

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904): *In Nature's Realm*, Op.91 (1891)

In Nature's Realm is the first of a trio of concert overtures composed by Antonín Dvořák just before the Czech composer left Prague to move to the New York City in 1892. He was enticed to the United States to become director of the National Conservatory of Music of America. There he would become a fierce advocate and mentor for a new generation of American composers, whom he encouraged to create a distinct national voice. Like many Romantic nationalists, Dvořák believed that the best music was rooted in the languages, cultures, and geography shared by a people. Writing to a friend, he said "Let's hope that nations which have and represent art will never cease to exist, no matter how small they are." With the fast pace of modernization in late nineteenth-century Europe, he feared that many distinctive musical traditions were disappearing, including the folksongs of his native Bohemia and their connections to older ways of life. He wrote that "The music of the people is like a rare and lovely flower growing amidst encroaching weeds. Thousands pass it, while others trample it under foot, and thus the chances are that it will perish before it is seen by the one discriminating spirit who will prize it above all else."

Much of Dvořák's music tried to preserve the character of this disappearing music, evident in its melodic inflections, its dances, and the way the accents of the Czech language are transcribed in its rhythms. In Dvořák's mind, it was inextricably linked as well to the geography of the region and the natural environment. He owned a country house in a small village outside of Prague where he spent his summers composing and taking long walks in the woods. This sanctuary was where he composed *In Nature's Realm*, the work we hear today.

After its premiere, a reviewer raved about its evocation of the landscape: "Dvořák is a great admirer of nature and her splendour; one can only marvel at the way in which the impressions instilled in him by the enchanting serenity of the Příbram forests, are now swathed in the most exquisite musical fabric that a composer could hope to weave." Indeed, the beginning of the work feels as if we're tiptoeing through a primordial forest. We hear birdcalls and an emerging "nature" motif that resounds both high and low, evoking the tradition of Moldovian shepherds yodeling songs across long distances.