

The mystery of the night and evocations of a wild forest combine in an immanent presence, symbiotic with the woodland inhabitants. Sinister demonic beings come to life with lugubrious and supernatural trembling; we have a huntsmen's chorus, folksongs, the force of love and a tragic epilogue announcing devastating consequences. This concentration of unashamedly romantic *topoi* (settings) in Weber's *Freischütz* (The Marksman) blends well into the popular themes of that cultural setting, and is in fact one of its most successful expressions. Briefly, Max, the gamekeeper, in order to gain his beloved Agathe, makes a pact with Kaspar, the force of evil, who gives him magic bullets so he can win a shooting contest. After a series of successful shots the last bullet, however, is sent off track by the faithless Zamiel, and kills Kaspar. Thanks to Agathe and a hermit, however, Max is forgiven for his wickedness. This manifesto of poetic style, a basic Germanic national theme in the spirit of Hoffmann, Jean Paul and Novalis, the *Freischütz* influenced

musicians such as Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner.

It was first performed in Berlin on 18 June 1821; Beethoven, who saw it in Vienna, immediately insisted he was an ardent admirer of the outstanding composition, which the Overture summarizes adroitly, with brilliant instrumentation. The luxuriant use of timbre, lovely melodies and harmony, using horns and trumpet calls to suggest the forest setting, and the scene in the Wolf's Glen, combine to create an extraordinary atmosphere. There are swift mood changes, alarming phrases, excited bursts, even reminiscences of Italian opera, all the way to the jubilant epilogue, its incandescent atmosphere reminding us of the brilliant – and successful – *Invitation to the Dance*.

For a series of banal reasons, Beethoven's *Concerto in C major for piano and orchestra op. 15* (the same clear-sounding key as Mozart's *Concerto K 503*

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No. 1

, when in fact he had already composed one in

B flat

that came out as

No. 2

Opus 15

was written in 1795-98; and almost certainly the composer himself performed it in Prague in October 1798, though he modified it slightly for the Vienna première at the Burgtheater, on 2 April 1800. Trumpets and drums give the Concerto a military tone – in line with the fashion to which Mozart paid his respects in his

K 503

– evident from the first bars of the flowing Allegro. The soloist brings in the piano theme, falling in with the joyful mood, echoing revolutionary songs, and the bravura passages are striking, although there are occasional moments of "intimate reflection". In the solemn key of B flat major – like the slow movement of the

Pathetic Sonata

– the melodious Largo opens up new, unusual vistas, although the language is still classical. Extrovert, folksy and humorous, the clever Finale, with its cheerful dance rhythms, carries us enthusiastically away. Schindler, a keen "follower" of Beethoven, found that «the Maestro is

frightening when he's so happy». Whenever something emerges unexpectedly it shocks us: here we have sudden shifting accents, broken octaves in the murky bass, and above all a Latin-American samba-like sound, a century and a half ahead of its time! But there are magic moments too – after the cadenza with its obligatory trill, one last disenchanting theme is tossed nonchalantly in less than 12 bars from the end. Prodigious to say the least...

Dvořák is mainly popular on account of his “cinematographic” *New World Symphony* even though this

Eighth

is in no way inferior in its richness and spontaneous invention. Its luminous freshness is certainly one secret of its appeal. Drafted in September 1889 in the quiet country setting of Vysoká, it was completed in Prague that winter and the composer himself conducted it on 2 February 1890, at the Rudolfinum. Two months later he dedicated the Symphony to the Bohemian Academy of Science, Arts and Literature, in gratitude for being elected a member. The London publisher Novello printed it in 1892.

Woven from enchanting folk themes, the *Eighth* starts with a sort of sad priestly chorale, but the woodwinds soon come in, giving the Allegro an effervescent, optimistic profile. The second theme is thoughtful, gentle and calm but again the whole orchestra soon gathers force, its loud excitement underscoring the joviality of the Allegro. Then things quieted down again, back to the initial serenity, before the triumphant *coda*.

The Adagio is the true emotional core, “enigmatic and magnificent” with its rhapsodic tone, shifting pace and gentle *pizzicati*, charmingly alternating gentle accents with subtle ripples, singing phrases with rousing peaks. Catchy rhythms and robust chords move easily alongside a languid appeal from the violin.

The Allegretto is an amorous waltz, its gentle flow bringing to mind the *Serenade for Strings op. 22*, and the *Dumka in Q*

uintet op. 81

. The final Allegro, in contrast, sets out immediately as a chivalrous fanfare. Slav dances lend it vital energy, and there is even a rough march harking back to 18

th century Turkish modes. The closing feast of spectacular sonority and exuberance is the landmark of the

Eighth

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