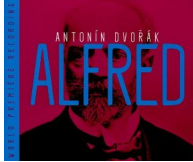


Antonin Dvorak - Alfred (2014)

Written by bluesever

Sunday, 02 September 2018 13:16 -

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Disc 1 1. *Tragic Overture, B. 16a* by *Symfonický orchestr Českého rozhlasu* 15:41 2. *Act I: Auf, auf, tapfre Gesellen zum Feste* by *Jörg Sabrowski* 8:49 3. *Act I: Hoch töne Trompetengeschmetter* by *Ferdinand von Bothmer* 9:42 4. *Act I: Geh', Alter, geh'* by *Ferdinand von Bothmer* 5:25 5. *Act I: Ballet* by *Symfonický orchestr Českého rozhlasu* 4:15 6. *Act I: Ich stehe nicht in Odins Gunst allein (Live)* by *Ferdinand von Bothmer* 7:30 Disc 2 1. *Act II: Wohl euch, ihr tapfern Streiter! (Live)* by *Felix Rumpf* 5:49 2. *Act II: Mein König! (Live)* by *Peter Mikuláš* 7:27 3. *Act II: In des Thurmes Nacht gefangen* by *Petra Froese* 5:26 4. *Act II: Was spürt ihr herum?* by *Jörg Sabrowski* 3:01 5. *Act II: Vergebens, gestrenger Gebieter* by *Tilmann Unger* 2:00 6. *Act II: Des langen Kampfes müde* by *Felix Rumpf* 8:11 7. *Act III: Sei uns willkommen, freundlicher Morgen!* by *Tilmann Unger* 3:50 8. *Act III: Alvina!* by *Tilmann Unger* 4:42 9. *Act III: Alfred und Sieg!* by *Petra Froese* 6:31 10. *Act III: Noch find' ich keine Spur von unser'm Helden* by *Tilmann Unger* 8:50 11. *Act III: Hier in festverschloss'nen Mauern* by *Ferdinand von Bothmer* 7:53 12. *Act III: Welch ein Ton? Was mag er bedeuten?* by *Petra Froese* 1:26 13. *Act III: Alfred und Sieg! Sieg!* by *Ferdinand von Bothmer* 8:42
Alvina – *Petra Froese* (soprano) Harald – *Ferdinand von Bothmer* (tenor) Alfred – *Felix Rumpf* (baritone) Gothron – *Jörg Sabrowski* (baritone) Seward – *Peter Mikuláš* (bass) Dorset / Bote – *Tilmann Unger* (tenor) Rowena – *Jarmila Baxová* (soprano) The Czech Philharmonic Choir Brno Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra Heiko Mathias Förster - conductor rec. Dvořák Hall of the Rudolfinum, Prague, Czech Republic, 16-17 September 2014

When he was writing his first opera, 29-year-old Dvorak had already been a violist with the Provisional Theatre Orchestra for eight years. Performing various operas from past and present on an almost daily basis had a major impact on his career as a composer. Moreover, during the course of the 1860s, the repertoire also began to feature important works from the Czech environment, in particular, Bedrich Smetana's *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, *The Bartered Bride* and *Dalibor*. Dvorak by that time already had a series of works from different genres to his name: symphonies, string quartets and songs, among others. Dvorak's resolve to now master the operatic form was, however, conditional upon finding a suitable libretto, which was not easy by any means: Czech librettos were few and far between and their standard was dubious to say the least. As Bedrich Smetana complained in an article: "There is a greater shortage of good

librettos than good composers". In addition, as a composer, Dvorak was still completely unknown, and he didn't have the funds to purchase a new libretto. He thus decided to use a German text written almost sixty years previously, entitled *Alfred der Grosse*, whose author was the Neo-Romantic German poet Karl Theodor Korner (1791-1813). The libretto, which is set somewhere in England in the year 878, during the war between the English and the Danes, had already been set to music in the past by Johann Philip Schmidt, Josef Joachim Raff and Friedrich von Flotow, and apparently Ludwig van Beethoven had also expressed an interest in the material even prior to this. The same story was also set to music by Gaetano Donizetti, however, his *Alfredo il Grande* is written to a different text. This is the only time that Dvorak wrote music to a German libretto and, if he initially thought of staging his work at the Czech Provisional Theatre, he may have assumed that the libretto would be translated into Czech. This practice wasn't at all unusual at that time, as in the case of operas by Skroup or Skuhersky; even the libretto for Smetana's *Libuse* was originally written in German.

In the libretto the story was originally arranged into seven tableaux, but Dvorak separated the first of these and combined others to create three acts. The musical setting was greatly influenced by Dvorak's special – and, at that time, still considerably uncritical – interest in Wagner's music. The score for *Alfred* bears a series of traits typical of the Bayreuth Master: copious use of leitmotifs, a compact orchestral setting, and "endless", richly modulating melodies. When the opera was first staged many years later, the critics even noted that "the score of *Alfred* is more Wagnerian than Wagner; Dvorak's submission to his great example is here almost unqualified in its sincerity". The work may be seen as formally fragmented and indistinctive in terms of expression, yet it is nevertheless a promising demonstration of the composer's sense of the impact of choral scenes and the full orchestral sound. We will note an interesting compositional detail in the leitmotif characterising King Alfred, which is almost identical to the melody of the *De Geyter Internationale*. However, neither of the composers could have "copied" this tune: Pierre De Geyter only wrote his *Internationale* eighteen years later and Dvorak's opera was never performed during his lifetime.

Although the overture was performed – under the title "Tragic Overture" – for the first time within a year of the composer's death, at a Czech Philharmonic concert on 4 January 1905, listeners weren't able to hear further extracts from the work until 6 February 1938 during a German broadcast at Prague Radio. It was only in December of that year that the opera was staged in its entirety for the first time. The first – and, to date, the only – staging of *Alfred* took place in Olomouc in what was then known as the Czech Theatre. The opera was presented in a Czech translation by Anna Richterova, who also sang the role of Alvin; the production was conducted by Adolf Heller. The premiere naturally attracted a lot of attention, a number of musicians travelled to Olomouc, along with the composer's daughter Magda and son Antonin. The next (and evidently also the last) time audiences were given the chance to hear at least a cross-section of the opera occurred on the 120th anniversary of Dvorak's birth, 8 September 1961, when excerpts from the work were broadcast by Plzen Radio, performed by the Plzen Radio Orchestra conducted by Josef Blacky, featuring soloists from the Plzen Opera. The world

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premiere of the opera featuring the original German libretto was held as a concert performance on 17 September 2014 during the Dvořák Prague International Music Festival.

Even though this early Dvorak opera will never become part of the repertoire and, where the composer's operatic oeuvre is concerned, it will always be regarded as more of a rarity, it is worthy of closer examination at the very least since it gives us a greater understanding of the continuity of Dvorak's compositional development and the ideas upon which he built his compositional style during the late 1860s and early 1870s. Certain methods the composer used in this early work then thread their way through his subsequent operas, right up to his final opera, Armida. ---antonin-dvorak.cz

The early opera of Antonín Dvořák recorded here definitely falls into the historical oddity category. It's in German, not Czech, set to a libretto by a poet long dead by 1870, when the work was composed, and it is unknown why Dvořák would have undertaken such a sizable project. The subject is a British king, Alfred the Great, who also inspired the opera by Thomas Arne that contains Rule, Britannia, and even shows up in the Vikings television miniseries. Although it was primarily Brahms off whom Dvořák's deepest ideas bounced creatively, the dominant models in this opera are Wagner (or the emerging mainstream simplification of his language: those who've heard Arthur Sullivan's Ivanhoe might be reminded of that work) and, in the active use of the chorus, French grand opera. The music is ponderous in spots, and some might argue that the whole thing doesn't quite hang together, but there are also impressive passages like the 15-minute overture (it's almost as if the composer was itching to get back to instrumental music), and those interested in the early part of Dvořák's career will be interested to see how he picks apart the structure of the libretto. The work is convincingly performed by a cast of largely unknown (at least internationally) Czech and German singers, and conductor Heiko Mathias Förster and the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra keep things moving along. The live sound from the Rudolfinum (not Rudofinum, as the graphics have it) is better than expected, and the opera seems to have held the attention of the audience. Not something to rewrite the history books, and there is very little of the mature Dvořák in it, but at the same time it is of considerable interest to those who love this composer and are especially intrigued by his long years of struggle. ---James Manheim, AllMusic Review

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