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SPECIAL FEATURE
on the SECOND CELLO CONCERTO
of BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ

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Martinů worked on his second Cello Concerto over Christmas and the New Year period of 1944-45. He was by now a most mature composer with many great works, including symphonies, in his experience. Although he was at this moment living in New York, as Dvorak before him, his homeland was calling him back. One has to remember that this was the penultimate winter of World War 2, and the German occupations in Europe were crumbling.

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Martinů was forced to flee to the United States in 1940 when the German troops occupied France, the country where he had been living for a number of years. The following year he wrote his first Symphony (however, I'm sorry to say it's the symphony of his which I personally least like, but he really matured in this genre later!). Musically the composer always remained influenced by the Czech idioms, and this is ever apparent in his second concerto for 'cello.

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As just mentioned his homeland was missing in his life, and this could have been rectified by his offer of appointment, once the war had finished, as professor at the Prague Conservatory. However, Czechoslovakia now came under 'Stalin' rule, and this prevented him returning due to massive reforms of bureaucratic structures. In fact, he did not even return to Europe at all until 1953, when he was able to live in Nice for two years. There he was to write perhaps two of his most important works; the oratorio 'Gilgamesh' and the musical drama Greek 'Passion'. He again moved, first to Rome and finally in Switzerland. He died on August 28th, 1959 in Liestal near Basel.

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The first Cello Concerto has been more regularly performed, but the second has been hidden away, a bit of a mystery. Why is this?

Well, I would like to point out that firstly the first cello concerto underwent certain revisions - there are three versions in all, and I dare say that each one got better! Therefore this work was more continually under the 'interest' limelight. Also, it had some great universal masters more readily interested in it, such as Pierre Fournier. I also regard the second concerto as more difficult than the first technically, at least as far as the stamina needed to perform it to the end so that might have scared some performers!

For some reason (and I do not know why) the second concerto was not even performed in Martinů's lifetime. This was truly a great pity, because I regard it as highly attractive. It is ample in structure, with a duration of over 35 minutes in three full movements, and the solo part ever-present to a greater degree than many other concerto works - the 'tuttis' are generally not that long!

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The first movement is not especially fast, rather more a 'moderato' than an allegro. The first entrance of the soloist, not at all heroic as often is the case in cello works, would even perhaps appear to be the melodic 'second' theme with the more rhythmic section coming later (I mean to say, back-to-front to normal). The orchestral 'tuttis' are wonderful and majestic. The cello soloist has much lyrical writing containing much that is typical Martinů; higher registers, intervallic interest, and above all many double-stops! This first movement comes to a gentle rest, not being so different in length to the first movement of the Dvorak Concerto and therefore longer than many other concerto works.

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The second movement, 'Andante poco moderato', starts about as fast moving as the tempo in the first movement, or so it would seem to the listener. Once again the soloist enters lyrically. Although there is gentle propulsion there is always time to sing the faster notes. Those people who know the slow movement of the wonderful Finzi Cello Concerto will surely warm to this movement! However, later a central section is somewhat faster, with plenty of arpeggiated figures and some nice octave practice needed! Again, at about 14 minutes, this is a greatly spaced movement too, and towards the close one can find passages that appear rather like accompanied cadenzas or recitatives; real magical possibilities for our soloist in which Martinů expresses his longing for home.. There is definitely some 'Beethovenian' influence at work here too (in my opinion!).

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The final movement, Allegro, is a complete change. Yes, here finally we open with fast pulsating rhythms and enormous energy. Although a second theme is somewhat more lyrical the syncopations, triplets placed against duplets, and once again many double-stoppings abound (including what I feel is almost a reference to Piatti Caprice No.3, haha!). At around nine minutes this is easily the shortest movement, but because of the insane intensity and high speed does not appear to be the case! The heady atmosphere gains and gains momentum, until suddenly the soloist breaks off the orchestra, entering suddenly into a fully-blown solo Cadenza. This Cadenza is difficult too, perhaps with brief allusions once again to Piatti, and also almost

certainly to a romantic high-powered J.S. Bach! The orchestra enter once again as we head off into the Coda, which is of even faster pace than earlier. The wonderful conclusion is triumphant - and joyous!

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The printed edition contains a Piano reduction of the Orchestral score for rehearsal purposes.

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The soloist who premiered the work on 25th May 1965, Saša Večtomov, probably shortly afterwards recorded the piece with the Prague Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Zdeněk Košler - I think there was a re-release from 1982, and is available from Supraphon. Given its duration it was issued as a single work Vinyl LP....

In more recent times I could point you towards a recording by my English colleague soloist Raphael Wallfisch - Raphael feels close to the heart of Martinů so this is a good option too.

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I would jump at the opportunity to perform this one day. I just LOVE everything Martinů too!!!



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'documenting the cello' www.johnstone-music.com

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