Czech Philharmonic

"*Another great European ensemble, with a heritage that stretches back to 1896 when Antonín Dvořák, no less, conducted the first concert. With some legendary names among its chief conductors, the Czech Philharmonic is now in the excellent care of Semyon Bychkov, a fine conductor and someone who understands the orchestra's traditional colours and style. Their partnership has given us distinctive Tchaikovsky and just a couple of months ago an impressive Mahler Fourth - inaugurating a symphony cycle for Pentatone - enshrining playing our critic described quite simply as 'wonderful'.*"

Gramophone, Orchestra of the Year 2022 Nomination

On 4 January 1896, the 127-year-old Czech Philharmonic gave its first concert in the famed Rudolfinum Hall in the heart of Prague. Conducted by Antonin Dvořák, the programme featured the world première of his *Biblical Songs,* Nos. 1-5. Renowned for its definitive interpretations of the Czech repertoire, it also has a special relationship to the music of Brahms and Tchaikovsky – both friends of Dvořák - and to Mahler who in 1908 conducted the Orchestra in the world première of his Symphony No. 7.

Following the culmination of *The Tchaikovsky Project* in 2019 with Chief Conductor and Music Director Semyon Bychkov, Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic have turned their focus to the symphonic works of Mahler. Concerts in Prague and abroad have resulted in recordings by Czech Phil Media – the Orchestra's own state-of-the-art producing house – and in April the release of Mahler's Fourth Symphony launched the start of a new relationship with PENTATONE. Over this season, Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic will perform Mahler's Sixth and Seventh Symphonies with concerts at home in Prague, as well as on tour in Paris, Luxembourg, Vienna, Graz and Milan, as well as at the Edinburgh International and Gewandhaus Mahler Festivals.

The 2022-23 season launched with news of the extension of Bychkov's contract as Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Czech Philharmonic until 2028. The new season is Bychkov's fifth at the helm of Orchestra and one during which he will also celebrate his 70th birthday with three concerts pairing the fifth symphonies of Beethoven and Shostakovich. At the beginning of September, Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic gave the official concert to mark the Czech Republic's Presidency of the EU, before three concert performances of Dvořák's *Rusalka* as part of the Dvořákov Prague International Music Festival. The opening concerts of the Czech Philharmonic's season feature music by Beethoven and Strauss, and two of the fourteen commissions that Bychkov initiated at the start of his tenure – works by Detlev Glanert and Thierry Escaich - will receive their world premières as part of the subscription series.

The Czech Philharmonic's 127th season will also see Principal Guest Conductors Jakub Hrůša and Tomáš Netopil conduct concerts featuring music from well-known and lesser-known Czech composers including Janáček, Dvořák, Martinů, Suk, Novák, Krček and Štědroň; Sir Simon Rattle and Magdalena Kožená appear as the Orchestra's 2022-23 Artists-in-Residence; and return and debut engagements from international guest conductors including Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Daniel Harding, Giovanni Antonini, Manfred Honeck, Juanjo Mena and Maxim Emelyanychev.

The Czech Philharmonic's extraordinary and proud history reflects both its location at the very heart of Europe and the Czech Republic's turbulent political history, for which Smetana's *Má vlast* (My Homeland) has become a potent symbol. The Orchestra gave its first full rendition of *Má vlast* in a brewery in Smíchov in 1901; in 1925 under Chief Conductor Václav Talich, *Má vlast* was the Orchestra's first live broadcast and, five years later, it was the first work that the Orchestra committed to disc. During the Nazi occupation, when Goebbels demanded that the Orchestra perform in Berlin and Dresden, Talich programmed *Má vlast* as an act of defiance, while in 1945 Rafael Kubelík conducted the work as a 'concert of thanks' for the newly liberated Czechoslovakia. In 1990, *Má vlast* was Kubelík's choice to mark Czechoslovakia's first free elections, an historic event which Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic marked 30 years later with a performance of the full cycle to launch a new annual Velvet Revolution concert series. The 2022 Velvet Revolution concert will be conducted by Artist-in-Residence Sir Simon Rattle.

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Throughout the Czech Philharmonic's history, two features have remained at its core: its championing of Czech composers and its belief in music's power to change lives. Defined from its inauguration as 'an organisation for the enhancement of musical art in Prague, and a pension organisation for the members of the National Theatre Orchestra in Prague, its widows and orphans, the proceeds from the four concerts that it performed each year helped to support members of the orchestra who could no longer play and the immediate family of deceased musicians. As early as the 1920's, Václav Talich (Chief Conductor 1919-1941) pioneered concerts for workers, young people and other voluntary organisations including the Red Cross, the Czechoslovak Sokol and the Union of Slavic Women and, in 1923 gave three benefit concerts for Russian, Austrian and German players including members of the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras.

The philosophy continues today and is equally vibrant. Alongside the Czech Philharmonic's Youth Orchestra, Orchestral Academy and Jiří Bělohlávek Prize for young musicians, a comprehensive education strategy engages with more than 400 schools bringing all ages to the Rudolfinum – some travelling as many as four hours - to hear concerts and participate in masterclasses. An inspirational music and song programme led by singer Ida Kelarová for the extensive Romany communities within the Czech Republic and Slovakia has helped many socially excluded families to find a voice. In addition to an annual education exchange with the Royal Academy of Music in London, over lockdown the Orchestra gave seven benefit concerts which were live streamed in 4K to international audiences, raising funds for hospitals, charities, and healthcare professionals.

An early champion of Martinů's music, the Orchestra premièred his *Czech Rhapsody* in 1919 and, its detailed inventory of Czech music, undertaken by Václav Talich included the world premières of Martinů's *Half Time* (1924), Janáček's *Sinfonietta* (1926) and the Prague première of Janáček's *Taras Bulba* (1924). Rafael Kubelík was also an advocate of Martinů's music and premièred *Field Mass* (1946) and Symphony No. 5 (1947), while Karel Ančerl conducted the première of Martinů's Symphony No. 6 *Fantaisies symphoniques* (1956). *Fantaisies symphoniques* has also featured twice in the Orchestra's programmes at the BBC Proms, first in 1969 under Chief Conductor Václav Neumann and again in 2010 under Sir John Eliot Gardiner.

Prague has long been favoured by composers, not least Mozart who, following performances of *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* in Prague,, travelled the 250km journey from Vienna to première *La Clemenza di Tito* in 1791. Five years later, Beethoven made two trips to Prague, returning in 1798 to give the première of his Piano Concerto No. 1. His Seventh Symphony was composed in the spa town of Teplitz (now Teplice). Mahler's ties ran even deeper. Born in the Bohemian village of Kaliště, now part of the Czech Republic, Mahler was 23 when he conducted at the Royal Municipal Theatre in Moravia and first travelled to Prague to conduct at the Neues Deutsches Theatre before returning to give the world première of his Symphony No. 7 with the Czech Philharmonic.

Mahler, however, was not the first composer of renown to conduct the Czech Philharmonic. Edward Grieg conducted the Orchestra in 1906; Stravinsky performed his *Capriccio* for Piano and Orchestra under Václav Talich in 1930; Leonard Bernstein conducted the European première of Aaron Copland's Symphony No. 3 at the Prague Spring in 1947; Arthur Honegger conducted a concert of his own music in 1949; Darius Milhaud gave the première of his *Music for Prague* at the Prague Spring Festival in 1966; and, in 1996, Krzysztof Penderecki conducted the première of his Concerto for Clarinet and Chamber Orchestra.

Their names are joined by the many luminaries who have collaborated with the Orchestra over the years: Martha Argerich, Claudio Arrau, Evgeny Kissin, Erich Kleiber, Leonid Kogan, Erich Leinsdorf, Lovro von Matačić, Ivan Moravec, Yevgeny Mravinsky, David Oistrakh, Antonio Pedrotti, Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich, Gennady Roszhdestvensky, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Wolfgang Schneiderhan, Georg Szell, Henryk Szeryng, Bruno Walter and Alexander Zemlinsky.

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