

## BEDŘICH SMETANA

Born March 2, 1824 in Leitomischl, Bohemia; died May 12, 1884 in Prague

### *Šárka* from *Má Vlast* ("My Country") (1875)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Prague, December 10, 1876

Prague Philharmonic Orchestra

Adolf Čech, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 11 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

It is one of the great ironies in 19th century music that Smetana conceived the first melody for *Má Vlast* ("My Country"), the splendid cycle of six tone poems inspired by the land and lore of his native Bohemia, at the same time he lost his hearing. Had he not been able to look to the example of the deaf Beethoven, he might well have abandoned this work, but he pressed on and completed *Vyšehrad* by November 1874 and immediately began *The Moldau*, which was finished in less than three weeks, on December 8th. *Šárka* dates from 1875; *From Bohemia's Woods and Meadows* was composed between June 3rd and October 18th of the same year; *Tábor* was finished in 1878 and *Blaník* in 1879. The first complete performance of *Má Vlast*, on November 2, 1882 in Prague (the cycle is dedicated to the city of Prague), was the occasion for a patriotic rally, and, like Sibelius' great national hymn *Finlandia*, this music has since become an emblem of its country's national pride. *Má Vlast* is the traditional music played every year on May 12th, the anniversary of Smetana's death, to open the Prague Spring Festival.

Of the third movement of *Má Vlast*, the composer noted, "This poem depicts the story of *Šárka*. It begins with the enraged *Šárka* [one of the girls at the court of the Přemysl, the founding family of Bohemia, who rebelled at being ruled by men after the death of Queen Libuše] swearing vengeance on the whole male race for the infidelity of her lover. From afar is heard the arrival of armed men led by Ctirad, who has come to punish *Šárka* and her rebellious maidens. In the distance, Ctirad hears the feigned cries of a girl (*Šárka*) bound to a tree. On seeing her, he is overcome by her beauty and so inflamed with love that he frees her. By means of a previously prepared potion, she intoxicates Ctirad and his men, who fall asleep. As she sounds her horn (a pre-arranged signal), the rebel maidens, hidden in nearby rocks, rush to commit the bloody deed. The horror of general slaughter and the passion and fury of *Šárka's* fulfilled revenge form the end of the composition."

*Šárka*, the most graphically detailed movement of *Má Vlast*, is divided into five continuous, almost cinematic, sequences. The first section (marked "with fire" in the score) portrays the fury of the avowed manhater. Next comes a swaggering march to accompany the entry of Ctirad and his knights. A solo clarinet intones the duplicitous cry of *Šárka*, to which Ctirad (solo cello) gives an impassioned response as he loosens her bonds. An episode of warmly lyrical music suggests Ctirad's wooing of the cunning maid before a soft, trilled string chord introduces the scherzo-like fourth section, which depicts the drunken revels of the warriors. *Šárka's* philter has its effect, and the festive music dies away as the men fall asleep (the low C's on the bassoon suggest their snoring). *Šárka* sounds her horn and exhorts her followers (another clarinet solo) to undertake the slaughter that fills the last chapter of this dramatic tone poem.