



Czech Philharmonic

## Performances with Semyon Bychkov Czech Repertoire

*"After the death of the orchestra's chief conductor Jiří Bělohlávek, the management of the Czech Philharmonic was faced with a difficult question: whom would they choose in place of that irreplaceable person? Management and the players were in agreement: it would be Semyon Bychkov, who is enormously experienced with orchestras around the world, an acclaimed opera conductor, and above all a superb musician and a demanding professional who is a guarantee that the quality of the leading Czech orchestra will not fade. But what good would there be in high standards and professionalism without empathy, kindness, and a deeply humane approach to the orchestral players? That fact that Semyon Bychkov has these qualities in abundance will perhaps be clear even just from the interview that follows."*

OperaPlus, 28 November 2017

Although the opening concert of the Czech Philharmonic's new season is still a week away, the orchestra's new Chief Conductor and Music Director Semyon Bychkov introduced himself for the first time in that position on Wednesday to a completely packed Dvořák Hall at the Rudolfinum. The concert for the 100th anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia was the best opportunity to show how the foreign chief conductor – a native of Russia who emigrated to the West in 1975 – will fare in the Czech repertoire for which the Czech Philharmonic is primarily known. The public's enthusiasm and the encores showed that Bychkov is equally "at home" interpreting Czech classics, which represent the core of the orchestra's repertoire. Followed the Czech national anthem, he conducted works by Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák and Bohuslav Martinů with reverence but still in his own way, and the result was remarkable...

Novinky, 4 October 2018

### DVOŘÁK Cello Concerto

New York, East Lansing, Ann Arbor – October-November 2018

On Oct 30, one of the world's greatest conductors, Semyon Bychkov, and the Czech Philharmonic came to the Wharton Center to play music that courses through their veins — Antonín Dvořák's Cello Concerto and "New World" Symphony. The music-making was grand, delicate, precise and passionate, and it was a homecoming of sorts for Bychkov, who led the Grand Rapids symphony from 1980, when he was fresh out of school, to 1985.

Lansing City Pulse, 27 December 2018

The Cello Concerto was the most consistent and stunning performance of the night [in Ann Arbor]... From the bold opening moments of the first movement to the triumphant conclusion of the unexpectedly slow finale, this was a masterful performance by an Orchestra in prime performance.

Michigan Daily, 4 November 2018

What does it mean when on the 100th anniversary of a country's independence is national orchestra is thousands of miles from home performing for strangers? Well, one thing it suggests is that the ensemble has ambitions beyond its borders. And if that orchestra happens to be the Czech Philharmonic – whose compatriots celebrated their nation's centenary on Sunday – those aspirations are legitimate... the conductor and Orchestra did not disappoint [in Dvořák's Cello Concerto at Carnegie Hall]. Mr. Bychkov has always been a detail man. Here, he supervised delicate balances between the woodwinds and brasses, ensuring that various instrumental voices could be heard without strain. And the group's ability to chart subtly a vast dynamic expanse was all the more gratifying because of the generally brawny nature of its sound. Not that elegance was lacking in either the concerto or in Dvořák's sublime Symphony No. 7, whose dance-like third movement benefited hugely from the feathery string tones Mr. Bychkov elicited... Deep feeling was conveyed solely through musical excellence and restraint.

Wall Street Journal, 31 October 2018

Mr. Bychkov was quick to establish the robust sound of this Orchestra, with fat horns and sonorous heavy brass that in turn supported a lush and rolling carpet of sounds [in Dvořák's Cello Concerto at Carnegie Hall].

Super-Conductor, 30 October 2018

With Maestro Bychkov, and an Orchestra that has Dvořák in their bones, this was a performance [Dvořák's Cello Concerto at Carnegie Hall] from all that could not be improved...

Oberon's Grove, 29 October 2018



Bychkov and the Czech players were warmly supportive throughout [of Alisa Weilerstein in Dvořák's Cello Concerto], providing a wonderfully refined introduction [in New York]. The clarinets were especially impressive in the opening theme, as were the flutes in the cadenza-like section of the Adagio. The Finale was full of enthusiasm, and the melancholic slow episode, just before the close, was touchingly handled...

Classical Source, 27 October 2018

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## DVOŘÁK Symphony No. 7

Prague, London, New York, Washington, Costa Mesa, San Francisco –  
October-November 2018

Czech Philharmonic weaves Czech magic over Davies Hall. The venerable Czech Philharmonic came to Davies Symphony Hall again last night, with a simple program. In the splendid execution of the concert, however, the event became simply grand. Returning after successful appearances here in 2000 and 2003, the orchestra had its biggest night... In addition to the Philharmonic's sensational string sections [in Dvořák's Seventh Symphony] (violins and basses especially shining in the Allegro, cellos have their way in the finale), woodwinds and brass joined in the grand oceanic sweeps of the music brilliant. Many memorable orchestral solos included the horns and oboes.

San Francisco Classical Voice, 12 November 2018

Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic show off vibrant partnership in first joint San Francisco visit. Sometimes it happens that a friend will begin a new romantic relationship. And the first time you see them together, you immediately think, "*Good Lord, they're perfect for one another.*" Some reaction along these lines seemed entirely appropriate during the magnificently fine concert given on Sunday... The goal, quite obviously, was to show off the artistic results of this pairing, and honestly you couldn't help being happy for everyone concerned. This sounded like a match made in heaven... In the gorgeously dark-hued account of the Seventh Symphony that occupied the second half of the program, the orchestra provided sumptuous instrumental textures – the strings, yet again, sounding plush but slightly tempestuous in the first movement – and Bychkov channeled them into a reading of marvelous urgency and refinement.

San Francisco Chronicle, 12 November 2018

Semyon Bychkov is an exceptional conductor, and he seemed to draw out effortlessly the warmth of tone and the easy charm of phrasing for which the Czech Philharmonic has long been famous... for this concert [in Costa Mesa], I observed a happy combination of keen direction, right repertoire and old instruments passed down from generations: the liquid-silver flutes, the rustic horns, the warmly articulate strings with just the right amount of vibrato and old-fashioned portamento that gave a sublime ending to the Seventh Symphony's *Poco adagio*... Two glowing encores, Dvořák's *Slavonic Dance* and Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5, guaranteed the unforgettable sound of the Czech Philharmonic would remain in the audience's ears and minds work weeks to come.

Classical Voice, 9 November 2018

Eight Czech double basses made a more contained and modulated sound at Duke's Hall [in London's Royal Academy of Music]. Yet they were not, I take it, trying to prove anything, merely content to give Bychkov the balanced and supremely idiomatic rendering of Dvořák's Cello Concerto and Symphony No. 7 he indubitably secured. Conducting is always a mysterious art, and certainly so on this occasion, when Bychkov, with no special emphases one was aware of, contrived to make his large, lustrous forces sound deeply and meticulously satisfying in the confined space. Here the music simply stole upon one, and our closeness to the players meant the bonus of immediacy and vibrancy, never claustrophobia. The dazzling vigour of high violins at the symphony's end remains in my mind, as also the cellos' lovely but unselfconscious pointing of their big-tune rhythm at earlier stages of the finale... The concert had a political importance as a celebration of Czech-British cultural co-operation – Czech cabinet members were present and their prime minister made a speech – but this was nicely epitomised by the music itself, for both Dvořák works were premièred in London, the symphony being a Royal Philharmonic Society commission.

The Sunday Times, 4 November 2018

Czech Philharmonic showcases musical birthright... the Philharmonic has maintained its distinctive Eastern European sound, particularly in its earthy incisive strings and piquant, birdlike woodwinds. The keeper of this flame is the Philharmonic's new Russian Music Director, Semyon Bychkov, one of the finest conductors working today... Bychkov's mastery of symphonic structure and scale proved a better match for Dvořák's Seventh Symphony. With his darkly atmospheric strings and richly characterized winds, Bychkov built each movement with supple lines and a sweeping sense of musical development. Especially moving were the impassioned climax of the slow movement and the delightfully, then frighteningly, off-kilter scherzo.

The Washington Post, 30 October 2018

It is [Dvořák's Symphony No.7] a truly great Symphony... And the Czech Philharmonic plays it better than anyone. The glowing strings, warm brass, and the obvious love they have for this music are



incomparable... It's not just love for the music, it's pride in the music. It is impossible to replicate anywhere else.  
Oberon's Grove, 29 October 2018

This magisterial rendering confirmed that Dvořák accomplished his goal [in his Symphony No. 7]. Bychkov drew out all of the score's depth, harmonic daring and structural intricacy, distinguished by a mysterious opening, an eloquent Poco adagio, a sparkling Scherzo, and a Finale with tremendous impetus.  
Classical Source, 27 October 2018

The real test came the evening before the *Resurrection* when the Philharmonic presented the Cello Concerto and Seventh Symphony of Dvořák... Rest assured, this is still the Czech Philharmonic of warm strings, penetrating brasses and fleet-footed danciness. But it does have a slight Russian accent under Mr. Bychkov's direction. The orchestra's sound may be a bit more international these days, but its players are still the masters of their own country... Let's hope that, under Mr. Bychkov, we don't have to wait another four years to here them hear again.  
The New York Times, 26 October 2018

The Rudolfinum offers intimacy and rounded acoustics, at least from my place in the parterre at a concert on 19 October. Bychkov drew at times lick phrases from the Orchestra during Dvořák's Seventh Symphony but also new ehnn to pull back and let the principals take the lead. Strings brought not just a rich tone but also striking conviction to the brooding opening movement... n the final movement, the orchestra generated an overall sound of both brightness and depth. Bychkov created great tension and drew incisive attacks from the strings and brass in the final stretch.  
Classical Voice North America, 26 October 2018

Bychkov has the measure of this masterwork's [Dvořák's Symphony No. 7] economy and tautness, and yet the music is so outgoing and impassioned, full of wonderful ideas and Bohemian characteristics, seized upon by the Czech Phil with ardency and many a bucolic reference. If the minority clappers again interfered between movements, there is no denying the closeness between Bychkov and the Czechs (their Tchaikovsky series for Decca has started fabulously, *Pathétique* and *Manfred* so far), made manifest in so many expressive subtleties.  
Classical Source, 24 October 2018

Bychkov wishes to emphasise the Czech classics, but he also wishes to promote modern music. The Orchestra played [Dvořák's Symphony No.7] with verve and lyricism, and it clearly saw eye to eye with its new Chief Conductor.  
iDNES, 18 October 2018

Chief Conductor Semyon Bychkov led the orchestra without sentimentality or attempts at exaggerated lyricism. The Symphony [No. 7] proceeded without haste, but straight ahead with a nearly fateful inexorability. Already in the first movement one was again vividly reminded of how much Dvořák shares in common with Brahms... Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic emphasised this Brahmsian aspect and played Dvořák like a first-class, single-minded Romanticist.  
Aktulane, 17 October 2018

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## DVOŘÁK Symphony No. 9

Essen – February 2019

Chicago – November 2018

Prague – June 2018; October 2018

The new Chief Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic, Semyon Bychkov, ensured that the music making [in Essen] was both passionate and dramatically alert with his calm and assured style of conducting... Bychkov concluded with Dvořák's Symphony *From the New World*, like a giant icing on a cake. With its "swing low" theme, the elegiac woodwind solo of the cor anglais like pearls on a silver platter, the velvety-soft horns stirred up the drama of the outer movements. Not American, but Bohemian through and through!  
Neue Ruhr Zeitung, 4 February 2019

Working together, conductor and orchestra moved from intensity to a dreamlike quality with each section of the orchestra adding their expertise [in Dvořák's Ninth Symphony in Chicago]... A wonderful concert. Those who have the opportunity to see this orchestra on tour will be richly rewarded.  
Splash Magazine, 6 November 2018

A warm-up session of sorts was held a week before the season opener, with a special concert celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia... Bychkov delivered a magisterial version of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony. Working without a score, he struck a balance between creating his own colors and phrasing in some sections, and basically getting out of the way in others. No one plays the woodwinds in this piece like the Czechs, and those passages in the second movement were breathtakingly beautiful. Highlighted by the bold brass and thunder Bychkov brought to the opening and closing movements, it was a thrilling interpretation with an



international flavor – still unmistakably Czech in its emotional underpinning, but broader in its horizons, with some of the fire more typical of Russian music.

Bachtrack, 12 October 2018

The highpoint of the evening was the New World Symphony by Dvořák . . . in his hands, the orchestra gave a perfect performance of this rigorously structured work. Especially deserving of mention were the outstanding solos by the English horn, flute, and clarinet players.

Novinky, 4 October 2018

The last subscription concert of the Czech Philharmonic's season was really symbolic. In a gesture of recognition, the future Chief Conductor presented a work that is more closely associated to the Orchestra than any other: Dvořák's New World Symphony. Semyon Bychkov's interpretation showed that in conducting one of the world's best-known compositions, he deferred to national traditions. This was heard first and foremost in the choice of tempi and, in his respect for the classic form. Bychkov's interpretation however was a little more dramatic and, one might say darker. On Wednesday, 20 June, Bychkov's final concentrated gesture demanded silence before he bowed to the Orchestra. The audience responded with enormous enthusiasm.

Harmonie, 22 June 2018

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## FIŠER Double Concerto

Washington – November 2018

Prague – December 2017

Written in 1969, Czech composer Fišer's "*Double for Orchestra*" opened the concert... a perfect encapsulation of an orchestra suspended between its past and future.

The Washington Post, 30 October 2018

This humorous [Fišer's *Double*] but short composition is cleverly and colourfully orchestrated (it even has a solo part for piano, played by the orchestra's excellent pianist Václav Mácha), and both the orchestra and its chief conductor Semyon Bychkov obviously enjoyed it...

Harmonie, 22 December 2017

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## MARTINŮ Double Concerto

Prague – October 2018; December 2017

Of the three items on the evening's programme, it was the Double Concerto that came off the best and the most powerfully for Semyon Bychkov. The strings of the orchestra were divided physically into two camps standing visibly opposed to each other, and they played with great commitment and intensity, the pianist Ivo Kahánek added a fiery approach with devotion to the music to the overall sound, and above them the timpanist Michael Kroutil dominated the stage...

KlasikaPlus, 4 October 2018

In the serious and shadowy second movement, the players deftly alternated the immense, dense passages with sections that sounded more transparent...

Harmonie, 22 December 2017

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## SMETANA *The Bartered Bride Overture*

London, BBC Proms – September 2019

Prague & London – October 2018

The Czech Philharmonic was on splendid form and the relationship with its new Music Director appeared to work like a charm. The acoustics of Albert Hall are well known to be treacherous, but Bychkov and the Orchestra worked wonders with orchestral balance and clarity, without losing an iota of nerve and enthusiasm. The Smetana selection had nerve and enthusiasm in abundance. In the Overture, the flexible articulation in the strings was perfect with a beautiful edge to the wood. The subsequent polka was magnificent with an effective and elegant rubato, a contagious rhythmic impulse for the Furiant and a thrilling final dance. Smetana's works were contagious and came across with joyful enthusiasm.

Scherzo, 13 September 2019

Whether due to Brexit blues or BBC budgets, this year's Proms have featured a smaller parade than usual of the greatest foreign orchestras. But one indisputably great band was on blazing form on Tuesday evening as it launched the final week of the Proms: 50 years since it first appeared at the festival, the Czech Philharmonic was making one of its periodic visits, this time in exciting partnership with its new music director, Semyon Bychkov. Where else to begin but with the



overture and dances from *The Bartered Bride*? Smetana's masterpiece is a cornerstone of the rich Czech operatic repertoire, and this music proved a good showcase for the orchestra's deep culture and cultivated sound. Bychkov may have a reputation for staid tempos, but here they felt just right and well sprung, allowing the strings room for their articulation and all the players breathing space to enjoy the music.

The Daily Telegraph, 12 September 2019

This orchestra normally treads lighter in the exhilarating overture, but for the three jolly interludes that followed, Bychkov found his dancing shoes and we were happily whirled along.

The Times, 12 September 2019

It's a given that the return of that curtain-raiser Smetana's *Bartered Bride* Overture should fizz with the woodwinds in the Czech Philharmonic's traversal helmed by Semyon Bychkov, now their principal conductor from last October. You can tell how their years together meld the sharp palette of this orchestra to Bychkov's long-breathed gambits. Though not here just yet. The Smetana Overture and the following dances, a polka, furiante, and a circus polka on speed boast a tang and burnish a depth of engagement that's infectious and sweeping. I doubt whether we've heard it this disinhibited yet drum-tight for years.

Fringe Review, 12 September 2019

Few things are musically more uplifting than hearing a fine foreign orchestra playing its own national heritage. The Czech Philharmonic plays with an exceptionally incisive string sound and the technique with which they played Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* overture and three dances was stunning: all those delicious rhythms caught with glittering, percussive precision particularly in the third dance. Semyon Bychkov, who beats time quite simply and has his orchestra traditionally seated, certainly knows how to make Czech music sing. It made a delightful concert opener.

Lark Reviews, 11 September 2019

Joining the end-of-Proms beauty parade of visiting orchestra, the Czech Philharmonic and its Chief Conductor of barely one year, Semyon Bychkov, arrived not so much as an international brand as a bottomless well of instantly discernible national character, style, strength and delicacy that breaks boundaries. Shostakovich, for whom irony was a protective veil, would have appreciated the programming – zesty Czech humour and one of the further extremes of intensely Russian emotionalism heading towards one of the darkest stars in the symphonic universe.

In terms of anticipating mischief and sharp wit, Smetana's Overture to *The Bartered Bride* is up there with Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the Czech players delivered it with incomparable high spirits, affection and panache, before further kicking up their heels in the three Dances Smetana added later. The playing and unmistakable Czech sound were so infectious that the Prom could have stayed in that vein for the whole evening.

Classical Source, 11 September 2019

Is it too early to coin the phrase "the Bychkov effect"?... But this concert, a repeat of last week's season opener in Prague, was all about the power of the live performance, something that even the most accomplished recording engineer cannot fully achieve. With striking contrasts between the two halves, Bychkov brought us the spice of life, unabashed romance and the bitterness of human survival, all through Czech and Russian eyes. In short, this concert packed quite a punch. Despite having a more international sound these days, it was pleasing to hear that the Czech Philharmonic has still retained its characteristic warmth, lyricism and rawness, displayed here with exceptional prowess, and that it has also kept steadfastly close to its roots. Opening with Smetana... at once, you could see that the players were as animated as the conductor – always a good sign.

Bachtrack, 11 September 2019

The tradition of playing Czech works by Czech orchestras is a strong one, and represented here by a commanding Overture and three dances from Smetana's *Bartered Bride*. A miraculous combination of full string sound and accuracy from the downbeat characterised Bychkov's Overture, taken fast but at a speed that allowed everything to speak joyously. The bucolic element was there, strongly, in the bassoon 'drone' below piping woodwind. Peppering the opera's three acts are the three dances heard here, an active Polka, a full-sunshine Furiant and that encore-favourite, the 'Dance of the Comedians', with its perfectly accurate trumpets and startling timpani shots.

Seen and Heard International, 11 September 2019

Semyon Bychkov was a surprising choice to take over the Czech Philharmonic last year, a conductor with few obvious connections to Czech music. But on the strength of this visit to the Proms, they make a good team. Bychkov communicates fluently with the players, conveying power and passion, and detail too, but without any overt theatrics at the podium. The Czech Philharmonic has a burnished tone, well projected and filling the Albert Hall, but more with colour than with weight. There is an elegant and lyrical flow to everything the strings play, which Bychkov is able to harness and shape. The woodwinds are sometimes reedy but always have plenty of character. And the brass can sound nasal, but deliver punch when required. But the defining virtue of the Czech Philharmonic sound is delicacy, a kind of fragility or reticence that adds an extra expressive dimension, and proves as valuable in Shostakovich as it does in Smetana.

The Arts Desk, 11 September 2019



The Czech Philharmonic and about thirty students from the Royal Academy of Music played both national anthems and the overture to the Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride*. The students had been chosen for the side-by-side project; this was the first such undertaking with a world-class orchestra in the school's history. This is now being done in many places, and it is not at all a bad idea. The students seated themselves as partners at certain desks in the string section and with some of the woodwind and brass players. Smetana's score sounded wonderful, played at a sufficiently lively tempo and with enough precision. The Czech Philharmonic players carried it off with their younger colleagues, and one could hear nothing amiss.

KlasikaPlus, 25 October 2018

The Czech Philharmonic brought its distinctive sound and patriotic pride to the Duke's Hall [in London]. No better indigenous start than the Overture to Smetana's *Bartered Bride*, articulate rather than frenzied from Semyon Bychkov, pointed rather than with details glossed over, the music skipping buoyantly along...

Classical Source, 24 October 2018

The hall first resounded with the overture to Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride*, followed by three dances from the same opera: *Polka*, *Furiant*, and *Skočná*. The conductor Semyon Bychkov accentuated the sharpness and brilliance Smetana's orchestration, chose moderate tempos, and emphasized the excellence of the orchestra's ensemble playing.

OperaPlus, 4 October 2018

This, of course, does not change the fact that the intimately familiar, joyous music [in Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* Overture] had reliably just the right energy, inducing patriotic and purely personal, pleasant emotions, and that at the beginning of the evening it served its positive, celebratory purpose.

KlasikaPlus, 4 October 2018

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## SMETANA *Má vlast*

Prague – October 2019

The performance was sharp, the coordination precise and the solos lovely.

Hudobný život, December 2019

Only a couple of years ago, I would not have believed that the Czech Philharmonic would ever achieve such a slender and sometimes virtuosic string sound, rhythmically spot on even in the round acoustics of the Rudolfinum... Bychkov achieved an interesting intensity of expression... For thirty years, people have been pointing out that the composition should be freed from pathos, made lighter and clearer. But still, when listening to somebody really pursuing this idea, we are always a bit surprised. *Má vlast* is surrounded not only by many interpretation clichés but maybe even more journalistic ones. Let me mention one of them, that is when people talk about the Czech tradition represented by Talich-Ančerl or Neumann-Bělohlávek. There are so many differences between Talich and Ančerl that many people and musicians never accepted Ančerl in the 1960s. And the difference between aging and generous Neumann, and young and perfectionistic Bělohlávek was so big that the musicians decided to get rid of the young conductor in the early 1990s... Bychkov dared to go back to the basis of *Má vlast* and build his interpretation on a more thorough scrutiny of the autograph. There is a lot of hidden potential in energy and devotion, promising that the interpretation will mature and change with every single concert, allowing us to uncover the meaning of our interpretation tradition from a different point of view.

Harmonie, 11 October 2019

The conductor respected the best from the interpretation tradition he also tried to reshape, aiming for more emotion, singing quality and grace: as such, the solos were brilliant.

iDnes, 10 October 2019