



Czech Philharmonic

"The Czech Philharmonic is among the very few orchestras that have managed to preserve a unique identity. In a music world that is increasingly globalized and uniform, the Orchestra's noble tradition has retained authenticity of expression and sound, making it one of the world's artistic treasures. When the orchestra and Czech government asked me to succeed beloved Jiří Bělohlávek, I felt deeply honoured by the trust they were ready to place in me. There is no greater privilege for an artist than to become part of and lead an institution that shares the same values, the same commitment and the same devotion to the art of music."

Semyon Bychkov, Chief Conductor & Music Director

The 125 year-old Czech Philharmonic gave its first concert – an all Dvořák programme which included the world première of his *Biblical Songs*, Nos. 1-5 conducted by the composer himself - in the famed Rudolfinum Hall on 4 January 1896. Acknowledged for its definitive interpretations of Czech composers, whose music the Czech Philharmonic has championed since its formation, the Orchestra is also recognised for the special relationship it has to the music of Brahms and Tchaikovsky - friends of Dvořák - and to Mahler, who gave the world première of his Symphony No. 7 with the Orchestra in 1908.

The Czech Philharmonic's extraordinary and proud history reflects both its location at the very heart of Europe and the Czech Republic's turbulent political history, for which Smetana's *Má vlast* (My Homeland) has become a potent symbol. The Orchestra gave its first full rendition of *Má vlast* in a brewery in Smíchov in 1901; in 1925 under Chief Conductor Václav Talich, *Má vlast* was the Orchestra's first live broadcast and, five years later, the first work that the Orchestra committed to disc. During the Nazi occupation, when Goebbels demanded that the Orchestra perform in Berlin and Dresden, Talich programmed *Má vlast* as an act of defiance; while in 1945 Rafael Kubelík conducted the work as a 'concert of thanks' for the newly liberated Czechoslovakia. 45 years later, [Má vlast](#) was Kubelík's choice to mark Czechoslovakia's first free elections and in January 2018, Decca Classics released Jiří Bělohlávek's recording of *Má vlast* to mark the 100th anniversary of Czechoslovak independence. For the opening subscription concert of the 2019/20 season, Chief Conductor and Music Director Semyon Bychkov conducted *Má vlast* with the Czech Philharmonic.

Where Bychkov's second season with the Czech Philharmonic's saw the culmination of *The Tchaikovsky Project*, their third sees them turn their focus to the works of Mahler. The 2020/21 season opens with performances of the Fifth Symphony in Prague and Vienna, while later in the season tours to Spain and Slovakia include Mahler's symphonies which they will also commit to disc. In addition to subscription concerts featuring music by Shostakovich, Dvořák, Strauss, Mozart, Rachmaninov and Brahms, Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic will give premières of works by Bryce Dessner, Detlev Glanert and Thomas Larcher; three of the fourteen commissions initiated by Bychkov at the start of his tenure with the Czech Philharmonic. A further initiative sees the commencement of an annual November concert honouring the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution.

Throughout the Czech Philharmonic's history, two features have remained at its core: its championing of Czech composers and its belief in music's power to change lives. Defined from its inauguration 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 orphans, the proceeds from the four concerts that it performed each year helped to support members of the orchestra who could no longer play and the immediate family of deceased musicians.

As early as the 1920's, Václav Talich (Chief Conductor 1919-1941) pioneered concerts for workers, young people and other voluntary organisations including the Red Cross, the Czechoslovak Sokol and the Union of Slavic Women and, in 1923 gave three benefit concerts for Russian, Austrian and German players including members of the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras. The philosophy continues today, and is equally vibrant. Alongside the Czech Philharmonic's Orchestral Academy and Jiří Bělohlávek



Prize for young musicians, a comprehensive education strategy engages with more than 400 schools bringing all ages to the Rudolfinum – some travelling as many as four hours - to hear concerts and participate in masterclasses. An inspirational music and song programme led by singer Ida Kellarová for the extensive Romany communities within the Czech Republic and Slovakia has helped many socially excluded families to find a voice. In addition to a newly launched international education exchange with the Royal Academy of Music in London, 2020 saw the Orchestra give a series of benefit concerts during lockdown raising funds for hospitals, the charity ŽIVOT 90 and the People in Need Foundation, culminating in a special concert to an audience of more than 500 at Sychrov Castle outside Prague in honour of all the health professionals across the country for their ongoing fight against the pandemic.

An early champion of Martinů's music, the Orchestra premièred his *Czech Rhapsody* in 1919 and, its detailed inventory of Czech music, undertaken by Václav Talich included the world premières of Martinů's *Half Time* (1924), Janáček's *Sinfonietta* (1926) and the Prague première of Janáček's *Taras Bulba* (1924). Rafael Kubelik was also an advocate of Martinů's music and premièred *Field Mass* (1946) and Symphony No. 5 (1947), while Karel Ančerl conducted the première of Martinů's Symphony No. 6 *Fantaisies symphoniques* (1956). *Fantaisies symphoniques* has also featured twice in the Orchestra's programmes at the BBC Proms, first in 1969 under Chief Conductor Václav Neumann and then in 2010 under Sir John Eliot Gardiner.

Prague has long been favoured by composers, not least Mozart who, following performances of *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, travelled the 250km journey from Vienna to première *La Clemenza di Tito* in 1791. Five years later, Beethoven made two trips to Prague returning again in 1798 to give the première of his Piano Concerto No. 1. His Seventh Symphony was composed in the spa town of Teplitz (now Teplice). Mahler's ties ran even deeper. Born in the Bohemian village of Kaliště, now part of the Czech Republic, he was 23 when he conducted the Royal Municipal Theatre in Moravia and first came to Prague to conduct the Neues Deutsches Theatre before giving the world première of his Symphony No. 7 with the Czech Philharmonic.

Mahler, however, was not the first non-Czech composer to conduct the Czech Philharmonic. Edward Grieg conducted the Orchestra in 1906; Stravinsky performed his *Capriccio* for Piano and Orchestra under Václav Talich in 1930; Leonard Bernstein conducted the European première of Aaron Copland's Symphony No. 3 at the Prague Spring in 1947; Arthur Honegger conducted a concert of his own music in 1949; Darius Milhaud gave the première of his *Music for Prague* at the Prague Spring Festival in 1966; and, in 1996, Krzysztof Penderecki conducted the première of his Concerto for Clarinet and Chamber Orchestra.

Their names are joined by the many luminaries who have collaborated with the Orchestra over the years: Martha Argerich, Claudio Arrau, Evgeny Kissin, Erich Kleiber, Leonid Kogan, Erich Leinsdorf, Lovro von Matačić, Ivan Moravec, Yevgeny Mravinsky, David Oistrakh, Antonio Pedrotti, Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Wolfgang Schneiderhan, Georg Szell, Henryk Szeryng, Bruno Walter and Alexander Zemlinsky.