

Towards the end of 2021, on the occasion of the 180th anniversary of the birth of Antonín Dvořák, leading Czech pianists Ivo Kahánek and Tomáš Víšek published recordings of the composer's oeuvre for solo piano. In these recordings, they do not only present their unique perspective on a part of the Dvořák landscape that is seldom visited by both Czech and international performers – they complement each other and, at times, perhaps, enter into a polemic (the sources are not always unambiguous). In addition to Kahánek's 5-CD set of Dvořák's finished compositions, Víšek's recording also includes rarer pieces and sketches.

Antonín Dvořák: New Recordings of the Solo Piano Oeuvre



Both follow in the footsteps of Radoslav Kvapil, who was the very first pianist to record Dvořák's complete piano oeuvre between 1967 and 1969. In the interviews that follow, we discuss with both artists what makes Dvořák's solo piano works specific and attractive.



Ivo Kahánek: *Dvořák had a Big Heart*

PHOTO: TOMÁŠ NOSIL 2x

Ivo Kahánek is from northern Moravia, a graduate of the Janáček Conservatory in Ostrava and the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where he has now been teaching for twelve years. Further studies took him to the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, where he studied with Ronan O’Hora. In 2004, he won the Prague Spring competition, which was followed by a performance at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms festival, where he performed Bohuslav Martinů’s Piano Concerto no. 4, “Incantation” with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Jiří Bělohlávek. In 2019, while recording a piece with Jakub Hrůša and the Bamberg Symphony, he added the Dvořák piano concerto to this session. Through the titles he records, he has garnered a profile as a performer of primarily Czech music of the 20th century - as an exclusive Supraphon artist, he has participated in projects including the complete piano concertos of Bohuslav Martinů, the piano works of Viktor Kalabis, pieces by Miloslav Kabeláč, and, along with singers Martina Janková and Tomáš Král, Leoš Janáček’s *Moravian Folk Poetry in Songs*.

His decision to focus on Dvořák’s complete solo piano works seems almost a matter of fate - an affinity with the composer arose in virtually every sentence in our interview. As if the uncommonly

common boy Antonín, of Nelahozeves, who made it big in the world, were entwined with the lanky Ivo of Frýdek-Místek, who was not “spoilt” by international stages and never stopped thinking of his homeland in the art he makes.

Do you remember which piece of Dvořák’s you played first?

I think it was the *Humoresques*, and I think I even played all of them. Some time around 2005, I performed a concert in Scotland, and the organiser had asked that they be on the programme.

You could have stuck to that, perhaps adding a waltz, a mazurka... But you decided to record everything Dvořák wrote for solo piano. Why?

Just like every musician, I was looking for pieces that are good enough to record but not too famous, so nothing like Tchaikovsky’s B minor concerto, of which there are countless recordings. The more I worked on Dvořák, the more I realised that during the course of my life, I have heard at most twenty minutes of this entire oeuvre, which lasts five hours, and that there are many pieces by Dvořák that are neither performed in concert nor recorded. Then came the year 2020 and my Dvořák recital at the Dvořák’s Prague festival, where I was also the guarantor of the piano marathon, which presented, in five blocks, almost all of Dvořák’s music for solo and four-hands piano. By that point, it was clear that a recording would follow.

You introduced it, according to plan, at the Dvořák’s Prague festival on the occasion of the composer’s 180th birthday. You had three and a half months to record five hours of music. I can’t help but ask if that was perhaps not too little time for such an ambitious project?

You are not the first to ask that – the question of whether I did not do shoddy work of the whole affair is, of course, close at hand. However, it wasn’t as if I began learning the repertoire immediately before the recording. Like I said, I started in 2005 with the *Humoresques*, after which I added and performed further pieces, such as the *Poetic Tone Pictures* and the A major suite, altogether about half of what I wanted to record. I learned the rest during the covid lockdown, when I had the opportunity to practice more intensively. I won’t deny that it was a lot of work, but I never would have done it I had thought I would only just make it. I wouldn’t dare do that to Dvořák, and I was also aware that this is not how such a complete set is usually recorded.

How suspenseful did it all become when covid-19 entered the stage and it was suddenly unsure whether the project and its realisation would go according to plan? Were there demotivating moments or did you simply not admit these to yourself?

The coronavirus complicated virtually everything in live arts – only in the case of recordings was it, in fact, a slight advantage. There was more time to practice, and the hall was also more available. There were no demotivating moments, though I was occasionally a little annoyed by the resistance that Toníček (*a diminutive of Antonín – translator’s note*) put up even in seemingly miniature pieces.

Did you record the pieces from memory or were you reading the score?

Both ways – some pieces from memory, some from the music. As I imagine most musicians do, I try to record larger chunks and only make corrections within these. But Dvořák is particular in his emphasis on small forms; delicate, detailed pictures. We also did a lot of tuning during the recording process, so most often, I would record a test run of the whole piece, then the piano would be tuned during the listening checks, after which I recorded a clean take.

Do you enjoy studio recording, or do you prefer a live concert with an audience?

There is, of course, no substitute for live concerts, and it is with a view of these experiences that one begins practising as a young child. With recording, what is added – at least for me – is a sense that I am really making something, that I will leave something behind. Like when a carpenter makes a table that you eat at, that children write their homework on, and that you might write your will on. It's a proper piece of work, but it also embodies emotions. And it's the same, I hope, with recordings – someone listens to them and connects them with a situation or experience in their life and the CD suddenly “comes to life”.

You now know Dvořák's piano works very well, from the Polka “Pomněnka” (Forget-me-not Polka), written by the composer when he was only thirteen years old, to the 1894 Humoresques. Is it generally true what is said of the piano concerto – that these pieces don't seem to fit under your fingers and are unpleasant to play?

That's true, the common denominator of not-quite-comfortable playing also applies here. Only a tiny minority are easy to play, like *Two Pearls*. Everything else, including miniatures like the *Mazurkas*, is not explicitly virtuosic, but it seems like your hands don't seem to want to assume certain positions – you simply have to practice them enough to make the result seem light and natural. Dvořák's chamber pieces are, pianistically speaking, more self-evident – there are technical difficulties, but not ones that would surprise a pianist. The solo works and the piano concerto, however, contain many things one must explore in greater depth.

Such as?

Among the standard difficulties are a complex chordal and finger technique, polyphony, octaves, but Dvořák, for instance, regularly makes minute changes for the return of the theme, which most composers would either repeat verbatim or else with a variation that changes the expression, such as a denser texture. Dvořák's changes do not affect the expression – it's just written slightly differently and it comes off as almost haphazard. You come across this constantly in the *Piano Pieces op. 52*. I don't think this was a spiteful act on the part of the composer – I think he was either playful and saw composition a little like a Rubik's cube, or else he did not look back on what he had written and spontaneously put down the same idea a little differently each time; with a slight modification. I think both options are a possibility.

Particularly during a live performance, this might be quite demanding for your focus.

Yes, because the result has to sound absolutely natural. In Dvořák, there are no sudden twists like in Beethoven, nor provocations like in Janáček. Everything flows lightly, only the structure is sometimes a little complicated for the performer.

Can we therefore say that Dvořák did not write pieces for external effect?

To a certain extent, we can, but in the case of the waltzes, for instance, we hear such effective stylisations that I am surprised they are played so rarely.

We'll come back to that, but I would now like to ask you how you would characterise Dvořák's dance stylisations in comparison to those of Chopin?

I think that particularly in the case of the dances, Dvořák's inspiration is looser. Chopin's mazurkas are significantly influenced by folk music. While Dvořák was also interested in folk music, it was different than Smetana and Janáček. It is not so much about the clear attributes of any given dance – more about its atmosphere and mood. Of course he keeps the three-beat rhythm of the waltz, but the rhythmic accentuation is not that distinctive. When you listen to his furiant (which, by the way, are very unpleasant technically), you discover they are not furiant at all in terms of rhythm – only in their mood.

That's Chopin – let's now broaden the conversation to Dvořák in the context of European solo piano works.

While for Chopin and Schumann, the piano was the most personal and intrinsic means of expression, this is not true for Dvořák. He wrote some pieces as sketches, such as the A major suite and the *Slavonic Dances*, which we know better in their orchestral form, he also wrote a lot of music following demands by the Bonn-based publisher Simrock, who needed a steady supply of pieces to sell. I have to note here that people bought the music to play it at home, so that gives you an idea about the level of the amateur pianists of the time. Even at half the speed, some of Dvořák's pieces remain extremely difficult.

To return to the question: the subtle melodicism of the early pieces in particular belies an inspiration with Mozart. There are also traces of Schumann, whether this concerns the polyphonic character, type of movement, or dotted rhythms in the chords. I don't feel much Brahmsian inspiration, although the second waltz of opus 54, for instance, is a clear reference to the *Hungarian Dances*. There is more of Tchaikovsky, in the sense of a loose folk inspiration. I think pianistic Dvořák is essentially different from the symphonic Brahms in that he did not write such extensive personal confessions. His longest piece for solo piano, *Téma con variazioni op. 36*, lasts around fifteen minutes; the second longest is the six-minute *At the Hero's Grave (U mohyly)* from the *Poetic Tone Pictures*. Everything else is shorter. And none of the influences I have discussed is strong enough for us to be able to speak of a particular period, like a Chopin or Schumann period.

As you prepared for the recording, did you also study the dissertation of your older colleague Tomáš Všek on Dvořák's oeuvre for piano?

I did and I value it greatly – it is dense reading and highly beneficial to pianists.

Which of Dvořák's pieces have you grown closest to?

Definitely the *Silhouettes*, as it is one of the few cycles whose architecture can be built up as a whole working with the pauses between the individual pieces, their character; making a single arc, as the first and last silhouette are thematically related. It is also an intimate world, full of contrasts. I also developed a preference for the *Impromptu in D minor*, whose middle section sounds almost like Suk – there are impressionistic harmonies in this piece that occur nowhere else in Dvořák's oeuvre. What I like about the *Suite in A major* is that it is one of the few pieces in which Dvořák explores more contrasting characters. And then the *Humoresques*, in which we hear the American Dvořák with his exotic melodies, but in an intimate, fragile, almost fleeting form. When we play them as a whole, the famous seventh *Humoresque* also has a different justification. I also enjoy playing the *Poetic Tone Pictures*.

Dvořák wrote that a pianist would need courage to play them as a whole.

Firstly, they vary enormously in their stylisations, which are not always comfortable. Secondly, they are not as unified in terms of ideas, so I see them more as a collection than a cycle. And they are also long. The entire cycle lasts for about an hour. It is not easy to invest it with narrative so powerfully that the listener will be drawn in from beginning to end. I definitely want to perform them in concert, but I consider them more of an example of special festival programming.

What effect does your championing of Dvořák's piano works have on your students? Do you feel a tendency to task them with playing more Dvořák, or are they more interested in Dvořák because of your example?

I definitely tend to offer them those portions of Dvořák's oeuvre that I myself consider a merit either in terms of repertoire or piano technique, and that they might not come across themselves.



How personally close to Dvořák do you feel?

Dvořák never ceases to fascinate me in that when I place him next to the greats of music – most of whom were unstable or controversial, with the substance of genius sharing seating space with some kind of pathology – I find nothing of the sort in Dvořák, and yet he reaches the same depths they do. Although I could not, of course, meet him personally, I believe he was intuitive and natural, despite the fact that he also encountered trauma in his life. He still feels, to me, like a harmonic character with a big heart; a kind person who is, however, also able to compose music that touches the painful and controversial aspects of humanity. This seems uncommon and I cannot think of a composer for whom these two contrasting elements are so close. He was not merely the composer of “pretty” music, and yet his soul was, I believe, very beautiful, even though his music is not boring.

You also seem like a harmonic, peaceful person. Perhaps that is why you resonate so well with Dvořák. Do you share any of his other interests, such as trains or a love for pigeons?

I like trains, though they probably don't fascinate me as much as they did him. Perhaps we could agree on birds, though I am more attracted by raptors and falconry.

What are your plan for the future?

In addition to Dvořák's solo piano oeuvre, I also did an album of sheet music called *An Expedition into Czech Piano Music*, aimed at the international market. I revised it so that it would be adequate for a moderately advanced instrumentalist, who can thus acquire an overview of Czech piano music from Jan Ladislav Dussek to composers of the 20th century such as Petr Eben and Miloslav Kabeláč. Related to my recordings is a Dvořák tour, and I am also planning a new recital of international repertoire. I want my programmes to have an emotional impact on the listeners, and I am convinced that this can also be achieved with Czech music, although it is often said that it is not spectacular enough. But when you place next to each other a well chosen selection of pieces by Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček, and Bohuslav Martinů, I am convinced that it works. I'll take a bit of a break from recording, though for the future, many gems of Czech music are an opportunity, and I am also looking to devote more time to contemporary music.