

DVOŘÁK

IN NATURE'S REALM

Overture Op. 91

CARNIVAL

Overture Op. 92

OTHELLO

Overture Op. 93

SCHERZO CAPRICCIOSO

CHANDOS



LILSTER ORCHESTRA *conducted by* VERNON HANDLEY



Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

- | | | |
|----------|---|-----------------|
| 1 | In Nature's Realm
Overture Op. 91 | 13:45 |
| 2 | Carnival
Overture Op. 92 | 9:46 |
| 3 | Othello
Overture Op. 93 | 14:19 |
| 4 | Scherzo Capriccioso
Overture Op. 66 | 14:30 |
| | | TT 52:40 |

Ulster Orchestra
Richard Howarth leader
Vernon Handley

Dvořák: In Nature's Realm etc.

Between the spring of 1891 and the early weeks of 1892 Dvořák became interested in the idea of a three movement symphonic work consisting of a cycle of three symphonic poems depicting Nature, Life and Love. His intention was to explore every possible facet of nature and life and the effect they have had on the soul of man, ending with the drama of deep love killed by unwarranted jealousy.

Having completed the cycle, Dvořák spent some time looking for appropriate titles for the first two – the original sketch of the first piece contains four suggested titles. Finally he named them *In der Natur (In Nature's Realm)*, *Bohemian Carnival* and *Othello*, the second very soon being shortened to *Carnival*. They were first performed in Prague in 1892, shortly before the composer left New York to take up the post of Director of the newly opened National Conservatory.

At their first performance the works were given as a cycle of three concert overtures, much as Dvořák had conceived them. Since then, of course, they have been put into

concert programmes as individual pieces, but there is no doubt that their impact, when performed as a three-movement symphony, has a special quality heard all too rarely.

In Nature's Realm Op. 91

To provide unity to the cycle Dvořák wrote a *motto* theme which appears in all three overtures, having been used as the principal idea in the first. On 8 September 1891 Dvořák celebrated his fiftieth birthday, which was the excuse for many ceremonies throughout Czechoslovakia. However, while a gala performance of a Dvořák opera was being given in Prague, the composer was quietly enjoying a country walk with his family at Vysoká.

This love of the countryside was an important element in Dvořák's personality and *In der Natur* can be listened to as a firm statement that the overall work is based on a pastoral theme, whose character is felt when least expected. It is for this reason, too, that a full understanding of each overture is best attained by hearing the three in sequence.

In mood *In Nature's Realm* is like being taken for an idyllic country walk by a man who delights in the simple sounds of the countryside which is his natural heritage. There is no developing theme in the symphonic sense, only a constant delight in nature, with exquisite birdsong and the ever-present pulsating throb of air on earth.

Carnival Op. 92

From the gentle introvert delights of nature in pastoral mood the opening bars of *Carnival* push the listener willy-nilly into the extrovert hustle and bustle of a country fairground in full swing. Then, at the uninhibited height of what Alec Robertson succinctly calls 'an unblushing visit to the Venusberg', a clean sweep on the strings drops away to a single velvety horn note and the pastoral theme from *In Nature's Realm* slides into the scene of the clarinet, while a cor anglais and a solo violin meander over strange bass growling, as though the fairground is on the edge of a mysterious yet fascinating wood where the sunlight is cut off by the trees and the ground in uncannily soft underfoot. The episode ends as quickly as it has begun, the wood is left behind and the excitement and colour of the fair take over once again.

Othello Op. 93

After the introspective enjoyment of nature and the gaiety of the carnival, with its middle section where the nature *motto* theme returns to remind man that all pleasure emanates from the natural world, it is that central theme which now returns in the most dramatic and symphonically structured of the three overtures. Muted strings suggest the latent jealousy of Othello, almost like a chorale, then a stronger questioning phrase on first violins is equally firmly answered by violas and basses in passages marked *forte*, yet still with the strings muted. Then the flute and two clarinets take the theme which grows in anger until the *allegro con brio* takes over in full power. The earlier themes had been reminders yet again of nature as heard in the first two overtures, but there the pictorial element is at hand. Desdemona's music, living and tender as she pleads her innocence, is thrust aside by the Moor's jealousy; suspicious whispers surround Othello and a quotation from Dvořák's own *Requiem Mass* anticipates the final tragedy, when, at the climax of the jealousy theme, Othello cuts into Desdemona's melody and murders her. Then, having learned the truth, the distracted Moor stabs himself in a dramatic burst of self-hatred and desolation.

Othello is one of the finest symphonic poems in the repertory and brings the trilogy of concert overtures to a magnificent and impressive close.

Scherzo Capriccioso Op. 66

This is one of the greatest short orchestral works ever written. It was composed in 1883 and published the following year, its relatively early opus number being concerned with order of publication rather than composition. It belongs to the period which saw the D minor Symphony and the F minor Piano Trio, a period when Dvořák was beset by personal doubts, bringing forth a determination to remain true to his national roots. The problem came with an invitation to settle in Vienna, with all that such a move could bring to his career, which had begun to take off after Brahms had championed his cause and brought about publication of the highly successful *Slavonic Dances* five years earlier. Dvořák's success had now brought him to this crossroad and his decision brought out the best possible music from a composer whose roots are his life.

In the *Scherzo Capriccioso* Dvořák proudly showed his inheritance in music which is superbly orchestrated and bubbles with delight and energy. Perhaps the greatest and

most memorable moment comes with the move towards the waltz theme, when the music magically dissolves as the harmonics imperceptibly soften and the glorious new melody takes over. From the decisive yet persuasive horn call in the opening bars to the delicious magic of the final pages this is music which triumphantly proclaims that Dvořák is a Bohemian and proud of it.

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Vernon Handley is widely respected as one of Britain's leading conductors. Born in London, he studied English at Balliol College, Oxford, before going on to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

His flair and energy in both the concert hall and recording studio have highlighted his contribution to music in Britain and the enormous success of his recordings with the London Philharmonic prompted the orchestra to create an appointment especially for him, that of Associate Conductor. At the beginning of the 1985-86 season he took up the position of Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Ulster Orchestra and also of the Malmo Symphony Orchestra. He has worked with many foreign orchestras

including the Stockholm Philharmonic, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Amsterdam Philharmonic.

Vernon Handley has gained particular esteem for his championship of British music and in 1974 the Composers' Guild of Great Britain named him Conductor of the Year.

In spite of his busy schedule he still manages to follow his keen interest in ornithology.

The Ulster Orchestra began as a chamber-sized ensemble in 1966 and was enlarged in

1980–81 incorporating players from the disbanded BBC Northern Ireland Orchestra, and its reputation has been greatly enhanced as a result of the Chandos series of recordings of the music of Hamilton Harty and Arnold Bax.

The Ulster Orchestra is unique as an independent orchestra, having a major broadcasting commitment to the BBC, and receives major financial assistance from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the British Broadcasting Corporation, Gallaher Ltd., and Belfast City Council.

The Ulster Orchestra Society acknowledges the financial assistance of the Belfast City Council in the production of this recording.

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