

SUMMER 2005
\$5.95

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MASTER CLASS

DVOŘÁK'S



Miniature Masterworks

By Orli Shaham

“I believe he never wrote a bad note.”

Orli Shaham is a pianist on the rise. After receiving two of the most prestigious prizes given to outstanding young talent—The Gilmore Young Artist Award in 1995 and the Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1997—Shaham has performed with such major orchestras as the Cleveland, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis and San Francisco Symphonies and put in regular appearances at the Mostly Mozart, Aspen, Ravinia, Caramoor, Verbier, Spoleto and other festivals. With her brother, violinist Gil Shaham, she has released a Deutsche Grammophon recording entitled Dvořák for Two, and an all-Prokofiev disc on Canary Classics.

Critic Donald Rosenberg of the Cleveland Plain Dealer wrote that “Her playing blends confidence with reflective grace, digital wizardry with subtlety of touch.” The assessment suggests a young romantic, rather than a typical modern firebrand. And indeed, when we asked her to contribute her thoughts on any composer for readers of Piano Today, she chose Dvořák.

Does she consider herself a “romantic”? “As a person, yes,” she says. “As a musician, that’s a loaded question. I firmly believe in great music, and that means a lot of different things. I just finished playing John Adams’ Century Rolls and Bernstein’s Age of Anxiety (which allows the pianist to go from a member of the orchestra, to a soloist, to a barroom pianist). Yet, for me, great music does always involve emotion and human sentiments.”

The awards she received, she reports, made a big difference in her artistic development. “For one thing, they meant that I could buy an absolutely stunning Steinway B,” explains Shaham. “It makes a big difference when you graduate to a wonderful piano in your home. What’s also

great about these awards is that neither one involved a competition. I only went out for one of those once, as a pre-teen—actually, I was only accompanying a cellist who wanted to enter the competition. We weren’t selected to move on, but we were chosen to give a special concert. It turned out to be better for our careers than if we had won. Of course, one of the positives of competitions is that they give musicians a framework for preparation. You have to learn a certain repertoire by a particular date. That can be a help for some pianists.”

And what lies ahead? “This is one of my favorite times of the season,” says Orli Shaham, as summer approaches. “It’s time to move on to chamber music, to make music with friends, and to visit beautiful places. And right now I’m talking with CPRN, the national radio network. They have fifty stations throughout the country, and I’m developing a number of different ideas.” We can’t wait to hear them.

What a remarkable composer was Dvořák!—a modest, honest craftsman with an understanding of humor, vitality, artistry and the deepest human emotions. The more of his music I discover, the more I believe he never wrote a bad note. Although his reputation rests on a few famous works, countless treasures in his output reward the curious music lover.

The composition of the Op. 54 Waltzes occurred at an important turning point in Dvořák’s life. After moving
continued on page 51

away from Wagner's influence, he had wandered in search of his own voice. In 1879-1880, the period of the Waltzes' composition, his career and self-esteem came together. His mentor Brahms had been to Prague for a visit and not only spent time with Dvořák but also encouraged his own publisher to take some of Dvořák's music. The violinist Joachim came as well, helping with the revision of the delightful Violin Concerto and inspiring the playful and lyrical Violin and Piano Sonata in F (which I happily recorded with my brother, Gil Shaham). Suddenly Dvořák's works were being performed with increasing regularity abroad, as far away as Cincinnati. He was receiving respect as never before.

It was far more prestigious for Dvořák's career to write "major" works such as the symphony he had promised Hans Richter, but his miniatures remained the bread and butter for his young family. His confidence stoked, he did both, writing the Sixth Symphony and at the same time taking care to imbue the 6 *Mazurkas* Op. 56, the *Gypsy Songs* Op. 55, and the *Waltzes*, Op. 54 with the intellect and attention to detail worthy of a "major" composer.

When I first read the waltzes at my piano, I was so enthralled that I wanted to put all eight in recital. Thirty minutes of waltzing, however, can make audiences a little dizzy, so I decided to split them up. After many attempts at recombination I realized that Dvořák had already grouped them in fours. My preference has been for numbers 5-8, finding the pacing between them tricky but extremely effective if done correctly.

The issues of timing and pacing come up within each waltz as well as between them. These gems do not demand too much technique, but they ask a lot of one's sense of artistic timing! To begin with, they are waltzes, and as always with dance forms, there is an internal rhythm which 'swings' ever-so-slightly. In the Viennese tradition, a waltz anticipates its second beat with regularity. However, though these waltzes are inspired by Vienna they are hardly Viennese, loaded as they are with Czech nuance. I think a subtle anticipation is appropriate in a number of places, but a strong one should be reserved for a particularly special moment. For me such moments arrive only in number 8, at its internal climax in mm. 67-73, and at its culminating high point (25 measures before the end). The latter of these is less of an all-out Viennese moment than the former, and should therefore not lilt quite as much.



Another internal moment in which pacing arises is in the waltzes' many modulatory passages using thematic fragments in sequence. One such place occurs in Number 5, at the key change to g minor. There are 23 measures here repeating almost exactly the same 2-measure pattern, each time with a different harmony. This sort of compositional technique can sound rather square if not paced well. It's important to have a long-term

phrase structure based on harmony, so as not to be too stodgy. Dvořák has helped us out with his dynamics (alternating *forte* and *piano*), but we are the ones who must decide how to build the phrase so as to make it convincing for a listener.



A similar issue occurs in Number 6. The D-flat major *B* section is repetitive by its nature, having its rhythmic pattern repeat every two bars. Already in its first half one must think of the longer phrase, particularly as the entire section has a repeat. But when the second half begins, with its rapid-fire modulations, it is crucial for us as performers to provide a sense of harmonic direction through timing, lest our listeners get lost in the landscape, wandering among cycles of fifths!

Dvořák has built in beautifully effective connections between the waltzes, some more transparent than others. One which is particularly delicious in its sense of humor is the link between Numbers Seven and Eight. The seventh waltz ends with a D Major arpeggio which descends (in those wonderfully Dvořákian quintuplets Prof. Kurz tried to smooth out of the piano concerto), and then ascends beyond its starting point, with a diminuendo to *pp* and of course an unwritten ritardando to end. Number Eight begins with the same gesture, this time on a B-flat seventh chord, the dominant of our new key of E-flat major. (This happens to be the Neapolitan Sixth of the previous waltz.) It is a charmingly anticipatory harmony. This time the rhythms are smoothed out purposefully to allow a slight accelerando (I feel) to go with the crescendo. On a few occasions, I have been lucky enough to time this transition to elicit audible chuckles from the audience. The joke continues, of course, for the initiated, with the "Minute Waltz"-like theme and the constant cross-rhythms of this culminating dance.



Another place with an unwritten accelerando is the *continued on page 56*

Dvořák *continued*

ending of this last waltz. It seems to me that the last 9 bars really benefit from a push. The rich rhythms of the hemiolas conflicting with the traditional anticipation of the second beat propel you to the climactic ending in a satisfying and exciting way.

There are many kinds of perceptively written, thoughtfully and soulfully put together musical works. Some require you to follow their markings literally. Others assume that with a certain level of musical proficiency and intelligence you will automatically understand some of the unspecified intentions. In the case of these waltzes, as with most great music, both situations apply. Dvořák has helped us realize his visions for these distinctive dances through abundant dynamic and expression marks. But he has not put in too many markings concerning tempo or timing. (In fact, three of these last four waltzes are marked *Allegro*, and the fourth *Allegro vivace* – not very enlightening!) It is up to our artistry as performers and our comprehension as analysts to raise these waltzes to the heights they can reach. A performance that takes account of pacing and structural detail can reveal these miniatures for the masterpieces that they are.

Just one more thing: I've been asked and wondered myself many times about the trills in Number 6.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece, marked "Allegro". The score is in 3/4 time and features a melody with several trills. The first trill is marked "tr" and the second is marked "5 tr". The piece begins with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a bass clef. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is written in the bass clef. The piece consists of six measures. The first measure starts with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The second measure contains a trill. The third measure contains a trill marked "5 tr". The fourth measure contains a trill. The fifth measure contains a trill. The sixth measure contains a trill. The piece ends with a final chord in the bass line.

My advice is to get the trills to start spinning immediately, super-fast, from the main note. You'll probably end up with a 5-note trill, but however many notes you have, I think a starting sparkle is the critical sound quality.