



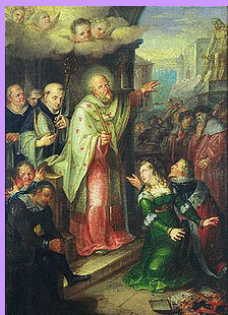
J. Reilly Lewis, Music Director

Prelude

Glorious Music in a Glorious Setting®

Cathedral Choral Society
J. Reilly Lewis - Music Director

Fall 2011



Bořivoj I, Duke of Bohemia



Ludmilla of Bohemia



Saint Wenceslas, Duke of Bohemia

There is a picture of the Heavenly Jerusalem in the Prague manuscript of St. Augustine's "City of God" with a cheerful nationalist caption: "Hope, love, and faith accorded a place there to the good Czechs."

Most happily, those good Czechs shared with the world their priceless gift of music, and we in America are perhaps the greatest beneficiaries.

Before we leap into more modern times, let's reflect for a moment on the wealth that had been inherited by the composers on today's program.

The Slavic peoples came to the Czech lands in the seventh century, layering over the Celts who had already developed their own oral tradition. After the great Carolingian dynasty in France stabilized the liturgy of the church, the impetus in the ninth and tenth centuries to spread Christianity reached the borders, and centered on Prague.

[Bořivoj](#) converted to the faith in the early 900s, and the following decades are marked by struggle and martyrdom. First, the King's consort, [Princess Ludmilla of Bohemia](#), was murdered in 921 by her daughter-in-law, a member of the semi-pagan nobility threatened by this new faith. Ludmilla's grandson had already been deeply influenced by her, and when he assumed the throne a few years later, he kept the policy of negotiating with the Christianized German states.

Despite the threats from his enemies, including his brother Boleslav, he kept his faith, and knowing that his end was near, toasted St. Michael one evening to guide him on his way. The next day, the good [Wenceslas](#) was killed, and so was born both a patron saint, and with the hymn *Svatý Václav*, the first Czech sacred song. The liturgy of Wenceslas was sung for the coronation of Bohemian kings for centuries, and with music for Ludmilla, Adalbert (the second bishop of Prague who was killed trying to convert the Prussians), and figures like Procopius, who founded the monastery of Sázava, a wonderful body of sacred music evolved.

Through the late middle ages, first with the Přemyslid dynasty (who brought Minnesingers to Prague!) and then with the great fourteenth century internationalist John of Bohemia, the musical life was deeply enriched. The Czech musical nature—playful, profound, folk-inspired, joyous—was already in place. Jan Huss complained that the sacred service sounded so folk-y the people are more moved to dance than pray; so, during the Hussite wars, the Catholic side sang *Svatý Václav* at the top of their lungs.

With the end of the Hungarian rule at the hands of the Ottomans in 1526, Bohemia passed into Hapsburg hands, becoming for a while the most enlightened and religiously liberal nation in Europe. This lasted until the oppression of Protestants in the early seventeenth century that led to the tragedy of the [Thirty Years' War](#): the result was an enforced "Germanization" of the region.

During these years, the Czech regions of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia continued to produce composers who enriched the European musical scene.



Bedřich Smetana

Then, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Czech National Revival put the world on notice—this nation, and these people, would once again find their voice. And so, our three composers come to us not from a formless void, but from a rich, proud, and very musical tradition.

Like so many nations where a powerful musical figure stands as a symbol for the country and its people—[Sibelius](#) in Finland, [Paderewski](#) in Poland, [Verdi](#) in Italy—one need only invoke the name of Smetana to hear the nineteenth century Czech voice. *Má Vlast* is not only a lovely and popular piece of music, it is the incarnation of the spirit, the history, and the soul of a great people.

And when [Smetana](#) was attacked for writing operas that were just not Italian enough, many rushed to his defense, including the young violist in the Bohemian Provisional Theater Orchestra, [Antonín Dvořák](#) (1841-1904).

We like Dvořák. There are many and plenty sad stories in the history of music, but with this composer and the enormous gifts he gave to our late nineteenth-century selves, there can only be happiness and gratitude. Sure he missed his homeland and eventually went back, but from 327 East 17th Street in New York City from 1892 to 1895, magic emanated.

Yes, there was the incomparable [New World Symphony](#), and those “American” pieces—the String Quartet, the cantata *The American Flag*, and the *American Suite*. We could claim the great Cello Concerto and some other late works he penned over here, absorbing our folk music, the African-American tradition thanks to his work with his pupil Harry Burleigh (Dvořák was a famously kind and indulgent teacher), and the Native American rhythms that so interested him.

But let us not forget that we absorbed so much more from him—song recitals for decades included “Songs My Mother Taught Me,” and vaudeville was ever-enriched by the hugely popular *Humoresque*. The “Goin’ Home” theme from the *New World Symphony*, so affectingly brought back by [Garrison Keillor’s](#) reworking as an anthem for Lake Wobegon, is in our pantheon of secular national hymns. Orchestras know that when they program Dvořák, we will come.

Even the composition of the *Te Deum* is part of this good story. When Jeanette Thurber, who had founded the National Conservatory of Music in New York, got the inspiration to hire Dvořák in 1891, she wanted a piece for the 400th anniversary of Columbus coming to the New World. The composer’s facility for the choral art was deep and broad—the lovely Mass, his [Stabat Mater](#) setting, the evocative Requiem, and most telling for our story, the grand oratorio for St. Ludmilla—and this hymn of praise was sketched out in a week. The premiere was October 21, 1892 in the New York Hall, with the composer conducting a choir of 250 singers.

[Vítězslav Novák](#) (1870-1949) studied for a while with Dvořák, and was a contentious character who lived through the changes his nation went through in the first half of the twentieth century. He studied the folk music of Slovakia and Moravia (more on that region later), and, when Richard Strauss’s *Salome* came to Prague in 1906, many things were kindled in the young composer, including a lifelong dedication to Strauss’s music.

When the conservative head of the university began an anti-Dvořák movement (too nationalist!), Novák took him on directly, making a powerful life-long enemy. Novák died only a few weeks before Strauss, his musical deity.



Antonín Dvořák



Vítězslav Novák

Our work today though, from the *Slovak Suite*, takes us back to a happier time—after his visit to Wallachia on the Moravian-Slovakian border in 1896, Novák began to set songs and dances from the region, culminating in this early work that established him as a major composer.

Another composer had been there to gather folk songs in the late 1880s. The so-called *Lachian Dances* by [Leoš Janáček](#) (1854-1928) were this composer's first major effort as well, and a crucial reminder of the wonders of Moravian music.

Here, if you would allow me the indulgence, a couple of personal reflections. I had the great joy along the line to interview the pianist [Rudolf Firkušný](#) (1912-1994), who had famously studied with Janáček. It was a great opportunity to ask him if his master had ever spoken of the great Dvořák. The answer was a revelation.

Apparently, the Prague-based musicians felt like they were in the center of the musical universe, and for the young Moravian son of a schoolteacher and avid folklorist, this was a great chasm—perhaps analogous to the way certain New York artists treat the provinces, like Washington here. In any event, Janáček reached out to the older composer and teacher and sent along some compositions. Dvořák was typically supportive and enthusiastic, encouraging the young man to follow his own star and never be ashamed of his Moravian heritage.

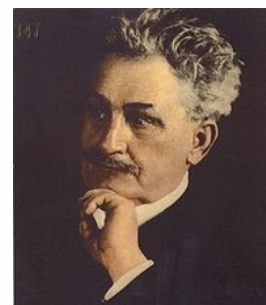
Now, let us spend a moment considering the Moravians in our own country. Their arrival by the 1740s was not only to convert native peoples but also to provide a home for German-speaking worshippers. The famous centers first in Nazareth, then Bethlehem in Pennsylvania gave the original missions a home.

Theological considerations aside (although music is considered part of the ministry), the Moravians brought us another gift: the huge body of eighteenth century sacred music, from Bach to Haydn, with plenty of stops along the way for fellow Czechs (like [Karl Stamitz](#)). To hear the nation's oldest Bach Choir in the Moravian Church up in Bethlehem ties many threads of the American-Czech relationship together.

The second personal note—before she founded WETA fifty years ago and helped to create educational television as we know it, before she became the first woman to be elected to a Virginia school board and worked ferociously to desegregate Arlington schools, before she was the dean of Mary Baldwin College, Elizabeth Campbell was Margaret Elizabeth Pfohl, who toured with her famous Moravian father and siblings bringing the musical message to the country. The great musical archives that are part of the Salem Village in North Carolina are in part a tribute to her and her family. Whenever I am ready to complain about being tired, I remember that she started that station when she was fifty-nine and came to work every day for more than four decades; and if she is any example of what a Moravian is like, these are among the most extraordinary people we can know.

In this context, we can come back to our Moravian schoolteacher's son, Janáček. From his early years as a promising choral singer, he studied with organist and church composer [František Zdeněk Skuherský](#) (1830-1892). The young man was so poor he practiced with a keyboard drawn on a table. He wrote movements for a Latin mass as a school assignment, but when his teacher presented a complete mass using the new work in Gregorian studies, Janáček publicly critiqued his teacher in print.

He was expelled from school; but Skuherský seems to have had an extensive change of heart. First, he gracefully relented and Janáček was re-admitted (he graduated at the top of the class). Second, he seems to have then encouraged his pupils to write sacred works in the Old Slavonic: he wrote one himself, and Janáček's classmate [Josef Bohuslav Foerster](#) contributed to the literature as well.



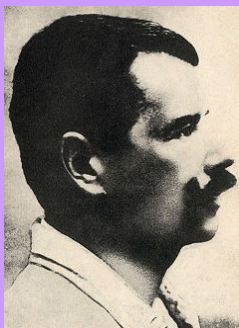
Leoš Janáček



Karl Stamitz



Skuherský



Petr Bezruč



Luhačovice



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For all of Janáček's success in opera and instrumental works, he never abandoned the choral art. In repayment for Dvořák's kindness and encouragement, he dedicated the *Four Choruses for Male Voices* in 1886 to the older man. His life was troubled and angular, but whether sacred works (like the lovely Czech *Our Father* of 1901) or secular (the settings of the poetry of poet [Petr Bezruč](#) from 1906 to 1909), he kept close to the form.

It was late in life—he was in his early seventies—when he wrote his masterpiece for chorus. By this time, a hard life and complex temperament had made the composer an avowed atheist. Two forces came to bear: a need to commemorate the anniversary of Czech independence, and the suggestion from a friend of his in the ministry, who lamented the lack of native Czech sacred settings.

There was already a nationalistic idea to writing in Old Church Slavonic. The language, which had been developed (as it is told to us) by Saints Cyril and his brother Methodius for their mission to Moravia in 863, was banned twenty-two years later by the Pope in favor of Latin. While it passed on first to Bulgaria, then the other Slavic lands where the [Glagolitic](#) alphabet eventually gave way to Cyrillic, this Moravian ministry was the foundation of the Slavic Orthodox liturgy.

Typically however, Janáček claimed that the *real* motivation for the work was a huge electrical storm he experienced while at the spa in [Luhačovice](#): "It grows darker and darker. Already I am looking into the black night; flashes of lightning cut through it. I switch on the flickering electric light on the high ceiling. I sketch nothing more than the quiet motive of a desperate frame of mind to the words 'Gospodi pomiluj' ("Lord have mercy"). Nothing more than the joyous shout 'Slava, Slava!' ("Glory! Glory!")."

Religious or not, you can surely feel the late-life love of country, the long-ago lessons on a tabletop in the riotous organ line, and the sheer love of the human voice that is so deep in the soul and expression of the Czech people.

--Robert Aubry Davis