

Josef SUK (1874-1935)

Serenade for Strings in E flat Major, Op. 6 [1892]

- I Andante con moto
 - II Allegro ma non troppo e grazioso
 - III Adagio
 - IV Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo presto
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Suk's Serenade for Strings ranks with those of Dvořák and Tchaikovsky among the finest examples of writing for string orchestra. Seventy-five years after Suk's death, it is time to acknowledge Suk's status as a leading figure of the Czech musical scene of his day. Suk performed actively as violinist in the renowned Czech Quartet from its formation in 1893 until his retirement. From 1922, Suk returned to the conservatory as composition lecturer, teaching students who were to become important contributors to Czech music in the following generation, including the composer Bohuslav Martinů and pianist Rudolf Firkušný.

Born into a musical family in Křivákovice in what today is The Czech Republic, Suk was taught the violin, piano and organ from an early age by his father - the local choral director. Suk entered the Prague Conservatory at age eleven, and studied violin with Antonín Bennewitz and composition with Dvořák, with whom he developed a strong relationship. Indeed, in 1898, Suk married Dvořák's eldest daughter Ottilie.

The Serenade for Strings, composed shortly after graduating from the conservatory, was in the Romantic idiom akin to the music of his mentor Dvořák, and Brahms. Dvořák said to the 18 year-old Suk, "It's summertime now, so go and make something lively for a change, to compensate for all those compositions in minor." This work has a summertime feel and, with its emphasis on melody, is characteristic of a typical serenade. The first complete premiere was at the Prague Conservatory in February 1895, conducted by Bennewitz.

In the first movement, the ardent melody is passed primarily between the violins and celli whose interweaving parts are urged forward by a simple accompaniment in the violas and basses. The violin and cello solos herald the transition into the final statement of the opening theme that eventually fades away to a delicate ending. The lilting music of the second movement features unexpected fresh outbursts against a gentle, shimmering accompaniment that concludes with a unison pizzicato. The adagio is the longest movement and captures the essence of lyrical Romantic slow movements, with a Slavic flavour. The finale embodies the effervescent heart of the young Suk, which after a compulsive start slows to a pause as if to regain its breath before its final dash to the finish.

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