



Antonín Dvořák: *Carnival Overture*, Op. 92

Prepared by Sean Danielson, Musician & Educator

BORN: September 8, 1841. Mülhausen (Nelahozeves), Bohemia

DIED: May 1, 1904. Prague

COMPOSED: 1891. Dedicated to the University of Prague.

WORLD PREMIERE: April 28, 1892. The composer led the Orchestra of the National Theatre in Prague

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes and piccolo, 2 oboes and English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, harp, and strings.

DURATION: ~9 minutes

BACKGROUND:

1891 was the culmination of Dvořák's native Bohemian influences. Almost every work leading up until this year was a programmatic homage to the landscapes of his homeland, the people that inhabited it, or the myths that surrounded it. Dvořák would find himself in America a little less than a year later being seduced by a new muse: the melodies of Black American spirituals.

The work is full of dazzling energy and musical innovation, imbued with the dance rhythms and folk melodies of Dvořák's homeland. It is a true celebration of life and music, and a testament to Dvořák's genius as a composer. The *Carnival Overture* was the second of a three-piece collection of overtures. The pieces were meant to represent nature, life, and love. The vibrant fanfare and lighthearted nature of the orchestra has made *Life* (*Carnival's* original title) by far the most performed of the three overtures.

MUSIC:

The opening of the overture teleports us smack-dab in the middle of a boisterous festival. It's as if you fell asleep on a drive to Disneyland and woke up on a descending roller coaster. One of



the most striking aspects of the overture is Dvořák's use of orchestration. He employs a wide range of instruments and textures, creating a sound that is both colorful and dynamic.

A few instruments to note in particular:

1. The tambourine is meant to represent many different aspects of a festival. We hear the bells on a Pierrot-like character's hat and shoes while they entertain the crowd, the movement of women in elaborate costumes dancing with their partners, and coins being tossed on the counter of a bar and at the feet of musicians.
2. The strings and woodwinds play a prominent role in the work, with the flute and piccolo trading complex and intricate melodies with the violins and cellos. One can't help but picture the flowing garments and fast-paced footwork of the crowd on cobblestone roads.
3. The merriment and celebratory ambiance of the work is interrupted midway to showcase one of the composer's favorite instruments, the English horn. Dvořák pairs the English horn with a solo flute and violin to paint a scene featuring "a pair of straying lovers." Dvořák never explicitly tells us what these lovers are straying from. Are they straying from the carnival to catch their breath and be in each other's company? Are they estranged lovers straying from each other in the midst of the crowd? Are they straying from their lives and witnessing the carnival from afar? That's the beauty of Dvořák's music. Nothing is ever black and white. Dvořák always gives us shades of mauve, blue, silver, and earth tones to get lost within.

Luckily, we are able to read what the composer was trying to convey with his overture. In Dvořák's own program notes he states:

The wanderer reaches the city at nightfall, where a carnival of pleasure reigns supreme. On every side is heard the clangor of instruments, mingled with shouts of joy and the unrestrained hilarity of people giving vent to their feelings in the songs and dance tunes.