

Culture



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Conductor Štefan Britvík has reconstructed a symphony that will now have its world premiere

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Czech composer has a premiere 200 years after his death

A reconstructed symphony and another rare work highlight anniversary concert

Concert for the 200th anniversary of J.K.Vaňhal

When: Aug. 20 at 7 p.m.

Where: New Town Hall

Tickets: 450 Kč

BY RAYMOND JOHNSTON
STAFF WRITER

Some composers have fallen into obscurity, despite their work being on par with some of the best. In some cases, manuscripts have been sitting in archives, waiting for someone to stumble on them. Other times, the works simply remain unperformed because the composer doesn't have a big name like Beethoven or Vivaldi that draws big crowds.

A concert in the New Town Hall by the chamber orchestra of Symphony Prague will present the world premiere of a J.K. Vaňhal's Symphony in E-major, as

well as the Czech premiere of a concerto for violin in A major by Chevalier de Saint-George. The concert marks the 200th anniversary of the death of Vaňhal.

Conductor Štefan Britvík has spent the past 30 years searching archives for unpublished and unperformed works. "I systematically restore an early composition by looking for all available copies of a manuscript, reconstruct the score from the individual parts, make corrections and supply all the other information necessary for a contemporary performance," he told The Prague Post.

He found the Vaňhal symphony in Prague. "This

composition has never been performed, because the composition was lying in the musical archive in the Klementinum," he said.

The piece needed significant preparation, as the scoring of the early part had never been done. "This composition is only one of many that I have found this way and prepared for its concert presentation. My personal music archive is full of various compositions of early Czech composers," he said.

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He worked on the piece a decade ago, reconstructing something that he considers to be close to the original in intent based on various arrangements and copies he located, as the original manuscript has been lost.

The date finally provided a good reason to play this particular piece. "Thanks to the 200th anniversary of the death of J.K. Vaňhal, and thanks to some financial support from Prague 2 in the form of cultural grants, our orchestra has decided to play the world premiere performance of this symphony. It will happen Aug. 8, 2013, exactly the day of his anniversary," Britvík said.

The anniversary also piqued the interest of a broadcaster. "We offered this piece to Czech Radio, and they have also decided to broadcast this concert live on that day, which is very significant for us, but especially for the music itself," he said.

Like most composers who lived around the end of the 18th and start of the 19th centuries, Vaňhal was heavily influenced by Mozart. He achieved some amount of fame in Vienna, where he spent most of his professional life. "J.K. Vaňhal is one of the most significant Czech composers of the classical period," Britvík said.

The Czech premiere of a violin concerto by Chevalier de Saint-George — born as Joseph Boulogne — did not need such extensive work, although it was revised for a modern orchestra. Violinist Miroslav Vilímeč will be the featured soloist, and he has become an expert on this particular composer. He recorded one of the composer's pieces for a Swiss label. "They must have liked it. ... [They] asked me to record all 14 violin concertos by this composer. I myself did not discover this music, but by recording it I was studying it and getting to know his music, and I found it extremely interesting," Vilímeč said.

On occasion, Chevalier de Saint-George is referred to as the "Black Mozart," but Vilímeč said that race is

not behind the composer's lack of renown. And his work only has a slight similarity to Mozart's.

The composer was born on the island of Guadeloupe to an Afro-Caribbean mother and a white plantation owner. The exact date of his birth is uncertain, but he died in 1799. "I think the reason his name and work were mostly forgotten was not his origin. At the time, he was rather famous in France, but his artistic career was disrupted by the French Revolution. The composer then died in oblivion and so did his work," Vilímeč said. "It was only recently that his work was rediscovered and got to the public from musical archives."

Recording the work was a challenge, as performance styles have changed, and the compositions had to be adapted. He also had to come up with his own cadenzas for the pieces.

Chevalier de Saint-George knew fellow composer Joseph Haydn, but their styles were different. "Every one of those personalities [in the classical era] brought something very special and specific, unique to music. That is why each composer differs from the other," Vilímeč said. "By listening, one may very clearly distinguish the specific coloring of the music of Chevalier de Saint-George. This special style is very apparent in his music."

Vilímeč chose the particular piece that is being performed Aug. 20 because he claims it shows the composer's best qualities. "There is a beautiful slow part and also a very funny, elegant rondo. I think this concerto in particular should become a part of common, basic concert repertoire, but unfortunately nowadays it is not," he said, adding that the music sheets are not widely available.

Audiences responded positively toward works from

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obscure composers. "I have very good experience whenever a lesser-known composer or work is performed. To tell the truth, I very much enjoy this adventurous activity of performing new things," he said.

"Generally this new performance is a real enrichment of the standard repertoire and it is often a very pleasant surprise both for the listeners and for myself."

To fill out the program, a symphony by Mozart will also be performed as part of the Aug. 20 concert.

Symphony Prague is a private orchestra that comprises the best players from other Prague orchestras, according to Britvík. The orchestra was founded five years ago and performs all around Europe. The chamber orchestra of Symphony Prague, a smaller formation than the main group, this year began using New Town Hall for concerts and will have five there this year. The orchestras receive no state support.

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