Serenade in E-flat Major, Op. 7
RICHARD STRAUSS
b. June 11, 1864, Munich
d. September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Premiere
November 27, 1882, Dresden

Performance Time
9 minutes

The Serenade in E-flat Major was composed by a high-school student. Strauss was seventeen when he wrote this music in 1881, and it was first performed by Franz Wüllner and the Dresden Court Orchestra on November 27, 1882, while the composer was in his first months of study at the University of Munich. The Serenade drew the attention of conductor Hans von Bülow, who performed it with his Meiningen Orchestra (at that time perhaps the finest in Europe), and Bülow promptly hired Strauss as the orchestra’s assistant conductor. The young man dropped out of college, never to return.

Strauss – who developed with astonishing speed as a composer over the next several years – would later disparage the Serenade as “no more than the respectable work of a music student,” but this graceful music is not far removed from the spirit and manner of Mozart’s wind serenades. The Serenade – in one brief sonata-form movement – is scored for thirteen wind players: pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, plus four horns and one contrabassoon. Strauss sets it at a moderate tempo (Andante) and announces the noble, chorale-like main subject at the very beginning; the two clarinets and one horn introduce the more animated second subject. The brief development section concentrates on the second theme, and Strauss returns to his opening material with a grand flourish of descending lines before a fairly literal recapitulation leads to the stately close on a quiet E-flat major chord.
We remember Charles Gounod as the composer of one of the most popular operas ever written, *Faust*, and of a vast amount of liturgical music. But Gounod also wrote instrumental music – this includes two delightful symphonies that are hardly ever played and one piece that everyone knows, the “Funeral March of a Marionette,” made famous by its use as the theme music of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* on television.

One other instrumental work by Gounod has enjoyed an active life in the concert hall, his Petite Symphonie for wind instruments. In 1879 the distinguished French flutist Paul Taffanel founded the Society of Chamber Music for Wind Instruments in Paris, and for that group he commissioned a work by Gounod. The composer, then in his sixties, responded with a piece of chamber music for a unique ensemble of nine wind instruments: one flute and pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and horns. Gounod called the work Petite Symphonie (“Little Symphony”), and that is exactly what it is: a brief (twenty-minute) symphony in classical form for nine wind players. Premiered in Paris on April 10, 1885, and beautifully written for wind instruments, the Petite Symphonie has become one of the cornerstones of the wind repertory.

Haydn himself would have had no trouble recognizing the four movements of this symphony. The first movement opens with a somber introduction before the music steps out smartly at the *Allegretto*, which is in sonata form. Gounod writes sensibly for the wind instruments in this movement. Recognizing that winds cannot sustain long sounds in the way stringed instruments can, Gounod gives them short phrases and emphasizes a staccato sound. The *Andante cantabile* is built on a graceful solo for flute; in the central episode the other instruments spring to the fore, but at the end the flute takes up its long melody to round the music off. The third movement, a *Scherzo* that Gounod marks *Allegretto moderato*, is set in 6/8 rather than the customary 3/4 of scherzos. A series of horn fanfares opens this scherzo, which is in the expected ternary form. The outer sections dance energetically, and a horn solo leads the way into the bucolic trio. The *Finale* opens with a brief introduction marked *Allegretto*. The fundamental rhythm of this introduction (long-short-short) gives shape to the main body of the movement, which is also marked *Allegretto* and which has a sort of jaunty
energy. Again, the writing for the nine players is graceful and idiomatic, and — after all this bright energy — the Petite Symphonie comes to a surprisingly subdued close.

This unusual — and attractive — music comes from the moment when Dvořák was just on the verge of fame. That fame had been a long time in coming. Born into a poor family in rural Bohemia, Dvořák had been apprenticed to a butcher, and he narrowly escaped a life behind a meat counter when friends and relatives responded to his desperate protests and helped send the boy to music school. Even then, success came slowly. Dvořák supported himself and his family for years by conducting bands, playing the viola in orchestras, and giving piano lessons. It was not until his mid-thirties — the age at which Mozart and Mendelssohn died — that Dvořák began to find success and finally fame.

In 1878, the year he turned 37, Dvořák composed his first set of *Slavonic Dances*. Based on the colorful peasant dances of Eastern Europe, the *Slavonic Dances* explode with color and excitement, and they made Dvořák’s reputation almost overnight. They were quickly performed throughout Europe and even in distant America, and audiences around the world were swept away by their unusual rhythms and distinctive melodies. Earlier in that same year — between January 4 and 18, 1878 — Dvořák had composed his Serenade in D Minor, and it too incorporates features of Czech music.

The instrumental serenade is usually remembered as an eighteenth-century entertainment form — Haydn, Mozart, and others had written serenades, divertimenti, and cassations for various ensembles of wind and/or stringed instruments. Usually light in character, these multi-movement works were often composed for social occasions — weddings, graduations, civic ceremonies — and were sometimes written specifically to be performed outside. They usually began with a spirited march, and along the way they might include minuets, variations, movements for a soloist with the orchestra, and so on. Mozart wrote some of his finest works — the “Haffner” Serenade,
the “Posthorn” Serenade, and the Gran Partita for Winds – in this form and for just such occasions.

No one knows the occasion for which Dvořák wrote his Serenade in D Minor. In this good-spirited music, Dvořák took the general form of the eighteenth-century wind serenade but made some important changes, reducing the number of movements to just four and scoring it for an unusual combination of instruments: two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, three horns, and – for added resonance and a sustained bass line – a cello and a doublebass. There is also a degree of thematic unity here unusual in a serenade: many of Dvořák’s themes begin with the upward leap of a fourth, and some themes appear in several movements.

Dvořák salutes tradition by beginning with a sturdy march. After this mock-serious opening, he offers some nice variety with a second subject that rocks easily along its dotted rhythms; both themes return to lead the movement to a quiet close. The second movement is the most “Czech” of the four movements, sounding very much like the Slavonic Dances Dvořák would compose later that same year. Though it is titled Minuetto, its agreeable outer sections are in the form of a Czech sousedská, an Eastern European folk-dance, while the trio section – marked Presto – rips along on furiant cross-accents. Critics single out the Andante for special praise. Its serene main melody, full of characteristic turns, unfolds in the solo oboe and clarinet while the three horns provide a liquid, pulsing accompaniment; the movement rises to an animated climax, then falls away to close peacefully. The finale returns to the manner of the first movement: its main theme bears some relation to the march tune that opened that movement, and in fact the march itself reappears in the course of the finale. Dvořák rounds the finale off with an Allegro molto coda, and the Serenade concludes on a series of sunny fanfares in D Major.

–Program note by Eric Bromberger