’s pre-war concert diversity: the orchestra played for the World Student Congress, in Czech churches, and in Spain.

Kubelík also oversaw the renationalisation of the Czech Philharmonic, bringing 50 years of uncertainty to a close on 22 October, 1945. The Czech Philharmonic, under Kubelík,

founded the Prague Spring International Music Festival, and performed at all of its concerts during its first year, in 1946. Kubelik conducted the Czech Philharmonic for the last time on 5 July, 1948. He left Communist-dictated Czechoslovakia soon afterwards.

### **The orchestra in flux**

After Rafael Kubelík left Czechoslovakia in exile, temporary conductors worked with the Czech Philharmonic for the next two years. Václav Neumann (1920-1995) and Karel Šejna (1896-1982), two members of the orchestra with aspirations toward conducting, appeared most frequently. Violist Neumann led the orchestra for the first time in March 1948, and then in September took over the concerts for that season. Karel Šejna had been a bassist with the orchestra since 1921, and a co-conductor since 1922, directing the orchestra in some 588 concerts. He became Artistic Director of the Czech Philharmonic on 18 May, 1949.

From February 1948, the Czech Philharmonic was faced with an increasing number of political orders from a totalitarian regime. In September 1949 it gave a concert in honour of the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country's mining industry, and in November it launched the 'Days of Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship'. On 12 December the orchestra performed in honour of the sixth anniversary of the signing of the Czechoslovak-Soviet contract; on 20 December it appeared at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia held for Stalin's 70th birthday. On 20 January the orchestra performed during a memorial held on the 26th anniversary of Lenin's death – and so on.

### **Karel Ančerl**

Karel Ančerl (1908-1973) had a challenging start with the Czech Philharmonic. Minister Zdeněk Nejedlý appointed Ančerl to the position Chief Conductor on 20 October, 1950, and an atmosphere of spontaneous resistance descended upon the orchestra almost immediately. The reason for this reaction was that the musicians saw their new leader as an intruder selected for political purposes. The orchestra's state security reports recorded that:

*Almost every member of the orchestra is against Ančerl, whom they curse aloud and taunt, and they say the worst about him. It stems from the fact that the Czech Philharmonic's level is high and Ančerl is not good enough – he inhibits the Czech Philharmonic.*

Ančerl, however, proved to have an incredible degree of strength and resourcefulness, responding to the orchestra's resistance with helpfulness, calm, and diligence. He was always well prepared for rehearsals; he worked efficiently; he prioritised quality and precision. Ančerl anchored orchestral programmes with Bartók, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich alongside Czech composers such as Martinů, Hanuš and Kabeláč. Eventually, Karel Ančerl left for Canada, protesting the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. He conducted his last two concerts with the Czech Philharmonic at the Prague Spring Festival in 1969.

### **International acclaim**

Thanks to his exceptional artistic quality, Karel Ančerl's direction of the Czech Philharmonic brought the most significant boost to the orchestra's international

reputation since it was formed. A total of 60 tours to 28 countries around the world included prestigious venues from Vienna's Musikverein to New York's Carnegie Hall.

The orchestra performed most frequently in Vienna, where critical acclaim was fulsome:

*... if only our orchestras played Mozart's Prague Symphony as elegantly yet vigorously, as naturally, they would be in a particularly good mood. Its effects have been demonstrated through Herbert von Karajan's applause.*

Additional performances followed in Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Hungary, the Soviet Union, France, Yugoslavia, Canada, Romania, USA, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Denmark, Finland, Holland, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, and West Berlin. The Czech Philharmonic had arrived on the international stage.

### **Jan Palach**

On 16 January, 1969, university student Jan Palach set himself on fire, protesting the sense of hopelessness afflicting the post-occupation Czech people. On 23 and 24 January, 1969, the Czech Philharmonic's concerts commemorated Jan Palach, with a performance of Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* following in April.

A year later, political 'normalisation' prevented further direct commemoration of Palach's sacrifice. Nevertheless, Ivan Medek, whose task it was to select the orchestra's programmes, arranged a symbolic performance of Honegger's cantata, *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, in January 1970. Preparation for the concert was not without incident, but eventually it took place 14 days later than originally intended. Conducted by Václav Neumann, the concert was exceptionally powerful and moving.

### **Václav Neumann**

On 19 December, 1968 Václav Neumann had conducted his first Czech Philharmonic concert as Chief Conductor, and he proved to be a leader of great generosity and depth. In 1969, he directed the orchestra at the Prague Spring Festival, and on tour in Japan. The 1970-1971 season was devoted to Beethoven: the Czech Philharmonic played all of Beethoven's symphonies and piano concertos, with Jan Panenka as soloist. Neumann also conducted contemporary music by composers such as Hanuš, Havelka, Kalabis, Kapr, Feld, and Slavický.

In August 1971, the Czech Philharmonic made its debut at the Salzburg Festival, directed by Neumann. The Neumann era also brought a close relationship with the record label Supraphon, including recordings of the complete Dvořák symphonies – twice, in 1973 and 1987 – Martinů's and Mahler's symphonies, and Dvořák's opera, *Rusalka*. There was even a television show, *Performance and Conversation with the Czech Philharmonic*, which became very popular in the 1970s. Neumann's tenure as Chief Conductor came to an end in September 1990, after 22 years.

### **Taking a stand against injustice**

In October 1989, Václav Neumann ceased to cooperate with Czechoslovak radio and television. He was protesting the persecution of those who had signed the petition

*Několik vět* ('A few sentences'), which had been prepared by the Charter 77 movement. Information about the petition reached people in other countries through the Czech journalist Ivan Medek, who was then working with the news broadcasters, Voice of America.

On 25 October, 1989, while on tour in Stuttgart, the vast majority of the orchestra backed Neumann's stand. During concerts on 16 and 17 November, the orchestra informed its listeners of its decision, just before the outbreak of the Velvet Revolution. Orchestra members subsequently participated in the November demonstrations, issued a statement called the 'Opinion of the Czech Philharmonic', and joined in general strikes.

Special concerts were given for students, the orchestra performing Smetana's *Má Vlast*, Dvořák's *Te Deum*, or the student hymn, *Gaudeamus igitur*. Subscription concerts were also transformed, with sociologists, civic politicians, and actors addressing the audience before each concert. This unforgettable era in the orchestra's history reached its climax with a performance of Beethoven's *Symphony No.9* on 14 December, 1989, in a concert for the Civic Forum. The orchestra, and Václav Havel, were given standing ovations.

### **Rafael Kubelík returns**

"I have passionately waited for this moment and I have believed that one day it will come. I am thankful to God, our whole nation, friends, and all of you." These were the first words spoken by Rafael Kubelík on 8 April, 1990 after his return from a 42-year exile. During that time he had received several offers to return to the orchestra, and he repeatedly replied that he would happily return, but only under the condition of "freedom of opinion, freedom of creation, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement for every decent Czech and Slovak with or without talent."

At the Prague Spring Music Festival in 1990, Kubelík conducted the orchestra in the opening concert on 12 May. As with the end of World War Two, Smetana's *Má Vlast* resounded over Old Town Square in honour of all Czechoslovaks. The orchestra also performed a 'concert of mutual understanding' on the day of the first free elections, 9 June, 1990. On 1 July, Kubelík wrote to the orchestra:

*Dear friends – in my thoughts I am still in Prague – home! – For all the beautiful music, loyalty and love – which you have so generously given me – I thank you – from my whole heart! Be healthy and strong – for the health of our music! I embrace you most warmly – Your Rafael Kubelík.*

Kubelík's last concert with the Czech Philharmonic was in November 1991, on tour in Japan.

### **Jiří Bělohlávek begins his relationship with the Czech Philharmonic**

Jiří Bělohlávek (b.1946) became Chief Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic after Vaclav Neumann's departure. Bělohlávek worked with the orchestra until 1992, and then made a welcome return as Chief Conductor from 2012.

German conductor Gerd Albrecht (1935-2014) led the orchestra from 1 October, 1993 until 30 January, 1996, widening its repertoire to include, for example, works by the 'Terezín composers', Ullman, Klein, and Haas. Both Bělohlávek and Albrecht

participated in the Czech Philharmonic's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, sharing the conducting duties for the concert on 4 January, 1996.

After Albrecht's departure, the orchestra was led by Vladimír Válek (b.1935) for two years. On 7 March, 1996, Krzysztof Penderecki conducted the orchestra in the premiere of his *Concerto for Clarinet and Chamber Orchestra*. On 6 September, 1997 the orchestra played for Václav Havel's first annual conference, Forum 2000.

### **From Vladimir Ashkenazy to Sir Charles Mackerras**

Pianist and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy (b.1937) conducted the Czech Philharmonic for the first time in January 1997. A year later, he became the orchestra's Chief Conductor. Some of his programming choices included 'Nordic Sound in Prague, 2001-2002' and the project, 'Agreement and Protest in Soviet Music'. Under his baton, the Czech Philharmonic performed 32 concerts in the USA and 20 in the Far East.

Zdeněk Mácal was Chief Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic from August 2003 to September 2007. During his time with the orchestra, the Czech Philharmonic appeared at the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, in Taiwan, and in Japan. Mácal also recorded the complete Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, and Brahms symphonies with the orchestra, on the Octavia Records label.

The Czech Philharmonic's Chief Conductor from 2009, Elijah Inbal (b.1936), placed particular emphasis on the music of Mahler. It was also in 2009 that the orchestra's a long era of collaboration with the British conductor Sir Charles Mackerras (1925-2010) came to a close. He recorded works including Janáček's operas *Šárka* and *Káťa Kabanová*, and Dvořák's *Rusalka*, with the orchestra, and also conducted the orchestra's concerts in Edinburgh (2000), at the BBC Proms, and in the Musikverein in Vienna (2004).

### **The Czech Philharmonic: a brief timeline**

- 16 April, 1903: Edvard Grieg conducts the Czech Philharmonic for the first (and last) time.
- 11 May, 1925: Radiojournal gives its first live broadcast of a Czech Philharmonic concert, from Smetana Hall.
- 1929: The orchestra records Smetana's *Ma Vlast* for the first time, under Václav Talich, for His Master's Voice.
- 26 June, 1926: Václav Talich gives the world premiere of Janáček's *Sinfonietta*.
- 26 February, 1930: Igor Stravinsky appears as piano soloist with the Czech Philharmonic for a concert in honour of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- 20 January, 1949: Arthur Honegger conducts the Czech Philharmonic for the first and last time.
- 8 February, 1956: Karel Ančerl leads the orchestra in the Czechoslovak premier of Bohuslav Martinů's *Symphony No. 6*.
- 13 September – 19 December, 1959: the Czech Philharmonic takes its first trip across an ocean. The orchestra performs 55 concerts in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China, India, and the Soviet Union.
- 1963: The Czech Philharmonic appears at the Salzburg Festival for the first time in 1963.
- 1965: The orchestra makes its first appearances in the USA and Canada.

- 20 May, 1966: Darius Milhaud conducts his *Music for Prague*; Zdeněk Mácal makes his Czech Philharmonic debut at the same concert.
- 9 June, 1970: Jiří Bělohlávek makes his debut with the orchestra.
- 19 October, 1972: Vladimír Válek first appears with the orchestra.
- 16 January, 1997: Vladimír Ashkenazy first conducts the orchestra.
- 28 November, 2004: The Czech Philharmonic gives its first performance in Taiwan.
- 4 October, 2012: Jiří Bělohlávek gives his first concert with the Czech Philharmonic as the orchestra's new Chief Conductor.

## **Hall of Fame**

So many celebrated artists have worked with the Czech Philharmonic over the years that it is impossible to list them all, but here are some highlights:

### *Guest Conductors*

Leonard Bernstein, Serge Baudo, Charles Dutoit, Christoph Eschenbach, Manfred Honeck (currently the orchestra's Principal Guest Conductor), John Eliot Gardiner, Jakub Hrůša, Neeme Järvi, Herbert von Karajan, Erich Kleiber, Erich Leinsdorf, Lovro von Matačić, Diego Matheuz, Jevgenij Mravinskij, Charles Munch, Antonio Pedrotti, Gennadij Rožděstvenskij, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Leonard Slatkin, Leopold Stokowski, George Szell, Bruno Walter, Alexander Zemlinsky, Nikolai Znajder.

### *Soloists*

Martha Argerich, Rudolf Buchbinder, Pablo Casals, Nicholas Daniel, Gerald Finley, Ida Haendel, Evgeny Kissin, Leonid Kogan, Lang, Christa Ludwig, Mischa Maisky, Yehudi Menuhin, Ivan Moravec, Garrick Ohlsson, David Oistrach, Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich, Josef Špaček, Josef Suk, Henryk Szeryng, and Pinchas Zukerman.



## Biographies

**Jiří Bělohlávek** was born in Prague in 1946. His love of music became apparent at an early age, and following studies in cello and conducting, he was invited to become assistant conductor to Sergiu Celibidache in 1968. Bělohlávek won the Czech Young Conductors' Competition in 1970 and reached the final of the Herbert von Karajan Conducting Competition in 1971.

In 1977, Jiří Bělohlávek began to serve as Chief Conductor of the Prague Symphony Orchestra, a position he held until 1990, when he was appointed Chief Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic. In 1994, he founded the Prague Philharmonia, an orchestra he then led as Chief Conductor and Music Director until 2005, when he was appointed its Conductor Laureate.

After serving as its Principal Guest Conductor between 1995 and 2000, Jiří Bělohlávek was appointed Chief Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 2006. He conducted the orchestra at the Last Night of the Proms in 2007, becoming the first artist whose principal language is not English to undertake this important role. He performed at the Last Night of the Proms again in 2010 and 2012.

Jiří Bělohlávek has also regularly conducted the Berlin Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, New York Philharmonic, Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, among others. He was recently appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra.

Jiří Bělohlávek has worked in the world of opera throughout his career, with regular appearances at the world's main opera houses including Berlin, Covent Garden, Glyndebourne, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Opéra Bastille and Teatro Real. Recent and forthcoming highlights include new productions of Dvořák's *Rusalka* at the Vienna Staatsoper (2014), Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* at the Zürich Opera House (2014), and Janáček's *Jenůfa* at the San Francisco Opera (2016).

Jiří Bělohlávek has an extensive discography, including a complete Dvořák Symphonies cycle recently released by Decca, and is the first conductor since Herbert von Karajan to receive the Gramophone Award for Orchestral Recording two years running. In 2012, Queen Elizabeth II appointed Jiří Bělohlávek an honorary CBE for services to music.



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The young Czech violinist **Josef Špaček** is fast emerging as one of the most talented virtuosos of his generation. He has been guided by some of the most highly regarded pedagogues, including Ida Kavafian and Jaime Laredo at the Curtis Institute of Music and Itzhak Perlman at the Juilliard School. In May 2012 Špaček was laureate of the International Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels. He currently combines a flourishing solo career with the position of concert master of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra.

As a soloist, Josef has appeared with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, Prague Philharmonia, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, National Orchestra of Belgium, Brno Philharmonic and the Russian Chamber Philharmonic etc. He has soloed under conductors including Jiří Bělohlávek, Christoph Eschenbach, Manfred Honeck, James DePreist, Asher Fisch, Jakub Hruša, Eliahu Inbal etc. Špaček regularly appears at the international music festivals in Czech Republic and abroad.

The Supraphon label released Josef's first recital recording in April 2013. Together with pianist Miroslav Sekera he performs works by Janáček, Smetana and Prokofiev. His 2010 recording of various works by Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst was released on Naxos in March 2013. In 2006 he recorded his debut CD featuring the complete sonatas for solo violin by Eugène Ysaÿe. Future and recent concert highlights include recital appearances in Europe, Asia and the USA.

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One of today's most sought-after soloists, **Jean-Yves Thibaudet** has the rare ability to combine poetic musical sensibilities and dazzling technical prowess. His talent at coaxing subtle and surprising colors and textures from each work he plays led The New York Times to write that "every note he fashions is a pearl...the joy, brilliance and musicality of his performance could not be missed." Thibaudet, who brings natural charisma and remarkable musical depth to his career, has performed around the world for more than 30 years and recorded more than 50 albums.

Jean-Yves Thibaudet's 2014-2015 season is an intriguing combination of a wide variety of music: a balance of orchestral appearances, chamber music, and recitals and a repertoire that includes familiar pieces, unfamiliar work by well-known composers, and new compositions. He also follows his passion for education and fostering the next generation of performers by becoming the first-ever resident artist at the Colburn School of Los Angeles this year and the following two. Summer 2014 sees him touring with Mariss Jansons and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra at the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, the Edinburgh International Festival, the Lucerne Festival, and the Ljubljana Festival. Mr. Thibaudet then travels to play Gershwin paired with a new piano concerto "Er Huang" by Quigang Chen with Long Yu conducting to open the China Philharmonic season in Beijing—a program both artists will repeat in Paris with the Orchestre de Paris. In October, with the Philadelphia Orchestra and its Music

Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, he performs the Khachaturian Piano Concerto, which he also plays in the spring with the Cincinnati Symphony and on tour in Germany and Austria with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin under the baton of Tugan Sokhiev. After concerts in Prague, Mr. Thibaudet embarks on a US tour with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra in November, reaching both East and West coasts with a grand finale at Carnegie Hall, where he performs Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2. The end of the year is a whirlwind of Gershwin, Ravel, and Liszt with the Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne.

In the new year, audiences can hear Mr. Thibaudet play MacMillan's Piano Concerto No. 3, which he premiered in 2011, with the St. Louis Symphony and New York Philharmonic, both conducted by Stéphane Denève, and then Liszt with the Cleveland Orchestra and the Naples Philharmonic. After playing a duo recital with Gautier Capuçon in his native France at the Festival de Pâques in Aix-en-Provence, Mr. Thibaudet returns to the United States to play Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major—one of his signature pieces from the French repertoire for which he is renowned—with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Bernard Haitink's direction, in addition to Poulenc and Fauré with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players. Under Michael Tilson Thomas's baton, he performs Bernstein's *Age of Anxiety* in San Francisco, where he celebrates Thomas's 70th birthday earlier in the year by playing the Liszt *Hexaméron* with Emanuel Ax, Jeremy Denk, Yuja Wang, and Marc-André Hamelin. Mr. Thibaudet performs Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand with Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic before interpreting both the Ravel Piano Concerto and Messiaen's *Turangalîla* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Esa-Pekka Salonen as part of the orchestra's 2015 *Reveries and Passions Festival*. He then travels to Europe to perform with the Frankfurter Museumsorchester (Venzago), Dresden Philharmonic (de Billy), and the Munich Philharmonic (Bychkov), among others, before ending the season in dramatic fashion with Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* with the Orchestre de L'Opéra de Paris under the baton of Music Director Philippe Jordan.

A distinguished recording artist, Jean-Yves Thibaudet has been nominated for two Grammy Awards and won the Schallplattenpreis, the Diapason d'Or, Choc du Monde de la Musique, a Gramophone Award, two Echo awards, and the Edison Prize. In 2010 he released Gershwin, featuring big jazz band orchestrations of *Rhapsody in Blue*, variations on "I Got Rhythm," and *Concerto in F* live with the Baltimore Symphony and music director Marin Alsop. On his Grammy-nominated recording *Saint-Saëns, Piano Concerti Nos. 2&5*, released in 2007, Thibaudet is joined by long-standing collaborator Charles Dutoit and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Thibaudet's *Aria—Opera Without Words*, which was released the same year, features transcriptions of arias by Saint-Saëns, R. Strauss,

Gluck, Korngold, Bellini, J. Strauss II, Grainger, and Puccini; some of the transcriptions are by Mikhashoff, Sgambati, and Brassin, and others are Thibaudet's own. Among his other recordings are Satie: The Complete Solo Piano Music and the jazz albums Reflections on Duke: Jean-Yves Thibaudet Plays the Music of Duke Ellington and Conversations With Bill Evans, his tribute to two of jazz history's legends.

Known for his style and elegance on and off the traditional concert stage, Thibaudet has had an impact on the world of fashion, film and philanthropy. His concert wardrobe is by celebrated London designer Vivienne Westwood. In 2004 he served as president of the prestigious Hospices de Beaune, an annual charity auction in Burgundy, France. He had an onscreen cameo in the Bruce Beresford feature film on Alma Mahler, *Bride of the Wind*, and his playing is showcased throughout the soundtrack. Thibaudet was the soloist on Dario Marianelli's Oscar- and Golden Globe-award winning score for the film *Atonement* and his Oscar-nominated score for *Pride and Prejudice*. He recorded the soundtrack of the 2012 film *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, composed by Alexandre Desplat. He was also featured in the 2000 PBS/Smithsonian special *Piano Grand!*, a piano performance program hosted by Billy Joel to pay tribute to the 300th anniversary of the piano.

Jean-Yves Thibaudet was born in Lyon, France, where he began his piano studies at age five and made his first public appearance at age seven. At twelve, he entered the Paris Conservatory to study with Aldo Ciccolini and Lucette Descaves, a friend and collaborator of Ravel. At age fifteen, he won the Premier Prix du Conservatoire and, three years later, the Young Concert Artists Auditions in New York City. In 2001 the Republic of France awarded Thibaudet the prestigious Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, and in 2002 he was awarded the Premio Pegasus from the Spoleto Festival in Italy for his artistic achievements and his long-standing involvement with the festival. In 2007 he received the Victoire d'Honneur, a lifetime career achievement award and the highest honor given by France's Victoires de la Musique. The Hollywood Bowl honored Thibaudet for his musical achievements by inducting him into its Hall of Fame in 2010. Previously a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, Thibaudet was promoted to the title of Officier by the French Minister of Culture in 2012.

*Mr. Thibaudet's worldwide representation: IMG Artists, LLC*

*Mr. Thibaudet records exclusively for Decca Records*



## CZECH PHILHARMONIC 2014-2015 NATIONAL TOUR

Beginning November 4, 2014, the Czech Philharmonic tours Costa Mesa, San Diego, Berkeley, Annapolis, Purchase, Northridge, Davis, Santa Barbara, Fairfax, and New York. The philharmonic performs in renowned venues including Carnegie Hall, the National Cathedral, Segerstrom Concert Hall, and Copley Symphony Hall, among others. Guest artists include pianist **Jean-Yves Thibaudet**, violinist **Josef Spacek**, and the **Prague Philharmonic Choir and soloists**.

The focus will be Czech composers: Janacek, Smetana and, in particular, Dvorak, to coincide with the international recording release of the complete concertos and symphonies on Decca. The philharmonic's touring repertoire alternates between Dvorak's 'New World' Symphony and his other moving masterwork, *Stabat Mater*. Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Josef Spacek join the philharmonic for concerts performing Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 and Suk's *Fantasy* respectively.

### 25th Anniversary of the Velvet Revolution



On November 17, 2014, and the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, the Czech Philharmonic performs Dvorak's 'New World' Symphony and Smetana's *Vltava* at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.. This final U.S. performance is part of a larger celebration of the Czech Republic which also includes the unveiling of a bust of Vaclav Havel in the US Capitol Building, making Havel one of four foreign

dignitaries to have a bust procured at the Capitol. This celebration is hosted by the Prague Freedom Foundation, an independent charitable **foundation** located in Prague. The philharmonic possesses a unique sound, drawing its players from a strong national musical heritage, and is recognized as one of the finest orchestras on today's international stage. In only the last few months they have toured China, Italy, Germany, Austria, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia. The Czech Philharmonic's 119th season begins **October 2** in Prague with pianist **Behzod Abduraimov** performing Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3.

### History of the Philharmonic

The Czech Philharmonic's 119-year history is filled with extraordinary musical achievements. The orchestra's activities have also significantly tended to manifest the artistic, cultural, and political context reflective of the times. A timeline capturing the fascinating history of the orchestra can be found **here**.

In 2010 a new management group was appointed at the Czech Philharmonic, following which it was announced that Jiri Belohlavek would make a welcome return as Chief Conductor after a 20 year break from this position. The new team is united to sustain the



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Czech Philharmonic as one of the best orchestras in the world. With improved salaries and working conditions for the players, the shared vision of Maestro Belohlavek and the musicians is to remain true to the roots of the Czech Phil, while expanding its repertoire and audience base.

Jiri Belohlavek, born in Prague in 1946, has conducted the Berlin Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Gewandhaus Leipzig and was Chief Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra from 2006-2012.



The **Rudolfinum** in Prague houses one of the world's most beautiful concert halls and is home to the Czech Philharmonic. It was founded in 1885 as a multipurpose cultural facility with concert and exhibition halls. The building continues to remain the centre of artistic life in the Czech Republic, offering concerts, exhibitions and numerous education programmes which are vital to the heritage of the nation.

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### **Dvorak Symphony Box Set, Documentary Film**



A new film 'Sketches of Dvorak,' directed by Barbara Willis Sweete, documents the work and process of Maestro Belohlavek and the Czech Philharmonic from 2012-2014 in recording the complete Dvorak symphonies and concertos. Slated for broadcast in the Czech Republic on October 18, the film captures the atmosphere of change at the philharmonic through live performance, studio work and interviews as experienced by the players, conductor, administration and surviving family members of Antonin Dvorak.

*"If I were to sum up my impression from the whole project of recording Dvorak's symphonies and concertos, I am happy to say these one and a half years of living with his music have been a truly wonderful period. We have enjoyed it tremendously, have learned a lot and our love for the Maestro has only increased."*

- Jiri Belohlavek, Music Director and Chief Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic

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### **U.S. Tour Schedule**

**November 4, 8:00PM**

**Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, Costa Mesa**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

LISZT: Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"

Jiri Belohlavek, conductor

Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

**November 5, 7:30PM**

**Great Hall - Valley Performing Arts Center, Northridge**

DVORAK: Stabat Mater

Prague Philharmonic Choir

Lukas Vasilek, choirmaster

**November 6, 8:00PM**

**Copley Symphony Hall, San Diego**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

LISZT: Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"  
Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

**November 8, 8:00PM**

**Barbara K. and W. Turrentine Jackson Hall, Davis**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

LISZT: Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"

Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

**November 9, 3:00PM**

**Cal Performances - Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley**

DVORAK: Stabat Mater

Prague Philharmonic Choir

Lukas Vasilek, choirmaster

**November 10, 8:00PM**

**The Granada, Santa Barbara**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

LISZT: Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"

Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

**November 13, 7:30PM**

**Alumni Hall, Annapolis**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

SUK: *Fantasy* for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 24

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"

Josef Spacek Jr., violin

**November 14, 8:00PM**

**Concert Hall, Fairfax**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

LISZT: Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"

Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

**November 15, 8:00PM**

**The Concert Hall - The Performing Arts Center, Purchase**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

LISZT: Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"

Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

**November 16, 2:00PM**

**Carnegie Hall - Isaac Stern Auditorium, New York**

JANACEK: *Taras Bulba*

LISZT: Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major

DVORAK: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "New World"

Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano

**November 17, 7:00PM**

**National Cathedral, Washington DC**

SMETANA: *Vltava*, symphonic poem from "My Country"

## **ABOUT THE ARTISTS**

### **Czech Philharmonic**

For over a century, the **Czech Philharmonic** has represented the pinnacle of Czech cultural achievement. In 1896, Dvorak conducted the orchestra's debut performance at the Rudolfinum in Prague, still home to the orchestra's Prague concerts, and the centre for its new Orchestral Academy. In 1908, Mahler conducted the Czech Philharmonic for the world premiere of his Symphony No.7. In 2012, Jiri



Belohlavek returns as the orchestra's Chief Conductor. Under the baton of the inimitable Jiri Belohlavek, the Czech Philharmonic looks forward to entering a new era, combining tradition with innovation as an orchestra at the height of its powers.

The partnership between Jiri Belohlavek and the Czech Philharmonic is among the most celebrated in the orchestra's history. Together they have given significant world-premieres, including works by Jan Klusak and Milan Slavicky, as well as critically-acclaimed performances of famous Czech works and the mainstream orchestral repertoire.

The Czech Philharmonic has received numerous awards and nominations, including ten Grands Prix du Disque de l'Académie Charles-Cros, five Grand Prix du Disque de l'Académie française, several Cannes Classical Awards, a position in Gramophone's Top 20 Best Orchestras in the World (2008), as well as nominations for Grammy and Gramophone Awards.



**Jiri Belohlavek** was born in Prague in 1946. His love of music became apparent at an early age, and following studies in cello and conducting, he was invited to become assistant conductor to Sergiu Celibidache in 1968. Belohlavek won the Czech Young Conductors' Competition in 1970 and reached the final of the Herbert von Karajan Conducting Competition in 1971. After serving as its Principal Guest Conductor between 1995 and 2000, Jiri Belohlavek was appointed Chief Conductor of the BBC

Symphony Orchestra in 2006. He conducted the orchestra at the Last Night of the Proms in 2007, becoming the first artist whose principal language is not English to undertake this important role. He performed at the Last Night of the Proms again in 2010 and 2012.

Jiri Belohlavek has worked in the world of opera throughout his career, with regular appearances at the world's main opera houses including Berlin, Covent Garden, Glyndebourne, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Opéra Bastille and Teatro Real.

Recent and forthcoming highlights include new productions of Dvorak's *Rusalka* at the Vienna Staatsoper (2014), Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* at the Zürich Opera House (2014), and Janacek's *Jenufa* at the San Francisco Opera (2016).

He has an extensive discography, including a complete Dvorak Symphonies cycle recently released by Decca, and is the first conductor since Herbert von Karajan to receive the Gramophone Award for Orchestral Recording two years running. In 2012, Queen Elizabeth II appointed Jiri Belohlavek an honorary CBE for services to music.



One of today's most sought-after soloists, **Jean-Yves Thibaudet** has the rare ability to combine poetic musical sensibilities and dazzling technical prowess. His talent at coaxing subtle and surprising colors and textures from each work he plays led *The New York Times* to write that "every note he fashions is a pearl...the joy, brilliance and musicality of his performance could not be missed." Thibaudet, who brings natural charisma and remarkable musical depth to his career, has performed around the world for more than 30 years and recorded more than 50 albums. A distinguished recording artist,

Jean-Yves Thibaudet has been nominated for two Grammy Awards and won the Schallplattenpreis, the Diapason d'Or, Choc du Monde de la Musique, a Gramophone Award, two Echo awards, and the Edison Prize.

Known for his style and elegance on and off the traditional concert stage, Thibaudet has had an impact on the world of fashion, film and philanthropy. His concert wardrobe is by celebrated London designer Vivienne Westwood. In 2004 he served as president of the prestigious Hospices de Beaune, an annual charity auction in Burgundy, France. He had an onscreen cameo in the Bruce Beresford feature film on Alma Mahler, *Bride of the Wind*, and his playing is showcased throughout the soundtrack. Thibaudet was the soloist on Dario Marianelli's Oscar- and Golden Globe-award winning score for the film *Atonement* and his Oscar-nominated score for *Pride and Prejudice*. He recorded the soundtrack of the 2012 film *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, composed by Alexandre Desplat. He was also featured in the 2000 PBS/Smithsonian special *Piano Grand!*, a piano performance program hosted by Billy Joel to pay tribute to the 300th anniversary of the piano.



Czech violinist **Josef Spacek** is fast emerging as one of the most talented virtuosos of his generation. He studied with Ida Kavafian and Jaime Laredo at the Curtis Institute of Music and Itzhak Perlman at the Juilliard School. He was laureate of the International Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels (2012); he won the Michael Hill International Violin Competition (2009) and received Third Prize at the Carl Nielsen International Violin Competition (2008).

Josef combines a flourishing solo career with the position of concert master of the Czech Philharmonic. As soloist he makes guest appearances with orchestras in Europe, the US and Asia, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, Prague Philharmonia, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, Kansas City Symphony and Queensland Symphony Orchestra. He has soloed under conductors such as Jiri Belohlavek, Christoph Eschenbach, Manfred

Honeck, James DePreist, Asher Fisch, Roy Goodman, Jakub Hrusa, Eliahu Inbal and Rossen Milanov. As recitalist he regularly performs at music festivals around the world.



The **Prague Philharmonic Choir**, led by principal conductor Lukas Vasilek, is a professional choral ensemble of almost 70 members which has been performing and recording all over the world for 80 years. It collaborates with renowned orchestras and conductors of the international music scene, and is considered one of the most popular choirs in Europe.

In the last two seasons, the choir has performed educational concerts in collaboration with primary schools, and concerts for parents with children. It has also organized the Choral Singing Academy for three years, which focuses on students of singing attending conservatories and music colleges. Students who successfully complete the demanding audition will have the opportunity to become acquainted with the repertoire and work of a professional choir during the season.

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**PHOTO CREDITS:**

CD cover of the Dvorak Cycle by Decca Classics

Velvet Revolution Protest Courtesy of [prague-life.com](http://prague-life.com)

Czech Philharmonic Black & White Courtesy of [frantisekzlama.com](http://frantisekzlama.com)



# The New York Times

November 14, 2014

## A Maestro Returns, First There, Now Here

Jiri Belohlavek and the Czech Philharmonic Tour the U.S.

By Zachary Woolfe



Jiri Belohlavek, conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, on Wednesday.

For the most prominent Czech conductor of his generation, the rejection hit uniquely close to home. Jiri Belohlavek had been chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic for just a year when its musicians won the right to elect their leaders freely in 1991. They voted him out.

"I was shattered," Mr. Belohlavek (pronounced bell-oh-LAH-vetch), now 68 and crowned with a cloud of white hair, said this week at the Czech Center

New York, a cultural institute housed in the Bohemian National Hall on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

But now he is back, having returned two years ago to lead, once more, this venerable but long-troubled orchestra. With mood and finances both stabilizing, the ensemble and Mr. Belohlavek are in the midst of their first American tour together, which reaches Carnegie Hall on Sunday and concludes, on Monday, with a program at the National Cathedral in Washington commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution that brought an end to Communist rule in Czechoslovakia.

The tour is an opportunity for audiences here to experience a rarity these days: an orchestra that sounds like itself. The internationalization of classical music over the past few decades has resulted in more versatile ensembles but also more homogeneity.

The Czech Philharmonic is a notable exception. Founded in 1896, it has retained the bright, rustic quality of its winds, the coppery directness of its brasses, its dark string colors and its infectious intensity and danciness through a storied history — it gave the premiere of Mahler's Seventh Symphony in 1908, led by Mahler — and a



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Mr. Belohlavek, conducting the Prague Philharmonia in 2012.

distinguished line of conductors, including Vaclav Talich, Rafael Kubelik, Karel Ancerl and Vaclav Neumann.

“The orchestra has a real tenderness and coziness,” the French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, who will join it at Carnegie for Liszt’s Piano Concerto No. 2, said in a telephone interview. “If you think of a really old, traditional and — I say this as a compliment — what we used to call an Eastern European sound, it’s that kind of old-fashioned, rounded sound, not just in the strings but in the woodwinds too. It’s really kept its identity.”

The violinist Josef Spacek, 28, who trained in the United States before returning to the Czech Republic as the orchestra’s concertmaster in 2010, agreed, looking to his own section for the source of the ensemble’s characteristic style.

“The key is in the strings, which are really warm and down to earth,” he said by phone. “Because we Czechs came from a sort of peasant lifestyle, there is a great sense for folk tunes. Smetana, Dvorak — they really derive their music from simple tunes from the countryside.”

Part of the reason the orchestra’s sound has endured is its intimate home, Dvorak Hall in the Rudolfinum in Prague, which rewards sonic richness. And part is simple numbers: According to Mr. Spacek, just two out of the 118 players are not Czech. “It’s not because we don’t allow foreign people to apply,” he insisted with a laugh. “But we have a huge overload of musicians coming from the Czech Republic,” a country of 10 million with more than a dozen conservatories. It was the desire for a non-Czech artist that led to Mr.

Belohlavek’s 1991 departure. His replacement was the German Gerd Albrecht, the orchestra’s first foreign chief conductor, who some players hoped would be an entree to recordings, tours and general fame and fortune in the West.

While the ensemble expected him to stay until Mr. Albrecht could take over, an angry Mr. Belohlavek soon resigned. He went on to found the competing Prague Philharmonia, become chief conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and lead several acclaimed productions at the Metropolitan Opera.

For years, successive Czech Philharmonic managers tried to lure Mr. Belohlavek back to its directorship, vowing that internal political and financial conditions had improved. He demurred. “There is that proverb, ‘You can never step into the same river twice,’” he said, “and I couldn’t return to the situation I left.”

But he was attracted by a new administration that promised to restructure the organization, raise musicians’ salaries and revamp hiring and firing procedures; in 2010, nearly two decades after leaving, Mr. Belohlavek was reappointed for a term that began in 2012.

Salaries for the players now average the equivalent of \$26,000 a year, 60 percent higher than they were a few years ago, before Mr. Belohlavek and the current administration took control. But they are still low enough, compared with major orchestras in Western Europe and America, to make it difficult to attract top international players. (Hence the scarcity of non-Czechs.)

Inside the orchestra, though, morale has improved, even with a more demanding schedule and work rules. “When the new management came, they promised they would make a pay raise for everyone, and it did happen,” Mr. Spacek said. “And when you make this happen, you make the orchestra trust in you, and that’s why we’re in a good state of mind.”

The orchestra’s budget has more than doubled since 2000, and audience interest seems to have significantly increased, too. While subscription

programs are now repeated three times, rather than twice, attendance has still risen in recent years, to an average of more than 90 percent capacity from around 65 percent.

It is a confident position from which to begin the current tour. In addition to the Liszt concerto, the program in New York includes Janacek's raucous, resplendent tone poem "Taras Bulba" and, appropriately, Dvorak's classic Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," music's grandest synthesis of Czech and American styles, which was composed here and had its premiere at Carnegie Hall in 1893.

In an exciting convergence of events, the performance comes just as Dvorak's original manuscript for the symphony goes on view, for five days starting Monday, at the Czech Center, the first time it has been seen in this country since its composer took it back to Europe in 1895. It is a reminder of the authenticity that the Czech Philharmonic still provides in its core repertory, down to the meatiness of its bassoons.

"This is what we are trying to maintain and preserve," Mr. Belohlavek said. "And I would say it's still there. We are succeeding."

Czech Philharmonic

INTERNATIONAL  
**artsmanager**

October 2014



**Czech Philharmonic**

executive director  
David Mareček and  
music director Jiří Bělohlávek  
talk about the year ahead



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# Reinventing the orchestra



After a restless couple of decades for the Czech Philharmonic, **Mark Powell** journeys to Prague and finds a wholly revitalised orchestra

Prague's historic Rudolfinum auditorium is nestled on the banks of the tranquil Vltava river. A wide run of stone steps rises steeply from an expansive forecourt to three towering, statue-flanked doorways precisely the sort of imposing entrance you'd expect at the flagship classical venue of a nation with a long and illustrious history in the field.

Home to the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rudolfinum resumed its original role as a music venue during World War II, having served lengthy stretches of the earlier 20th century as a repurposed political HQ for the former Czechoslovakia. Inside, the Neo-Renaissance 1870s building boasts high ceilings, marbled floors and echoing, wood-panelled galleries. The private offices at the heart of the complex could be lifted straight from a lavish period drama, with walnut desks and grand pianos reflecting the autumnal treetops of Letná Park across the water.

On the evening of the Czech Phil's 119th season concert launch, I sit in one such office with the orchestra's executive director David Mareček, already sporting a formal tuxedo and bow tie. Despite it being less than an hour until show time, he's talking me through the orchestra's history, and in particular what he readily admits has been a somewhat tumultuous last 25 years.

'It really began in 1989 with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Velvet Revolution,' Mareček explains. 'Until then, the orchestra had always had Czech chief conductors, starting with Antonín Dvořák in 1896. When things here suddenly opened up to Western culture, the orchestra management realised it could bring in people from abroad. They thought that it would help, that it would result in more tours and recording opportunities. In reality, it didn't.'

Outspoken British classical commentator Norman Lebrecht described the difficult period that followed as one of 'free market madness' for the Czech Phil. 'That's exaggerating things a bit,' smiles Mareček, 'but the orchestra's decisions at the time reflected an overall feeling in the country.'

The short-term effect was certainly unsettling: respected Prague-born chief conductor Jiří Bělohlávek prematurely resigned from his

post, making way for Germany's Gerd Albrecht to be voted in by an orchestra clearly much divided on the issue.

Over the next two decades, the Czech Phil would experience an uncharacteristically rapid turnaround of successive chief conductors – Russian Vladimir Ashkenazy's seven-year tenure (1996-2003) was the longest of this notably uneasy era, with the most recent to leave the role being Israeli Eliahu Inbal (2009-12).

'In my opinion, this is one of the reasons the orchestra suffered,' says Mareček. 'If you look at, say, Berlin Phil, the chief conductor is always there for 10 years or more. Of course the chief conductor has to be great, and ours were... but it's also very important that they're willing to stay for a good length of time.'

Predictably, money was also an issue. 'In the communist period, the orchestra was quite privileged; they could travel, and earned well from tours and recordings,' Mareček explains. 'After the Velvet Revolution, everybody could travel, so it wasn't such a privilege any more. The money was no longer very good either; salaries dropped low compared to other professions. The prestige was gone.'

'Then we began this quick succession of chief conductors, and little by little I would say the orchestra lost stability, lost face. It was frustrated, underpaid, and towards the end of this awkward 20-year period, it began to experience fast changes in management. There were quarrels between orchestra and management about financing more recordings. The long-term director left, and another CEO stepped in who was forced to leave by the Ministry of Culture after nine months. He was replaced for just two months, then the Ministry sent a replacement for six months... it was a difficult period.'

It was into this turbulent environment that Mareček and his colleagues stepped as a team, tasked with repairing somewhat tarnished reputations both within the orchestra and externally. 'A core part of our vision from the start was to bring back Jiří Bělohlávek, the best-known Czech conductor these days. Our aim had to be to rebuild the reputation of the orchestra slowly, but also to improve the conditions the players were working in.'

'Together with Jiří and the Ministry of Culture, we put a plan together: Jiří pledged to come back to the orchestra if the conditions for the players were improved, and the Ministry pledged to provide the money for reform if we, the new management team, vowed to make it happen. So we started to negotiate with the orchestra.'

'Of course it was tough, because we wanted more work from them, more recordings on prestigious labels done for free, more weekly concerts and rehearsals, more tours, and more rigorous internal regulations – in other words, the option to fire people if they didn't perform. Of course we don't ever *want* to do that,

Above:  
Czech Philharmonic

Facing page:  
violinist Josef Špaček

Far right:  
the orchestra on stage



'It's part of our raison d'être, to represent Czech music. We're very proud of that'

but it's all part of creating a more professional structure.' The new structure was wrestled into being through lengthy and difficult negotiations between the orchestra, the unions, the artistic committee and the legal teams, but eventually agreement was reached. 'Then, two things happened that had a major effect on the new setup,' says Mareček. 'One was the funding coming through from the Ministry, and the other was the [2011] earthquake in Japan.'

'We were over there for our first tour when it struck. Thankfully we were in Kyushu, and the epicentre was much further north, but of course we had to cancel the rest of the shows and get the orchestra home safely. The fact that our players saw this new management team working around the clock for them really helped us to win their trust.'

The eventual arrival of the promised funds from the government had an equally positive impact on morale: at the end of an 18-month restructuring process, orchestra salaries had been raised by 60 per cent. Jiří Bělohlávek took up the chief conductor post, and thus began the current era of the rejuvenated Czech Phil.

'I can't say it's been entirely smooth since then,' says Mareček, 'because of course it never is. But the most important thing is that now we all pull in the same direction. The orchestra is much more motivated, because they're getting many more opportunities – they recently recorded the *Dvořák Complete Symphonies & Concertos* for Decca; we're doing 50 foreign concerts this year when before it would've been more like 20. We're touring the US [4-17 November], the UK [18-25 April 2015], Spain, and we have a residency at the Vienna Musikverein [19-22 March 2015].'

Along with key structural changes, an overall rebranding and renewed audience-building drive is also proving successful. Czech Phil concerts were previously averaging around 65 per cent capacity; Mareček now puts the figure at 'more like 90-95 per cent.'

The future looks bright, but Mareček emphasises that there's more the team wants to do. 'Recording is something we really want to focus on in the immediate future,' he states. 'One of the more difficult aspects of that has been finding a really good, well-known label to establish a relationship with, and now we have one with Decca, we want to keep it and do more projects with them. So of course we're very keen to negotiate that over the next two to three months.'

'We also want to keep building our tours – with recent bookings we've achieved concerts at many of the halls we really wanted, but now we're interested in more residencies, and in getting to more big festivals.'

Relationship-building with the international circle of guest conductors is also high on the agenda. There are already strong ties with the likes of principal guest Manfred Honeck, and more being built all the time (Semyon Bychkov was one of a number of recent

high-profile names to work with the Czech Phil. 'We need more of those sorts of conductors, and certainly it's hard to achieve at times, because the orchestra perhaps didn't do enough to invite them in the past when those people were younger and more available. Now they tend to be extremely busy, and it doesn't matter what you can offer in terms of money or programming if the main challenge is simply struggling to make the time.'

'But you hold out, keep negotiations going, and eventually you hope a window will open up. That's what happened for us with Bychkov, and with Valery Gergiev, who were both very busy. And of course, they liked the orchestra very much when they came here...'

The next day, I meet with Jiří Bělohlávek, and the pervading theme of renewal and rejuvenation continues. For Bělohlávek, the current period of tenure he began in 2012 feels, like a sort of home-coming. 'I would describe it as having come full circle,' he nods. 'It feels to me like it's been quite a natural development, but now I can say that we've finally achieved much of the general shape we spent a long time aiming for. We've got to the end of the first big step, as it were. In art, of course, the product is never 'finished' – people's skills are constantly developing, we have a lot of young talent coming through, and it's essential for them to keep refining and learning about the life of a professional orchestra player. We're in a strong position to do that now. I definitely feel I'm in the right place at the right time.'

Touring and recording are equally important for Bělohlávek, who notes that while the orchestra's process of rebuilding and consolidation is continuing nicely, there's 'always more to do, and always significant costs to doing it to the highest standards. Financially we're already in a much better position than a few years ago, but of course there's always more distance to go before things are fully satisfactory.'

Despite the caution underpinning the renewed optimism at the Rudolfinum, the increased stability of the setup around the orchestra is clearly starting to pay dividends: the US tour this November features high-profile visits to prestigious venues like Carnegie Hall and Washington National Cathedral.

When playing abroad, Bělohlávek agrees, the Czech Phil plays the role of cultural ambassador; it becomes a direct conduit for the world to hear the majestic works of Dvořák played with authentic home-nation spirit. Does this feel limiting, or liberating?

'It's part of our raison d'être, to be representative of Czech music and give the best possible interpretation of it,' he says. 'We're very proud of that, always. At the same time, of course, there are only so many concerts in the year, and only so many opportunities to play non-heritage repertoires, and those are equally important to us in terms of maintaining our highest possible quality. So we must work hard to maintain that balance, and that vitality.'

Happily, they appear to be doing just that. At the opening concert of the 119th season that evening, young violinist Josef Špaček plays moving solos in stirring performances of Fišer's *Fifteen Prints After Dürer's Apocalypse* and Josef Suk's *Asrael Symphony*. It seems to embody a new vibrancy that begins with Bělohlávek and carries right through the massed ranks of the orchestra, the building, the audience, and out into the darkness of Jan Palach square.

Czech Philharmonic

# The New York Times

September 7, 2014

**The New Season** | Classical

**CZECH PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA** This venerable ensemble — it gave the premiere of Mahler's Seventh Symphony in 1908, led by the work's composer — is known for its intense performances and distinctive sound: dark string colors, and a wind section that favors individualism over blend. In the early 1990s, Jiri Belohlavek, now 68 and the most prominent Czech conductor of his generation, was dropped after a brief stint as principal conductor, and he went on to found the competing Prague Philharmonia. But time seems to have healed all wounds, and Mr. Belohlavek was reappointed in 2010, for a term that began in 2012. He and his old/new band will show off their refound happiness in a program of virtuosically grand emotions: Janacek's "Taras Bulba," Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 (with the suave Jean-Yves Thibaudet) and, appropriately, Dvorak's Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," which unforgettably bridges Czech and American styles. Nov. 16. Carnegie Hall.



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# The New York Times

November 4, 2014

## Dvorak's 'New World' Manuscript to Revisit New York

By Allan Kozinn

Antonin Dvorak's "New World" Symphony holds an important place in American music, not only because Dvorak composed it during his residency in this country, but also because he meant it to show that great symphonic music could be built on themes from various American folk traditions. The New York Philharmonic gave the work its premiere in 1893, but when Dvorak returned to Prague in 1895, he took the manuscript of the symphony with him. It has remained in Prague ever since, and is currently in the collection of the Czech National Museum. But it is returning to New York, briefly, for the first time.

As part of its celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, the Czech government is lending the manuscript to the Czech Center New York, which will put it on display at the Bohemian National Hall, along with the performing parts used at the premiere, on loan from the New York Philharmonic, from Nov. 17 to 21. (The day before the exhibition opens, the Czech Philharmonic, conducted by Jiri Belohlavek, will perform the "New World" Symphony at Carnegie Hall.)

The Czech Center and the Dvorak American Heritage Association are also presenting several lectures at Bohemian National Hall that touch on the work. The conductor Maurice Peress will trace Dvorak's influences through the music of Gershwin, Copland and Ellington (Nov. 18). In "Dvorak's New York," Barbara Haws, the New York Philharmonic's archivist, and Majda Kallab Whitaker, a cultural historian, will discuss Dvorak's visit to New York and the symphony's premiere, with performances by the Arts Ahimsa String Quartet (Nov. 19). And the musicologist and Dvorak specialist Michael Beckerman will trace the roots of the themes Dvorak used in the symphony.



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Czech Philharmonic

examiner.com

October 26, 2014

## Czech Philharmonic performs in Berkeley on 11-city tour of the US

By Gilly Lloyd



The Czech Philharmonic, led by Music Director Jiri Belohlavek begins a tour of the United States on November 4, six years after the orchestra's last visit to the US. The itinerary, which takes the orchestra from the West to the East Coasts, includes performances at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, at Carnegie Hall and at the National Cathedral in Washington DC. Guest artists are French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Czech violinist Josef Spacek and the Prague Philharmonic

Choir and Soloists. The concert programs will focus on the Czech composers Janacek, Smetana, and Dvořák in particular, as the tour coincides with the international release of the Philharmonic's recording of the Czech master's complete concertos and symphonies on the Decca label. The Dvořák works to be played on the tour are his *Stabat Mater*, featuring the Prague Philharmonic Choir and Soloists, and his *Symphony No 9 - From the New World*. There's also a work by Czech



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composer, Josef Suk - his *Fantasy for Violin and Orchestra* - which will be played by Josef Spacek - and Jean-Yves Thibaudet plays the Piano Concerto No 2 by Hungarian composer, Franz Liszt.

The final concert of the tour, at the National Cathedral in Washington DC on November 17, has a special significance. In celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution - which ended 41 years of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia and marked the establishment of the Czech Republic - it features a performance of the *New World Symphony* and Smetana's symphonic poem, *Vltava* (My Homeland). A bust of Václav Havel will be unveiled in the Capitol Building.

For over a century, the Philharmonic has represented the ultimate in Czech cultural achievement. The orchestra was established 1894, and gave its first concert on January 4, 1896, at the Rudolfinum cultural center in Prague, under the baton of Antonin Dvořák, with a performance of three of the conductor's own works.

Amongst the honors bestowed on the orchestra are ten Grands Prix du Disque de l'Académie Charles-Cros, five Grand Prix du Disque de l'Académie française, several Cannes Classical Awards, a position in *Gramophone's* Top 20 Best Orchestras in the World (2008), and nominations for Grammy and *Gramophone* Awards.

In 2012, Jiri Belohlavek once again took up the position of Music Director of the Czech Philharmonic, after an absence of 20 years, to resume a partnership which is considered to be amongst the most celebrated in the orchestra's history. Maestro Belohlavek has conducted performances in the major opera houses of the world throughout his career, and served as Principal Guest Conductor of BBC Symphony Orchestra between 1995 and 2000. He was appointed Chief Conductor in 2006, conducted the orchestra at the Last Night of the Proms in 2007, and again in 2010, and in 2012 was given an honorary CBE for services to music by Queen Elizabeth II. He has an extensive discography, and was the

first conductor since Herbert von Karajan to receive the *Gramophone* Award for Orchestral Recording two years running.

The elegant and stylish Jean-Yves Thibaudet has been a much sought-after performer on the concert stages of the world for the past 30 years. Possessing an enviable combination of technical expertise and musical sensitivity, Mr Thibaudet has a repertoire which ranges from the classics to jazz to scores for film and television, drawing reviews such as "A virtuoso with pronounced musical depth" (*Los Angeles Times*), "Elegance, color, and imagination" (*The New York Times*) and "Sensitivity and effortless virtuosity are the hallmarks of his style" (*The Sunday Times*, London).

Concert master of the Czech Philharmonic, violinist Josef Spacek also pursues a career as a guest soloist. Described as one of the most talented virtuosos of his generation, he was laureate of the International Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels in 2012, won the Michael Hill International Violin Competition in 2009, and received Third Prize at the Carl Nielsen International Violin Competition in 2008. He has performed with orchestras in Europe, the US and Asia, and as a recitalist at music festivals around the world. *The Philadelphia Enquirer* described "his high-charisma playing" [which] "was fueled by priceless musical comprehension", following an appearance with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Maestro Belohlavek and the Czech Philharmonic feature in a newly-released documentary, *Sketches of Dvořák*, directed by Barbara Willis Sweete, which covers the 2012-2014 recording of the complete symphonies and concertos by the composer. It features live performances, studio work and interviews with the orchestra's conductor, players, administration and surviving members of Antonin Dvořák's family. Follow this link to see a trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOILfBadhVI>

# THE PRAGUE POST

September 8, 2014

## Conductor wins Czech classical music prize



Czech conductor Jiří Bělohlávek has won the Antonín Dvořák Prize for promoting Czech classical music and the works of Dvořák, Silvie Marková, spokeswoman for the Classical Music Academy that organizes the Dvořák Prague International Music Festival that opens today, has told the Czech News Agency.

Tonight, Bělohlávek will conduct the opening concerts of the Dvořák Prague

Festival, held under the auspices of Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka. The award will be handed to Bělohlávek in New York City's Carnegie Hall Nov. 16.

This year, the first part of the complete symphonies and concertos of Dvořák (1841–1904) played by the Czech Philharmonic conducted by Bělohlávek has been issued. The recordings of the second part have already ended and will



be published by Decca Classics in 2015. Bělohlávek is the president of The Dvořák Society for Czech and Slovak Music and of the Prague Spring music festival.

Bělohlávek, 68, has been chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic since 2012. He was principal guest conductor (1995–2000) and later chief conductor (2006–12) of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. He repeatedly

included music by Czech composers Josef Suk and Bohuslav Martinů in the program.

He was granted the title Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2012.

In the previous years, the Antonín Dvořák Prize has been bestowed on choreographer Jiří Kylián, soprano Ludmila Dvořáková, violinist Josef Suk, pianist Ivan Moravec and conductor Jiří Kout.

## GRAMOPHONE

September 2014

GRAMOPHONE *Collector*  
BĚLOHLÁVEK'S DVOŘÁK**Rob Cowan** listens to a new six-disc set containing the Czech conductor's latest take on the complete symphonies and concertos

Force of personality: Jiří Bělohlávek records with the Czech Philharmonic at the Rudolfinum, Prague

Quite aside from a wealth of illuminating detail and an empathetic approach to Dvořák's symphonic oeuvre overall, the crowning virtue of this set is in the way it relates the composer's artistic growth. **Jiří Bělohlávek** focuses the precise character of each piece, so that the aura of youthfulness he brings to the First Symphony (and to the third movement in particular) contrasts markedly with the breadth, mellowness and epic proportions of his *New World* – played, incidentally, without its first-movement exposition repeat. The Sixth's balmy exposition is also left single-tier, which isn't surprising given that there's so much of it, though beam up from around 3'44" into the very vital Kertész recording (Decca) and you'll catch the beautiful bridge passage that we miss out on with Bělohlávek. The Fifth, a Dvořák 'Pastoral' in all but name, wears a very sunny countenance and is at its most amiable in the first and second movements, whereas the quietly questioning transition from the slow movement to the *Scherzo* recalls the artful handling of Karel Šejna (Supraphon). The Second Symphony, which here plays for not far short of an hour, runs the gamut – even within its first minute – from darkness to light, and Bělohlávek allows its rich fund of ideas to flow freely. You could call it a vade mecum of Dvořák's evolving symphonic style.

**Jiří Bělohlávek focuses the precise character of each piece'**

In one or two instances among these early symphonies you can sense Dvořák stumbling across awkward dissonances that, had he been more experienced, he might have ironed out. One, involving quiet woodwinds and strings, arrives at 6'09" into the first movement of the Second (if played out of context you'd probably think it was from the 20th century), the other, like a momentary spot of inebriation, occurs from 7'21" to around 7'35" in the finale of the Third, where Bělohlávek takes the best possible option – he just goes for it. I wasn't too sure about the way he makes a tiny pause at around 0'41" into the Third's first movement, before the repeated string figurations, which to my ears disrupts the flow: check, for comparison, Václav Smetáček (Supraphon) or, among complete cycles, Vladimír Válek (also Supraphon) and, especially illuminating, the wonderful Witold Rowicki with the LSO (Decca). Bělohlávek and his Czech players make the strongest possible case for the Fourth Symphony's highly atmospheric opening pages, 'Wagner meets Smetana' you might say, though the lyrical second subject is Dvořák through and through. *Tannhäuser* greets the opening of the second

movement but surely the symphony's highlight, also the high point on this particular reading, is the breezily cantering *Scherzo* with its riotously festive Trio.

The volatile Seventh is surveyed without compromise if at times with rather less close observation than one would have liked (string lines are occasionally blurred) and that sense of impulsive engagement that Kubelík brought to the work (BPO, DG) isn't quite matched. And yet there are magical moments, one in particular near the start of the slow movement (0'50"), where Bělohlávek draws from his orchestra great depth of tone, releasing high woodwinds like a flock of doves. Not for him nostalgically aching *portamentos*; and, as with the Sixth, the finale really blazes.

When it comes to the concertos, Andrew Achenbach has already commented in these pages (7/14) on **Alisa Weilerstein's** 'risk-taking flair' in the Cello Concerto, an impression I would fully endorse. Bělohlávek's predominantly symphonic view of the score provides a powerful but disciplined framework for her spontaneous, tonally full-bodied playing. The Piano Concerto is performed with the greatest sensitivity, as you can check for yourself by cueing 5'50" into the first movement, where **Garrick Ohlsson** achieves a magical *diminuendo* and the orchestra respond with gently etched string chords. The trick with this work, it seems to me, is to approach the solo part as a first among equals: Richter did it in Munich with Carlos Kleiber (EMI) and Ohlsson does it here with Bělohlávek. **Frank Peter Zimmermann** offers a spruce, dancing account of the Violin Concerto, with spot-on intonation and a Milstein-like suaveness of tone. Bělohlávek's accompaniment is typically flexible; witness how he eases the pace for the first movement's second subject.

Summing up, I'd offer a secure 'central' recommendation while citing Rowicki as a dramatic vintage alternative, Kertész's set as more brightly lit and the less consistent Kubelík cycle worth considering for the sake of four or five exceptionally fine performances. Cycles under Neumann and Válek, both for Supraphon, also tell it as it is, if without quite the degree of personality that Bělohlávek offers here. The sound on this new set is by and large first-rate. **G**

## THE RECORDING



**Dvořák** Cpte Syms & Concs  
Czech PO / Bělohlávek  
Decca © 478 6757DX6



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Czech Philharmonic

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November 5, 2014

## Czech Phil's pieces fit together beautifully at Segerstrom

By Timothy Mangan



Conductor Jiri Belohlávek and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet take a bow at Segerstrom Concert Hall on Tuesday

The Czech Philharmonic, which gave its inaugural concert under the baton of Antonín Dvorák, graced the stage Tuesday night at Segerstrom Concert Hall in the first performance of an 11-city U.S. tour, which will also stop at Carnegie Hall.

The program was most welcome, even though it included Dvorák's most

famous, and therefore overplayed, symphony. But it also featured two lesser known gems (at least in these parts) in the first half of the concert, and they were both given a wonderful ride.

The orchestra isn't the first or fifth one that comes to most people's minds when thinking of the world's greatest orchestras, but it is assuredly right up



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near the top, judging from Tuesday's concert. I'd put the Czech Phil's strings neck and neck with the Vienna Philharmonic's, perhaps even giving them a slight edge. At any rate, they play beautifully, unanimously and always expressively. They have a slightly bright sound overall, but it is never edgy or brittle. Call it illuminated.

The whole orchestra has a special sound. It is clear without being arid, plush without being clotted. The strings nicely dominate, without even trying. One heard, it seemed, every articulation in the strings, yet no one forces the sound. The brass and woodwinds fit into the interstices, no elbowing needed and none attempted. The double basses are lined up behind the orchestra, perfectly centered and facing straight at the audience. Their sound infuses the orchestra's with a deep richness, but it also has remarkable definition.

Jirí Belohlávek, now in his second stint as chief conductor of the group and who studied for a time under none other than Sergiu Celibidache, showed himself to be a most distinguished musician. His conducting style is somewhat plain in appearance (there's no showboating or posing) but clear and effective. He conducts from the shoulders, which gives his signals a certain power. At the same time, he seems to invite the orchestra to play. The musical execution has easy warmth and supple movement as a result.

Dvorák's Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," served as finale for the evening in a performance that unfurled like a blooming flower in time lapse. Gone were bar lines, transitions and tempo changes; all was continuity, everything sang. There was a lot of patience here, but nothing studied.

Belohlávek paced it so perfectly that one was barely aware there was any pacing involved at all. The musical expression was disciplined, never exaggerated. The

performance was a demonstration of fine orchestral playing.

French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet was on hand for a rare performance of Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2. The piece has few champions, but Thibaudet is one of them and he put it across like gangbusters. Written in one continuous movement, the concerto is in a hybrid form. Liszt originally conceived it as a "concerto symphonique," which is more like a symphony with a soloist's decorations.

Those decorations are flowery and ornate, thunderous and frenzied, and Thibaudet gauged them all just right, knowing when to accompany and when to command. His technique was nothing less than extraordinary, the fortissimos like powerful jabs, the poetic flights like elegant perfumes, the virtuoso merriment like dazzling fireworks in HD. Belohlávek and the orchestra had just as much fun. It was like having candy as a second course.

Conductor and orchestra (and organ) opened with Janáček's symphonic poem "Taras Bulba," which follows a tale by Gogol about the deaths of three Cossacks, a father and two sons. The scenario is as detailed as anything by Richard Strauss. One needed a scorecard to follow it.

But all the hallmarks of Janáček's late style are there – the obsessive rhythmic cells repeated over and over, the soulful melodies high in the violins, the discontinuous unraveling and abrupt contrasts, the unusual timbres. It fascinated in its meandering and then came to a colossal, roof-raising and heart-pounding close.

The orchestra offered two encores, the first a snazzy and stylish account of Smetana's Overture to "The Bartered Bride," the second a suave reading of the "Valse triste" by Oskar Nedbal. It was quite an orchestra and quite an evening.



# Los Angeles Times

November 6, 2014

## Seeking an inner light amid darkness of Dvorak's Stabat Mater

By Mark Swed



Jiri Belohlávek leads Czech Philharmonic, Prague Philharmonic Choir and vocalists in Stabat Mater.

Music and sadness is an endless and much too studied subject.

Does sad music make us feel better by first making us feel worse, like, say, having a tooth pulled? Or do we feel better simply because we are thankful we may not suffer as, say, a grief-stricken Dvorák did when he wrote his Stabat Mater? All three of his young children had died over the previous two years.

Can a composer find consolation from sorrow by creating tones that correspond to emotions? Is there a

higher power to be evoked? Or is the intense mental challenge of writing great music itself diverting, antidepressant medication?

Dvorák's somber Stabat Mater was given a rare performance Wednesday night by the Czech Philharmonic, the Prague Philharmonic Choir and four vocal soloists at the Valley Performing Arts Center. It was a sad concert. It was beautiful concert. It was, at its best (which wasn't all the time), an inspiring concert.

The evening — involving 180



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performers, the most the stage has ever held — was really an impressive risk for a performing arts center at the start of its fourth season. But what the evening wasn't was illuminating.

Although Dvorák's *Stabat Mater*, a setting of the 13th century Latin poem that describes Mary's heartache standing before the Cross, is a popular Czech composer's largest nonoperatic piece and considered among his most moving scores, it has little traffic these days outside the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Maybe it is too sad. But I don't think so.

The Czech Philharmonic's performance, conducted by Jiri Belohlávek, had a grim intensity. The VPAC made no effort to coddle or enlighten its audience. The program book contained no notes on the work, no Latin text or translation of the *Stabat Mater*, no context. No one onstage smiled. The music was asked to speak for itself.

I have no answers why this 90-minute score has little currency, whereas Brahms' German Requiem and Verdi's Requiem, which the *Stabat Mater* resembles, are part of the standard repertory. Dvorák was so influenced by them that he sounds here like Brahms for beginners or Verdi translated into Czech (although Dvorák retained the traditional Latin).

Perhaps the more interesting question is one of originality. What is the secret ingredient that makes this *Stabat Mater* unmistakably Dvorák? The score can't match Brahms' harmonic finesse or structural imagination or Verdi's operatic excitability. Instead, Dvorák relies on simple but not obvious turns of phrase, on grace, on unflappability and on darkness' inner light.

In this performance, Belohlávek emphasized monumentality but not

grandiosity or sentimentality. The orchestra produced gritty, clotted textures (additional risers onstage might have helped). The chorus sounded more expansive. An unevenly matched quartet of soloists —soprano Lucie Silkanová, alto Dagmar Pecková, tenor Jaroslav Brezina and basso profundo Jan Martinik — strained to liquefy dry acoustics.

But focus remained on Dvorák's score. The *Stabat Mater* begins in massive depression with typical stormy emotional climaxes underpinned by timpani rolls, huge brass and conventional chorus outbursts. The lyricism peeking through, however, is unexpected and original. The more that lyricism peeks through over time, the more convincing the *Stabat Mater* becomes.

By the end, Dvorák pulls out the stops with an impressive Handelian fugue and glorious Beethovenian finish. He transcends grief with goose bumps and glory, a glimpse at a better world. But this joy is no more convincingly conveyed by chorus, orchestra and soloists than is anguish.

Dvorák's piety may be his therapy, but he never stops noticing the world around him. For "Tui nati vulnerati," in which Mary asks to be noticed, Dvorák writes a short, flowing movement for chorus in 6/8 that is almost like a barcarole, gliding of its own accord.

Rather than showily seek understanding, the composer simply continues, doing what he knows how to do best, which is write bountiful music in his voice. This has nothing to do with sadness or telling a listener how to feel and everything to do with being. Belohlávek's great achievement Wednesday was to trust this bounty.

The great achievement of the VPAC was to actually present this concert. The Czech Philharmonic began a U.S. tour Tuesday night in Costa Mesa with a standard program that concluded with Dvorák's overplayed "New World" Symphony, the work that will be on all its programs, including a stop at Carnegie Hall, but for the Northridge concert and on Sunday at UC Berkeley. That's sad.

Czech Philharmonic

The San Diego  
**Union-Tribune.**

November 7, 2014

**Czech Philharmonic creates magic,  
mystery in San Diego**  
Conductor Jiri Belohlavek proves himself a masterful  
musical storyteller

By James Chute



At the end of Dvorak's Symphony No. 9, the "New World Symphony," the final movement seems headed toward a triumphant conclusion. But on the very last chord, Dvorak has the winds sustain their part after the violins have decisively finished.

Exactly how long they sustain is unspecified, but Dvorak asks for the near impossible: the musicians are

required to diminuendo from triple forte to triple piano, in other words, to go from as loud as they can play to as soft as they can play, at the same time keeping the exposed E major triad that concludes the piece in tune.

With that sustained chord, it's almost as if Dvorak doesn't want to concede victory or give the impression that the struggle is finished. Although the "New



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World Symphony” is among the most beloved pieces in the classical repertoire, that chord still leaves you feeling just a bit unsettled.

When the Czech Philharmonic arrived at the conclusion of the Symphony No. 9 Thursday in a La Jolla Music Society program at Jacobs Music Center, the effect was magical. As that chord faded from a thunderous shout to a whisper, and then quieter than a whisper, time seemed to stand still until the silence was interrupted by the roar of applause. In a sense, that final chord seems emblematic of this orchestra’s character. It traces its history back to Dvorak himself, who conducted the orchestra’s inaugural concerts. This tour includes a Nov. 14 stop at Carnegie Hall, where the ensemble will perform the same program as it did in Jacobs Music Center: Janacek’s “Taras Bulba,” Liszt’s Piano Concerto No. 2 (with soloist Jean-Yves Thibaudet), and Dvorak’s “New World Symphony.” (It should be quite an occasion as the orchestra takes the “New World” back to the place the work premiered in 1893.)

It’s not that the Czech Philharmonic’s impressive playing made you feel unsettled; rather, there seemed to be an undertone of restraint, even in the most energetic, overtly extroverted portions of the program.

The orchestra’s nature undoubtedly has something to do with its distinguished

music director Jiri Belohlavek. This was not an exercise in chamber music. He had total control over the orchestra and the music, and yet he never forced anything, he never pushed anything, he never made a single gesture that wasn’t connected to the music.

Most of all, Belohlavek knew how to tell a story. Janacek’s idiosyncratic “Taras Bulba” tells a very specific story, in fact, several stories, but you didn’t have to read the program notes to know what was going on. Belohlavek is a master of the long line, of making the pieces of this seemingly disjointed work fit together.

Even Liszt’s Piano Concerto No. 2, which despite its thematic unity also can border on incoherence and become a mere display of virtuosity, sounded like the soundtrack to unseen movie. And Belohlavek found an ideal partner in Thibaudet, who had both the poetry and power to bring out the unspoken narrative in this piece.

In the “New World Symphony,” Belohlavek took the opening Adagio a couple ticks slower than a conventional interpretation, but the line never faltered. Neither did the energy and focus Belohlavek and the orchestra brought to the work and the program. Still, like that final chord, that energy had a slight undertone that kept you thinking long after the program was over.



**Santa Barbara**  
**Independent** WHO. WHAT. NOW.

November 14, 2014

## **Czech Philharmonic at the Granada Theatre**

**CAMA presented French Pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet  
on Monday, November 10**

By Joseph Miller



The very first bars of this concert's opening work, Leoš Janáček's *Taras Bulba*, indicated something special. A gentle oboe melody was embedded in placid strings that swelled in volume for a moment, and then dropped again like breath. It sounds simple: a crescendo and decrescendo, yet the execution demonstrated wonderful unity, and a subtle restlessness that

presaged the drama to come. In fact, unity — that golden ring forever striven after by music ensembles — would be the first word I'd use to describe Monday evening's performance. Again and again as I closed my eyes, I felt as though I were in the presence of one mind.

This Santa Barbara concert marked the halfway point for the Czech



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Philharmonic's two-week U.S. tour with French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, which ends at Carnegie Hall on November 16. The real culmination, however, will take place the following night at The National Cathedral in Washington D.C., when the orchestra kicks off a 25th anniversary celebration of the Velvet Revolution — the six-week nonviolent protest that ended Communist rule in Czechoslovakia at the end of 1989 — and the legacy of Václav Havel. A bust of Havel by Czech-born artist Lubomir Janecka, will be installed in the U.S. Capital during the three-day event. In short, the evening seemed to brim with democratic and nationalistic pride as Santa Barbara was dealt a blast of authentic Czech brilliance by an orchestra inaugurated under the baton of none other than Antonín Dvořák. Chief conductor and music director Jiří Bělohradský appropriately weighted the program towards Czech compositions of grand scope and orchestral color, beginning with the Janáček and ending with Dvořák's iconic symphony "From the New World." The latter is practically a

necessity for this tour — commissioned by the New York Philharmonic while Dvořák was director of N.Y.'s National Conservatory of Music, and inspired by Native American and African American music. Thibaudet took to the keys for *Piano Concerto No.2 in A Major* by Franz Liszt, and the evening was rounded out with an inspiring encore by Dvořák's and Janáček's pioneering predecessor, Bedřich Smetana.

If the solo piano works of Liszt are your reference, it might be difficult to identify *Piano Concerto No.2*. Though its lush romanticism demands piano virtuosity, the keyboard is merged closely with the orchestra, often taking on the role of accompanist. It is a work of continuous surprises, and one that Thibaudet knows well. His energetic and commanding performance aroused a passionate ovation.

CAMA continues to be the chief benefactor for giving access to international wonders like the Czech Philharmonic. What good fortune for Santa Barbara to be included in the sounds of this historic tour.

August 30, 2014

## Classical CDs Weekly

By Graham Rickson

### Dvořák: Complete Symphonies & Concertos

*Czech Philharmonic Orchestra/Jiří Bělohlávek, with Frank Peter Zimmermann (violin), Garrick Ohlsson (piano), Alisa Weilerstein (cello) (Decca)*



These are good times for Dvořák symphonies. There's a satisfying recorded cycle unfolding in Bournemouth with Jose Serebrier, and Manfred Honeck's recent live 8th in Pittsburgh is a corker. You can pick up vintage sets by Kertész, Kubelik and Neumann for the price of a few drinks. This new one comes with good credentials; the Czech Philharmonic can still make a distinctive sound, and Jiří

Bělohlávek has this music in his bones. The orchestral playing is high-class – if you came to know some of these pieces through scratchy Supraphon LPs, you'll find that the Czech Philharmonic's timbre remains very recognisable. Winds are piercingly clear but never shrill, and there's still a welcome touch of vibrato in the brass. The Cello Concerto's first movement horn solo, as noted by David Nice, is exquisite. Bělohlávek's strings play with weight, security and agility. Are the interpretations up to scratch? The three concertos almost justify buying the set; Alisa Weilerstein's Cello Concerto is more than decent, but the real find is Frank Peter Zimmermann's glowing reading of the inexplicably neglected Violin Concerto. Structurally it's a bit unbalanced, and the Finale goes on a bit, but when it's performed this well you don't care. Garrick Ohlsson makes the strongest case for the even rarer Piano Concerto, making it sound like laid-back Brahms.

Dvořák symphonies become dull and



stodgy when they're played as if they are actual Brahms. Bělohlávek knows this, and injects the requisite rhythmic lift. If there are any reservations, it's that several of these performances don't take wing. Nos 8 and 9 are thoroughly respectable, but don't set neck hairs tingling. No 7 is cooler and less volatile than it can be, though I like Bělohlávek's doubling of the string line in the finale's coda with brazen trumpets. Working through the other symphonies chronologically is fascinating. No 1, unperformed until 1936, is both

accomplished and entertaining, while No 2 has a sublime extended slow movement. The tripartite No 3 bounds along in Bělohlávek's hands. No 4's Allegro feroce contains an uproarious, catchy trio. With Nos 5 and 6 we've arrived at mature Dvořák. Bělohlávek's 5 is a pastoral delight, and No 6's swinging first movement is delectable. Decca's sound is good, and the whole slimline package is offered at bargain price.

Czech Philharmonic

# The Guardian

August 25, 2014

## Prom 50: Czech Philharmonic Orchestra/Bělohlávek/Weilerstein review – fluid and elegant

Royal Albert Hall, London

Dvořák's cello concerto showed Alisa Weilerstein and the orchestra in complete sympathy



By Erica Jeal

Nobody does Proms encores like the Czech Phil. The Czech repertoire is shot through with dances whichever way you cut it, and Jiří Bělohlávek's orchestra rounded off this programme with a generous three of them: a Dvořák Slavonic Dance, a scurrying Skocna by Smetana, and Nedbal's Valse Triste, all delivered with effortless poise and style.

In fact the whole of the second half had, in its way, been one long dance. "The apotheosis of the dance" is how Wagner famously described Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, and that is how the work sounded here under Bělohlávek's neat direction. The phrasing was fluid, the playing elegant; but nothing mattered so much as the rhythm, whether it came courtesy of the lower strings pushing their way onwards over the higher violins as the slow movement built up its juggernaut momentum, or the horns unleashing brief but jubilant fanfares in the final pages.

If the orchestra hit its real stride only in the second half, there was some refined

playing in the first half too. The overture to Janáček's bleak, prison-set opera *From the House of the Dead* brought intensity, especially from the two solo violins at the start, and apt sound effects from a percussion player shaking his chains, but the piece itself seemed to tick the Czech box rather than fit with the rest of the programme.

It was a world away from the romantic breadth of Dvořák's Cello Concerto, especially with the solo part played with such focus and sweep as it was here, by Alisa Weilerstein. They all recently recorded the work together, and it showed – perhaps not so much at the beginning, when things took a little while to settle, but very much so in the spacious slow movement, beautifully drawn out by Weilerstein and with the orchestra in complete sympathy. Weilerstein's encore, a solo Bach Sarabande, was from the same mould – smooth, deliberate and perfectly controlled.



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# *The* **Guardian**

September 6, 2007

## **'If I understand the heckles, I'll respond'**

On Saturday, mild-mannered Czech conductor Jiri Belohlavek will oversee his first Last Night of the Proms. Has he any idea what he's letting himself in for, asks Stephen Moss

Malcolm Sargent, who dominated the Last Night of the Proms for 20 years, had a flat just opposite the Royal Albert Hall, but was reputed to take a taxi when he was conducting. The story is no doubt apocryphal - all part of the legend of "Flash Harry" - but I couldn't help recall it when I met Jiri Belohlavek, the Czech conductor who, on Saturday, has the task of steering the swaying, braying prommers through the ritual of the Last Night.

Belohlavek, who is hauling a small frequent-flyer's bag behind him on the day we meet, is the antithesis of Flash Harry. An impeccably well-mannered, serious but by no means dour 61-year-old, he became chief conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra two years ago - the holder of the post has the dubious honour of bringing the Proms to a raucous end. He has won plaudits for raising the orchestra's morale after the troubled tenure of Leonard Slatkin, and has just been given a four-year extension to his contract, taking him through to 2012. He is also being courted by US orchestras, and a music directorship is imminent. If he can cope with the Prommer who always brings a car horn to sound at key moments in Henry Wood's Fantasia on British Sea-Songs,

these are blissful days for Belohlavek. But how will an earnest Czech musician deal with this mildly bonkers British evening?

"I am sure I will be shocked when the man in the audience blows his horn," says Belohlavek in his heavily accented and delightfully idiosyncratic English, "but I consider it as a gesture of joy and common feeling. I feel comfortable with it. The question is: will a British audience be comfortable with me? I am living with this fact that I will do this Last Night for more than one year, and it builds up the tension and the curiosity, not only in myself but in the people around me. Everybody is asking what is coming. I think this is a very positive sign - it is proof of how much people love that event."

As well as the man with the horn, he will have to deal with the Last Night speech - a slightly awkward affair when the conductor turns to the Prommers and chats to them. Belohlavek says staff at the Proms are making suggestions and feeding him facts, but the speech will ultimately be down to him, with much of it improvised. "It won't be long," he says. "It will be an address rather than a speech, and of course, for me, it is not so easy to face this challenge. I have some



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**PRESS REPRESENTATIVE**

points which are important and which I have to keep in, but otherwise it has to be spontaneous. I said to the orchestra's manager, 'What will happen if I start to speak Czech?' He said, 'No, please - you may speak one sentence in Czech but no more.'" How will he deal with hecklers? "If I understand what they are saying, I will respond."

My guess is he will be terrific. The bouffant hair, professorial manner, dry wit and mittel-European accent will go down a storm - the perfect counterpoint to the Prommers' gawky lunacy and the flag-waving parties up from Dorking in the stalls.

Some critics loathe the jingoism of the Last Night, but Belohlavek is relaxed. "It's a unique event, and I think it's fine once a year to have a big party." He has never attended a Last Night but has seen several on video, knows vaguely what to expect and respects the traditions. "I am watching it and feeling this is part of heritage," he says. "Why should you change the heritage? One can shape the first part, but the traditional part I think should stay. With a piece of history one should work in very smooth gloves. Maybe a few days from now I will speak completely differently, but I don't think so."

Belohlavek exudes calm on the podium. The BBC Symphony Orchestra has a reputation for bolshieness, but so far the relationship has been harmonious. "My first period of work with them was 1995 to 2000, when I was a permanent guest," he says. "I was told that the permanent guest position in this orchestra was a killer, that everyone fails. But I had a straightforward and open relationship with the players. I never made the mistake that I would flatter them, but I was always trying to be very fair."

Do they deserve their reputation for being difficult? "I can imagine that they are able to be difficult, but they have never done it for me."

I attended a rehearsal and was struck by the fact that, when they weren't playing, some of the brass section were reading newspapers. Is that good practice? "I don't like this, but thank God I don't see it," says Belohlavek. "It is not a good

habit, though they are in full concentration when they play. I have seen it in German orchestras as well, though I don't think that an American orchestra would do it."

There is, you suspect, an intriguing collision between the wing-and-a-prayer English style and Belohlavek's central European thoroughness. Do the orchestra think they can get through on their collective self-confidence? "Yes, I think this might be the little trap for this ensemble," he admits, "because they are incredibly fast sight-readers. The fact that they are so versatile and so fast is, of course, admirable, and I would never like to lose this, but at the same time we are trying to work on the other side of the balancing act. I am trying to encourage them to understand more deeply what is behind the notes, as Mahler always used to say."

I spoke briefly to one of the players after the rehearsal and asked her what she thought of Belohlavek. Some in the orchestra feel his tempi are a bit slow, she said, a bit lacking in dash. I put this to him - not something you would do with every maestro - and he answered without missing a beat. "It's definitely not my intention to dam their exuberance and energy when it is in the score, but energy and controlled energy are two different things, and I definitely am for the controlled energy because in an ensemble without a certain control it is just anarchy."

The watershed in Belohlavek's musical life came in 1991, when he was voted out of his job as chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic. The players wanted the German conductor Gerd Albrecht instead, believing he would bring lucrative record deals and foreign tours. It could have been a disaster for Belohlavek, but he founded his own orchestra, the Prague Philharmonia, and set about developing his career in the west. What could have wrecked his career was in reality the making of it. "I was devastated when I was going through it," he says, "but it was a blessing, actually. It brought me to different opportunities and to a different standpoint of myself. Up to that point my career had gone so smoothly -

everything was fine and everyone was praising me. It's too easy and life shouldn't be so - it is never so easy. Only with some problems can man get better and stronger."

His career has flourished in the past decade, with a successful debut in *Katya Kabanova* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, a rapturously received *Tristan und Isolde* at Glyndebourne and regular appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic. It contrasts with the more

limited opportunities he had before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. "I was always working and was able to come to the west, but at that time if you were invited to conduct a western orchestra, you were still always like a little exotic creature. It was interesting, but I was never part of the cultural life. Now I feel at the heart of it." The serious-minded Czech who is now oddly at home in England's green and pleasant land.