

A Festival of Fučík

Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi *cond*
 Chandos 5158, 2015 (1 CD: 80 minutes), \$17

In the English-speaking world, Czech bandmaster and composer Julius Fučík (1872–1916) is best known for his jaunty chromatic march *Einzug der Gladiatoren*, the first strain of which, under the name *Thunder and Blazes*, has become indelibly linked to the circus. Wind band aficionados might also be familiar with his *Florentiner* march, which has become a staple of that repertoire thanks to its championing by Frederick Fennell. Yet Fučík was more than a march composer: he was a significant contributor to the ‘silver age’ generation of light music composers active around the turn of the twentieth century, ranking just behind his contemporaries Franz Lehár, Carl Michel Ziehrer and Oskar Straus. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Fučík’s output of some 400 works, which range from marches and waltzes to overtures and tone poems, has been largely forgotten beyond his native country. This makes the appearance of a new disk of his orchestral music a rare and welcome development.

Born into a working-class family in Prague, Fučík learned music from an early age, going on to study violin and bassoon at the Prague Conservatory.¹ Fučík’s time at the conservatory coincided with Antonín Dvořák’s brief tenure on the faculty, and he had the opportunity to study composition under Dvořák alongside fellow students Josef Suk and Oskar Nedbal.² The influence of Dvořák can be felt in Fučík’s earliest compositions, which include Czech folk song settings and other nationalist works. After completing his studies in 1891, Fučík began his professional career as a bassoonist in the band of the 49th Austro-Hungarian Infantry Regiment, stationed in the Lower Austrian town of Krems an der Donau. There, he spent three years performing under the baton of Josef Franz Wagner, famous composer of the march *Unter dem Doppeladler*. Following a series of brief engagements with theatre orchestras in Prague, Zagreb and Sisak, Fučík returned to the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1897, becoming *Militärkapellmeister* of the 86th Infantry Regiment in Sarajevo. The regiment and its band were transferred to Budapest three years later, and it was there that Fučík spent the most prolific decade of his career. In Budapest, Fučík was a prominent figure on the popular music scene; in addition to military parades and concerts, his musicians would

¹ Biographical information on Fučík comes from Alois Lugitsch, ‘Julius Fučík: Leben und Werk’ (MA thesis, Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst, Graz, 1995); Josef Damanski, *Die Militär-Kapellmeister Oesterreich-Ungarns. Illustriertes Biographisches Lexikon* (Vienna: Paltur & Co., 1904): 105; Andrew Lamb, ‘Fučík, Julius’, in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*; Wolfgang Suppan, ‘Fučík, Julius’, in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd ed., ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel, 1994), Personenteil Bd. 7, col. 236–7; and Elisabeth Anzenberger-Ramminger, Friedrich Anzenberger, and Walter Schwanzer, *Märsche der k.u.k. Zeit: Märsche der Donaumonarchie von Achleitner bis Ziehrer* (Vienna: Walter Schwanzer Musikverlage, 2004), 40–41.

² For more on Fučík’s Czech nationalism and influence from Dvořák, see Wolfgang Suppan, ‘Julius Fucik (1872–1916), Komponist, Militär- und Zivillkapellmeister der Donaumonarchie, und sein Beitrag zur national-tschechischen Schule in der Musik’, *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 47, no. 2 (2006): 243.

have also performed at balls, wine gardens and other social gatherings – a wide variety of musical contexts that necessitated an equally diverse compositional output. In 1909, the regiment was transferred once again to the Habsburg-controlled northern Serbian town of Subotica, but Fučík found the environment there less hospitable. Within a few months, he resigned from the 86th and returned to his native Bohemia as *Kapellmeister* of the band of the 92nd Infantry Regiment in Theresienstadt (Terezín). This was a much more prestigious posting for Fučík, as he soon found himself performing for large and adoring crowds of his fellow Czechs. In 1913, he left the military altogether and moved to Berlin to found his own ensemble. The harsh economic conditions brought on by the World War One soon put a damper on these activities, however, and hastened his declining health. In September 1916, Fučík died suddenly after a tumor operation in Berlin at the age of 44.

Given what we know about the breakup of the Empire along national lines in 1918, it may seem surprising for a Czech nationalist composer who trained under Dvořák to make his career in the bands of the Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Army. This was, after all, the same army that put down the nationalist uprisings of 1848, and that still maintained internal order by force through the end of World War One.³ Yet for many musicians – particularly those who did not get to attend the more prestigious conservatories in Vienna or Budapest – playing in the Empire's military bands was the only viable musical career path available. This is especially true for graduates of the Prague Conservatory, which served as a veritable training ground for Austro-Hungarian military bandmen. According to one contemporary source, nearly 55 per cent of all the Empire's military bandmasters active around 1900 hailed from Bohemia or Moravia – despite the fact that ethnic Czechs represented less than 12 per cent of the monarchy's population at the time.⁴ These bandmasters were routinely called upon to compose or arrange new works, and those who were already steeped in nationalist compositional strategies had a distinct advantage: by drawing on a wide variety of local popular and folk music, the regimental band could simultaneously ingratiate itself to both the geographically transplanted soldiers and the local populace. This in turn represented the musical corollary to Kaiser Franz Joseph's contemporaneous military order calling for 'utilizing the individual qualities of each nationality for the benefit of all'.⁵ Indeed, Fučík's own catalogue encompasses compositions that draw on the music of several of the Empire's nations, including Czech, Hungarian, Italian and Bosnian influences.

Prior to the appearance of this new disk from Chandos, Fučík's music had been recorded extensively only by Václav Neumann and the Czech Philharmonic on the Telefunken (1973), Orfeo (1984–86) and Supraphon (1988) labels. The most

³ Nationalism was such a potent force in the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the late nineteenth century that army regiments were routinely stationed far from the homelands of the recruits for fear that they would hesitate to fire on members of their own ethnic groups should the need arise.

⁴ Damanski, *Die Militär-Kapellmeister Oesterreich-Ungarns*. 1910 census figures are cited in Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815–1918* (New York: Longman, 2001): 335.

⁵ This is the crux of the standing order issued by Franz Joseph on 16 September 1903 while on maneuvers near the town of Chłopy, in Galicia. See Henry Wickham Steed, *The Hapsburg Monarchy*, 4th ed. (London: Constable and Co., 1919), 66–7; see also Jason S. Heilman, 'O du mein Österreich: Patriotic Music and Multinational Identity in the Austro-Hungarian Empire' (PhD diss., Duke University, 2009), 78–88.

comprehensive of these projects was the Orfeo *k.u.k. Festkonzert* set, which featured 12 of Fučík's works across the three disks, including one devoted entirely to him. While Neumann had the Czech Philharmonic and its authentic timbre and authoritative history in this repertoire, his recordings were often hampered by poor sound quality and more than a few rough performances. This 2015 Chandos recording has no such limitations; it features Neeme Järvi conducting the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in gorgeous 24-bit/96kHz sound. While it is available to download or stream as a standard stereo MP3, the multi-channel Super Audio CD version has the added benefit of a 5.0 surround sound layer that presents the orchestra in a natural yet spacious soundscape with a sufficient amount of reverb.

Järvi seems to have a special affinity for this kind of music, having previously recorded Fučík's *Gladiatoren* and *Florentiner* marches with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra on a 1997 Deutsche Grammophon release of *fin-de-siècle* bonbons. The new recording is a companion volume of sorts to Järvi's 2013 disk of Franz von Suppé overtures and marches, also recorded by Chandos with the same ensemble. It encompasses a sampling of 14 of Fučík's most frequently performed marches, waltzes and overtures, presented in a kind of Vienna New Year's concert programme interpolating shorter marches and polkas between the longer works. Many of the pieces appear in new orchestral arrangements, some of which are markedly different from what Neumann had previously recorded – to say nothing about their original wind band or salon orchestra versions. The informative booklet notes by Nigel Simeone discuss each of the pieces chronologically, grounding them in the context of Fučík's life events at the time of composition.

The selection of marches presented on the album is quite diverse, mixing Fučík's most famous works with a few relative rarities. Taken as a whole, they show Fučík's chameleon-like way of adapting to his various circumstances, as well as his penchant for incorporating exoticism into his works. Fučík's best-known work, his 1899 *Einzug der Gladiatoren*, was conceived as a parade march inspired by Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1895 novel *Quo Vadis*. Since then, it has come to be regarded as an up-tempo 'screamer', and Järvi's performance here is clearly in that mould. This is joined by the more traditional military marches *Unter der Admiralsflagge* (1901) and *Die Regimentskinder* (1905), both of which became staples of Austro-Hungarian patriotic pomp in the pre-war era. Fučík's 'national' marches are far more interesting, and they are resented here by the famous Italianate march *Florentiner* (1907) and the Balkan-tinged rarity *Hercegovac* (1908). Alpine kitsch makes an appearance by way of *Die lustige Dorfschmiede* (1908) and its two obbligato anvils. Here, the orchestra observes Fučík's indication that the piccolo's trio melody can be accompanied by whistling from the ensemble. American subjects were very much in vogue around the turn of the century, and two marches in this collection put this trend on display: *Onkel Teddy* (1910), originally titled *Onkel Tom* but renamed by Fučík's publisher for former President Teddy Roosevelt; and *Mississippi River* (1902). The performances of all of these marches are uniformly excellent, though the conducting is often superficial and brisk. Idiomatically, however, the wind playing more closely resembles that of a British brass band than a Central European *Blaskapelle*, which makes this characteristic repertoire sound rather generic.

The longer works are of greater importance to understanding Fučík's true place in turn-of-the-century culture, and their performances here are more satisfying. Fučík's polka for obbligato solo bassoon *Der alte Brunnbär* (1907) is not lacking for recordings, but it receives an excellent performance with all the appropriate comedic stylings at the hands of bassoonist David Hubbard. The three waltzes – *Donausagen* (1909), *Winterstürme* (1906) and *Ballettratten* (1909) – each put Fučík's

rhythmic inventiveness on display. While not quite as inventive as some of the most famous waltzes of the era, these are all carefully crafted works that show how the waltz phenomenon evolved outside of Vienna. The most substantial pieces on the album are two of Fučík's concert overtures: *Marinarella* (1908) and *Miramare* (1912). The former is a lively and colourful overture in the vein of Franz von Suppé for an operetta that never materialized, while the latter is a programmatic work about Trieste's Castle of Miramare that blends an extroverted Italian style with echoes of Dvořák and Smetana. Järvi's performances of these longer works are generally good; the ensemble is fully committed, and *Winterstürme* and *Marinarella*, in particular, receive sympathetic and compelling interpretations. Unfortunately, the orchestra's lack of a tradition in this repertoire quickly becomes apparent, with the result that many of these tracks come across as highly polished run-throughs. Despite this shortcoming, this is the finest collection of Fučík's music currently available. While Neumann's recorded legacy will remain a necessary stylistic counterbalance, Järvi's set offers an excellent and accessible starting point for anyone with an interest in the popular culture of turn-of-the-century Austria-Hungary beyond the Strauss family.

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The Virtuoso Ophicleide

Trio Aenea: Patrick Wibart *ophicleide*, Adrien Ramon *cornet*, Lucie Sansen *pf*
Corentin Morvan *ophicleide*, Oscar Abella Martín *ophicleide*
Ricerca 362, 2015 (1 CD: 60 minutes), \$20
Notes by Jérôme Lejeune in English, French and German

This beautifully performed, recorded and presented period instrument CD is enjoyable, interesting and important. It offers as good a profile as is available of the idiom of one of the few musical instruments for which we can authoritatively trace an active lifespan from birth to natural death. The ophicleide was invented by the French maker Halary around 1817 and patented by him in 1821.¹ It is often defined organologically as the bass member of the keyed bugle family. All keyed bugles had relatively short periods in common use, but this should not detract from their importance during the times when they flourished – an importance that must be seen in the context of the wider development of mechanical chromatic brass instruments in the nineteenth century.

¹ 'Halary' or 'Halari' was the adopted name of Jean Hilaire Asté (1775–1840).