

LEOŠ JANÁČEK

Born July 3, 1854 in Hukvaldy, Moravia, Czechoslovakia; died August 12, 1928 in Ostrava

Taras Bulba, Rhapsody for Orchestra (1915-1918)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Brno, October 9, 1921

Brno National Theater Orchestra

František Neumann, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 23 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat and two B-flat clarinets, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, organ and strings

By 1914, the Habsburg dynasty had ruled central Europe for over six centuries. Rudolf I of Switzerland, the first of the Habsburgs, confiscated Austria and much surrounding territory in 1276, made them hereditary family possessions in 1282, and, largely through shrewd marriages with far-flung royal families, the Habsburgs thereafter gained control over a vast empire that at one time stretched from the Low Countries to the Philippines and from Spain to Hungary. By the mid-19th century, following the geo-political upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars, the Habsburg dominions had shrunk to the present territories of Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, a considerable reduction from earlier times but still a huge expanse of land encompassing a great diversity of national characteristics. The eastern countries continued to be dissatisfied with their domination by the Viennese monarchy, however, and the central fact of the history of Hungary and the Czech lands during the 19th century was their striving toward independence from the Habsburgs. The Dual Monarchy of 1867 allowed the eastern lands a degree of autonomy, but ultimate political and fiscal authority still rested with Emperor Franz Joseph and his court in Vienna. It was not until 1918, following the ravages of World War I, that the centuries-long Habsburg rule over central Europe finally came to an end.

Leoš Janáček was among those many Czechs at the turn of the twentieth century who longed for freedom for their native land from the Habsburgs. The son of a village schoolmaster, Janáček became a chorister in Brno at age eleven before going to Prague, Vienna and Leipzig for advanced musical training. He did much to further the musical life of his country, founding the Brno Philharmonic Society in 1881 and later serving as professor at the Prague Conservatory. In addition, Janáček not only gave much time to collecting folk music, which he considered an indispensable component of his country's national character, but he also developed a specifically Czech vocal style based on the sounds, rhythms and inflections of the local spoken dialects, comparable to that achieved by Mussorgsky in Russia. (The opera *Jenůfa* — his first international success, at age 50, in 1904 — solidified his unique style, and was followed by a remarkable series of stage works that contain some of the most powerful music drama ever conceived: *Katya Kabanova*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *The Makropoulos Affair* and *From the House of the Dead*.) Just as he wanted a music free from Germanic domination, so Janáček wanted his country politically free from the Habsburgs. He believed that this end could best be accomplished by an alliance of all the Slavic peoples led by Russia since, as he wrote in a letter to his friend Richard Vesely, "In the whole world there are to be found neither fires nor tortures strong enough to destroy the vitality of the Russian nation." Soon after war broke out in 1914, Janáček, then sixty years old, expressed his sympathy for the Russians who were fighting the Germans and their Austrian allies by creating a three-movement symphonic poem. He based his work on episodes from Nikolai Gogol's 1839 novel about the heroic Taras Bulba, who led the Zaporozhye Cossacks, the warlike people of the lower Don River valley who were frequently utilized by Russian rulers in the late Middle Ages for their prowess as fighters, in a victorious battle against the Poles in 1628. Janáček began the piece in 1915, but, as was usual for him, work went slowly and the score was not completed until Good Friday, March 29, 1918. It was to be another three years before it was performed; František Neumann conducted the Brno National Theater Orchestra in the premiere of *Taras Bulba* on October 9, 1921.

The three movements of *Taras Bulba*, which depict Taras killing his own son for betraying his people (*The Death of Andri*), the martyrdom of his second son (*The Death of Ostap*), and his own execution and vision of ultimate victory and the coming of a great Czar to rule all the Russians (*The Prophecy and Death of Taras Bulba*), are dramatic in form, and follow closely the narrative of Gogol's story.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda