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The 'Česká mše vánoční' (Czech Christmas Mass), also known as the 'Rybova mše vánoční' or simply 'Rybovka', is a lively, uplifting and moving Christmas Mass composed by the Czech composer Jakub Jan Ryba in 1796. It is considered to be an integral part of any Czech Christmas, like carp and cookies, and is performed annually in hundreds of churches and halls all across the country. With parts for orchestra, choir and soloists it's an ambitious piece full of character and variation. It is also one of the pieces that the Charles University Choir and Orchestra are performing each Christmas as part of their Christmas repertoire.



Part of a canon of work consisting of almost a thousand compositions the 'Rybovka' is probably Ryba's most popular piece. Based on a traditional Latin Mass consisting of Kyrie, Gloria, Angus Dei, Benedictus, etc. it pairs a lively, dramatic melody with Czech lyrics (rather than the typical Latin) and portrays the Nativity in a Bohemian context. Those factors probably contributed towards its initial popularity, although its memorable melodies have surely secured its popularity with modern as well as non-Czech speaking audiences.

The Charles University Chorus, or the 'Sbor Univerzity Karlovy' to give it its Czech name, is a choir consisting of both Czech and international students, making practices under the care of the multi-lingual conductor Haig Utidjian interesting affairs. The choir has a varied repertoire including works by Czech composers like Bedřich Smetana, Milan Iglo, and Zdeněk Fibich, as well as Ryba himself of course. The chorus holds practices every week in the beautiful Charvátův Hall of the 'Všeobecná fakultní nemocnice' (General Faculty Hospital) near Karlovo náměstí (Charles Square) and consists of around 60 members.

Writing as an international student who is also a member of the chorus, I can say that being a member of the choir offers a brilliant insight into Czech life, giving you a chance to experience aspects of its culture from the inside, as it were. What better way to immerse yourself in the language than by sight reading the second soprano line while grappling with 18th century Czech tongue twisters? ... sorry, I meant text. And all of it *Allegro!* If you thought being able to say "Dám si jedno pivo" ('A beer, please. ') and "zmrzlina" ('icecream') was an achievement, try singing "Bu-dem' Bo-ha ctít srd-cem po-bož-ným, je-ho ve-le-bit du-chem po-kor-ným. Všec-ky všu-dy svo-lá-me..." *allegretto non troppo*, keeping your eyes on the conductor at all times! It's a steep learning curve, but all the more enjoyable for being such a challenge!

Singing with the chorus also offers unique opportunities to perform in incredible venues, like the Great Aula of the Karolinum, as well as to learn about Czech history and customs. One memorable example was when the choir sang in a concert to commemorate the International Day of the Students, a day very important in the history of Charles University as well as the Czech Republic.

So, if you are looking for a dose of culture this Christmas, make sure you catch a performance of the Czech Christmas Mass. The Charles University Choir will be performing it on Wednesday, the 18th of December at 7:30 p.m. in the kostel Nejsvětějšího Salvátora (Church of the Holy Saviour) on Křižovnické náměstí, Prague 1 (close to Charles Bridge). More info can be found on the website: <http://sboraorchestruk.cz/>



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