
About Antonín Dvořák, Love to Locomotives and Music

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In the month of September the musicians traditionally commemorate the birth of one of the leading personalities of Czech music, the composer Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904). In recognition of this event the Charles University Choir (the Vysokoškolský umělecký soubor Univerzity Karlovy, which when translated word by word becomes the University Artistic Ensemble of Charles University) opened its 67th season by a concert composed of works by Antonín Dvořák.

Due to the occasion of Antonín Dvořák's 173rd birthday on 8th September 2014, the fans of the Maestro's music were invited to the Traffic Hall of the National Technical Museum, a truly unusual place for a classical music concert, to listen to Dvořák's Biblical Songs, opus 99, a group of 10 songs composed in 1894; as well as the Mass in D major opus 86, known to Czech audience as Lužanská Mass.

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The anniversary concert was opened by a short lecture on Antonín Dvořák and his love of modern technology. He enjoyed observing trains and locomotives, watching them daily at the local train stations when he stayed in Prague as well as the large steamships in the port and on the sea when living in New York. In his letters home he often wrote about the different steamers going to and from Europe, trying to predict which one of the vessels would deliver his family's letters. The lecture was followed by the concert itself – in the first half of the evening, Dvořák's Biblical Songs resounded in the Traffic Hall; in the second Lužanská Mass.

Dvořák's 10 Biblical songs, op. 99 were composed in 1894, for alto voice and piano accompaniment. The libretto being taken from David's psalms within the Bible of Kralice, a complete translation of the Latin bible into the Czech language written in the 16th century, although there are a few alterations of text by Dvořák. Antonín Dvořák composed very few religious or sacred pieces. As the 10 Biblical Songs were composed when Dvořák had been residing in New York for a year, it can be argued that Dvořák resorted back to religious texts of his native country due to homesickness. Additionally can be noted the closeness of the composition date and the death of Tchaikovsky in 1893, a close friend, which may have resulted in Dvořák's compositions in 1894 becoming focused around the theme of religion. The work is considered to be one of emotion and spiritual understanding, this is achieved by the Maestro's lack of use of musical devices, as well as an unadorned imitative and harmonically simple piano accompaniment. Despite this through the 10 Biblical Songs, Dvořák successfully represents as well as explores a range of human emotions from extreme anxiety to meditative tranquillity. The Lužanská Mass, or the Mass in D major, was composed by Dvořák in 1887 for organ, and re-orchestrated for orchestra in 1892. The original instrumentation included an organ accompanying a mixed choir and four choral soloists: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. The language of the libretto is in liturgical Latin, the form being taken from the catholic mass. This suits the original place of performance, the small and picturesque chapel in the Castle of Lužany in Western Bohemia, a main reason the composition being appropriately named the Lužanská Mass. Similarly to the 10 Biblical Songs, Dvořák uses simple forms and limited instruments, however he includes rich melodic and harmonic textures with the use of innovative musical devices. The overall effect being one of flowing melodies and rich choral harmonies; creating a piece which successfully represents Dvořák as a composer; humble yet full of life. The Lužanská Mass was a success on its premiere on the 11th of September 1887. The *Musical Opinion* stating that it was a "work of remarkable power and effect". Dvořák himself shared the view by writing in a letter to his friend and patron Josef Hlávka (owner of Lužany Castle), "I am pleased to announce that I have finished the work and am supremely pleased with the results".

The public enchanted by the power of the choir music left the Traffic Hall still hearing the sounds of Dvořák's compositions. Now we can only look forward to the next performances of the Charles University Choir prepared for the season 2014/15. Czech as well as international students of CU might be interested to learn that the Choir is currently searching for new members. [Details can be found here](#).



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