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In search of. Bohemia

The musical riches of Bohemia are celebrated in a Proms theme this year. But what, in fact, is Bohemia? DEREK SAYER separates myth from reality

Mention Bohemia to music lovers and it is likely to bring to mind Puccini's *La bohème*, an opera set in 1830s Paris. The real Bohemia lies elsewhere. The Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia more or less coincide with the boundaries of the present-day Czech Republic, which is located in the very centre of Europe. But in the geographies of the mind, Bohemia has led a more itinerant existence. Shakespeare furnished it with a coastline in *The Winter's Tale*. Neville Chamberlain believed it to be 'a faraway country' inhabited by peoples 'of whom we know nothing'. After the war, it languished in somewhere called Eastern Europe, even though Prague lies west of Vienna. Well might the Czech national anthem begin, 'Where is my home?'

The poignant, lilting melody, taken from František Škroup's incidental music to the play *Fidlovačka* (1834), is as far removed from the martial strains of 'The Marseillaise' or 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles' as Dvořák's *Rusalka* is from *Das Rheingold*. It rhapsodises a less familiar Bohemia, though not necessarily a less imaginary one – 'our Czech home, that land without anything grandiloquent about its countryside, a land of hills and hillocks, fields and leas, silver birches, weeping willows and broad-crowned lime trees, a land of fragrant hedgerows and tranquil little streams,' as Franz Kafka's Czech lover Milena Jesenská described it, writing in the dark summer of 1939.

It is this Bohemia, where everything is *malé, ale naše* – little, but ours – that Smetana serenades in the two most lyrical movements of *Má vlast* (My country), 'Vltava' and 'From Bohemia's fields and woods'. 'Vltava', which portrays the Czech river as it winds its way to Prague, borrows its main theme from a Czech nursery rhyme.

Má vlast links the land with its legends and its history, reclaiming it as eternally Czech. 'Vyšehrad' is the rock overlooking the Vltava from which the mythical Princess Libuše looked out and prophesied



Landscape painter: Though a city-dweller for most of his life, Dvořák (above) wrote music that made plain his love of the Czech countryside (top)

the founding of Prague; 'Šárka' is a heroine of the 'Girl's War' that followed Libuše's death, when her husband, Přemysl the ploughman, imposed the iron rule of men; 'Blaník' is the hill under which sleep the knights who will awake and come to the country's aid in its hour of need; 'Tábor' is the southern Bohemia city founded by the Hussites, whose 15th-century wars with the Papacy made Bohemia the cradle of the Protestant Reformation.

Neither Vyšehrad, which later became a cemetery for Czech writers, artists, and musicians – Dvořák and Smetana among them – nor Šárka's Valley, a pretty ramble on the outskirts of Prague, feature on the standard tourist trail, but both are worth visiting. If you really want to relive the Czech 19th century, though, there is no

better way to do it than to hear *Má vlast* performed, as it is every year at the Prague Spring music

Smetana's *Má vlast* links the land with its legends and history

festival, in the Art Nouveau Municipal Hall (Obecní Dům) where Czechoslovakia declared its independence from the Austrian Empire in 1918 (selections from *Má vlast* are played in Prom 31).

The Czech landscape is also celebrated by the more modernist Janáček – who hailed from the little village of Hukvaldy in Moravia (his *Hukvaldy Songs* appear on the Prom 16 programme) – and by



Light: Aged
ek (above)
his first
recognition
Prague
e of *Jenůfa*
ational
(top)

Martinů, who spent most of his adult life in France. Martinů was neither the first nor the last Czech to desert the homeland.

From the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620 to the Soviet invasion of 1968, exile has been a fact of Czech life. It nurtured nostalgia for what had been left behind – Dvořák's 'American' compositions are saturated with homesickness (the Ninth Symphony, 'From the New World', is played in Prom 70) – but not always a longing to return. Much as he missed 'sweet, hilly Bohemia', the novelist Josef Škvorecký preferred living in a 'Bohemia of the soul' on Lake Ontario to returning to a homeland that had sold its soul to foreign occupiers. 'We wandered lost through alien lands,' lament Bohuš and Julie in Dvořák's opera *The Jacobin*. 'We sang ourselves a Czech song... In song alone, in song alone/We found sweet relief.'

Janáček grounded the melodies of his operas in the rhythms of the Czech language, which is one reason they are so difficult to sing. 'The speech melodies of actors' language,' he wrote, 'have to be genuinely Czech, genuinely Moravian... Speech melody calls for a Czech in the bosom of his land; it calls for his life, rolling through the centuries with equal sorrow and harshness.' That sorrow and

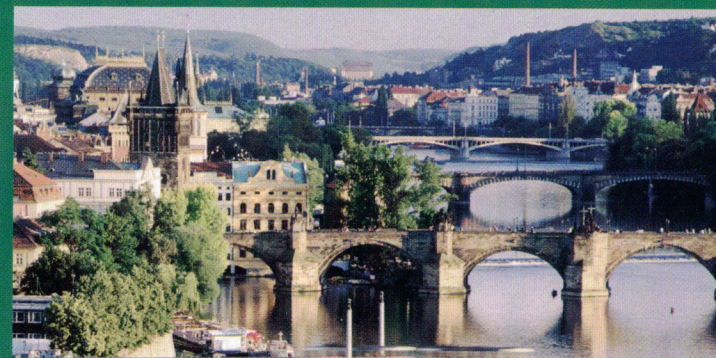
harshness are there in full measure in *Jenůfa*, along with some of the most sublime pages in the modern operatic literature. Janáček's is a less sentimental portrayal of village life than *The Bartered Bride*, with its beribboned maidens and jolly choruses extolling good Czech beer, but it is no less heartfelt. Listen, too, to Janáček's *On an Overgrown Path*. There is no quicker way to the Czech countryside, short of actually going there. If

you do, you will find it much as its composers painted it – provided you close your eyes to the Communist-era smokestacks and the ravages of acid rain.

And don't forget about Bohemia's real history. For it is entirely to the point that Smetana's 'Vltava' is far better known under its German title as 'The Moldau'. German was the language Smetana spoke as a child. Like many born-again Czechs of his generation, he was not at home in the vernacular of the land he wished to make his own. He was the product of another Bohemia altogether. Franz Kafka was a Bohemian – but not a Czech. So was Rainer Maria Rilke.

In 1938, there were some three million German-speakers living in Bohemia and Moravia, nearly a third of the population, and around 120,000 Jews. Both had been there for centuries, almost as long as the Czechs themselves. But Germans murdered the Jews – the names of 77,297 of them are inscribed on the walls of Prague's Pinkas Synagogue – and almost all who survived the Holocaust emigrated. After the Second World War, Czechs expelled the Germans. Listening to the music, it is easy to forget the price that has to be paid sometimes for realising national dreams. **RM**

ART KOWALSKY, ALAMY/CORBIS



Water feature: Prague's many bridges, including the famous Charles Bridge with its many statues, span the Vltava River, which overflowed its banks spectacularly in 2002

Quick guide to musical Bohemia

How to get there

Czech Airlines, British Airways, bmibaby and Easyjet fly from London to Prague, the capital of Bohemia and of the modern-day Czech Republic. Czech Airlines flies to the Moravian capital of Brno; alternatively, it's a two-hour train journey from Vienna or three hours from Prague.

Prague

Many of Prague's musical landmarks are within walking distance of the Old Town Square, the city's historic heart. This includes the Rudolfinum, or 'House of Artists', the home of the Prague Spring Festival and one of several theatres located along the Vltava River. Just below the Charles Bridge is the Bedřich Smetana Museum. From here you can enjoy a fine view of the river and Prague Castle on the opposite bank. Continuing along the river on Smetanovo Nábřeží will bring you to the National Theatre, which incorporates the Provincial Theatre where Dvořák once played viola in an orchestra led by Smetana. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was premiered in 1787 at the Estates Theatre, still a fine choice for an evening of opera. The Dvořák Museum in the Villa Amerika is a tram ride away from the city centre.

Prague outskirts

A 30-minute drive from Prague takes you to Nelahozeves, where Dvořák was born (his birthplace is now a tiny museum) and where, a century earlier, Prince Lobkowitz, Beethoven's great patron, maintained his country estate. Nelahozeves Castle, which looms over the town below, is filled with paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Canaletto, Velázquez and Veronese, as well as musical treasures such as the working parts to Beethoven's Op. 18 String Quartets and first editions of the Third and Fifth Symphonies. The Lobkowitz family reacquired the castle after the fall of Communism and is restoring the building and its contents (www.lobkowitz.org). 'My Praguers understand me,' Mozart remarked after the successful performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* in Prague. Perhaps they also understood his dislike of deadlines: it's said that soprano Josefina Dušková locked him in the summer pavilion at her home, the Villa Bertramka, so he would finish *Don Giovanni*. The Villa contains a Mozart museum (www.bertramka.cz).

Moravia

Many travellers to the Czech Republic don't have Moravia on their agendas, but they should. Moravia offers gorgeous countryside and historic towns (such as Telč with its Renaissance-style central square), and it was the birthplace of many artists, including Janáček. In this jubilee year of his birth, there have been festivals in Brno and in his birthplace of Hukvaldy. There's a Janáček museum in Moravia's capital, Brno, where you'll also find Mahenovo Divadlo (Mahen Theatre) where Janáček operas from *Katya Kabanova* onwards received their first performances.

Festivals

Prague Spring Festival (12 May–3 June every year): www.festival.cz
International Music Festival Janáček in Hukvaldy (26 June–12 Aug 2004): www.janackovy-hukvaldy.cz/enfest.htm
Prague Autumn (12 Sept–1 Oct 2004): www.pragueautumn.cz