

Bedrich SMETANA (1824-1884)

Má vlast (My Fatherland) [1874-9]

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II Vltava (The Moldau) [1874-9] The Czech people in the mid-nineteenth century were on the verge of independence. The national language was emerging out of suppression, and the transformation of the political situation from Austro-Hungarian domination was cause for great optimism. In this atmosphere Bedřich Smetana's compositions epitomised the spirit of a new Czech fervour.

Whilst abroad in Sweden between 1858-61, Smetana first explored Hungarian composer Franz Liszt's concept of the Symphonic Poem. Through this form, where poetic or illustrative concepts could be depicted through music, Smetana was to produce his best-known expression of nationalistic pride.

Upon his return to Bohemia in 1861, Smetana spent a decade as conductor of the Royal Provincial Czech Theatre, where his output was consequently operatic rather than orchestral. It was while writing his fourth opera, *Libuše* (1869-72), inspired by national history, legend and landscape, that he began sketches for a series of symphonic poems of a similar nationalistic flavour. Deafness forced him to resign from theatre work in 1874 but it did not suppress his desire to compose, nor his patriotism. It was in that year that he returned to these sketches, which would ultimately become the monumental six-movement cycle *Má vlast* (My Fatherland).

Vltava, named after the river known in English as the Moldau, is the second work in the cycle. The river is a source of Bohemian myth, legend and history and this composition is a musical depiction of its journey. Intertwining flute and clarinet melodies represent the streams - one warm, the other cold - that are the sources of the river. Through the countryside the river travels, passing nearby hunters sounding the horn. Later, celebrations of a village wedding can be heard, where polka rhythms are used as a symbol of Czech country life (and evocation of Smetana's youthful love of dancing). Day darkens to night, and the river's moonlit journey reveals the emergence of water nymphs, coinciding with yet another change in tempo and an affiliated air of mystery. The *Vltava*'s course is thrown into turmoil and confusion while passing through the St John's Rapids. However it continues relentlessly, to greet Prague in triumph, before wending majestically out of sight.

The cycle represents the continuation and completion of Smetana's aim to glorify Czech culture in his work, to produce a musical celebration of the emergent modern Czech nation. Smetana was present at the premiere of *Vltava* on April 4 1875, conducted by Adolf Czech. When the cycle was first performed in its entirety on November 5 1882, it received public acclamation for its representation of Czech national style, following which Smetana dedicated the cycle to the City of Prague.

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