Antonín Dvořák | *In Nature's Realm, Op. 91*
(1841 – 1904) | Duration: 14"

Antonín Dvořák planned a trio of concert overtures, in the tradition of Mendelssohn's evocative *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hebrides*, which he planned to call "Nature, Life, and Love." *In Nature's Realm,* the first of the three, was followed later by *Carnival,* and *Othello*, the composer intending them as a cycle, with common themes shared between them. He ultimately abandoned the idea of linking them, instead preferring that they stand alone. He wrote these overtures in the year before his departure for America in 1892, and they were premiered on what was called a "farewell tour." This homage to nature portrays the beauty of Dvořák's beloved Czech homeland: both a parting gift and a musical memory.

The overture begins in a nocturnal shroud, perhaps just before dawn. The double basses pulsate deep in their register, on an F (just one half-step above the lowest pitch available to most instruments). The solo flute mimics the chirping of birds; the oboe and clarinet, we may imagine, a pair of singers yodeling in the distant mountains. In the melodic fragments slowly emerging in the violas and bassoons, we hear the faint evocation of a reedy Bohemian bagpipe, or *bock*, over the bass clarinet's continuing drone. A charming folkish theme in a pentatonic mode is intoned in the clarinet. We will hear themes of similar character in the composer's "American" works, including the twelfth string quartet and the famous ninth symphony, both of which came not long after this overture. Although elements of the music certainly suggest the natural world, the overture is no more a tone poem or pure program than Beethoven's *Pastoral*, the finale of which shares much in common with the thematic substance. Neither are narratives, but landscapes.

The sonorous English Horn and muted French horns usher in a somewhat darker, though no less colorful, central section, which eventually resolves once more to bright and festive spirit. A nostalgic clarinet solo near the work's conclusion may allude to the composer's bittersweet goodbye to his home as he prepares to leave for America. As gently as it came, the overture fades away, not mournfully, but with a smile and fond farewell.

Jean Sibelius | *Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47*
(1865 – 1957) | Duration: 35"

Sibelius had a fond attachment to the violin, and studied it in his youth. Though he aspired at one time to become a famed virtuoso, he never attained that level of greatness. The composer poured this repressed devotion into this, his only concerto.

Atop a D minor cloud, the soloist floats effortlessly, before a soft echo in the clarinet's rich, throaty tones. Throughout the concerto, Sibelius is careful to voice much of the orchestra in a lower register,

emphasizing the distinction between the soloist's timbre. A sultry non-chord tone a few measures in suggests a note of defiance in the soloist.

Throughout the movement, even in its most expressive moments, there is a notion of restraint and even fear. The soloist often seems misaligned with the orchestra: not rhythmically nor harmonically, but in temperament. Themes emerge yet soon subside, and so much of the movement's melodic content is held deep down in the lowest voices of the orchestra, against which the violinist is in a continuous struggle. (Though Sibelius never expressed much admiration from Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst found the composer's music to be fascinating.) An amorous second theme radiates, making full use of the violin's double-stopping abilities. A stern, martial episode follows in the orchestra, which then launches into a grotesque sort of dance before subsiding into a low and gradually disappearing drone.

From here, the soloist re-emerges to begin the development, the entirety of which is handed over to the soloist. In most any sonata form movement, this is the time for escape, where themes, motives and harmonies venture off into uncharted territory. When a composer decides it is time to pull out the map and compass and find a route to home, they find a way to transition back. In the development-cadenza, Sibelius awards the violinist freedom to explore, and though the orchestra interjects early on with a violent shout, it eventually subsides. The soloist is left to wander throughout its full range of dynamic, pitch, and style.

The beginning of the recapitulation (the return to home) is subtle. None of the usual conventions prepare a grand return of the opening theme. Instead, the soloist floats into the heights of its range while the opening theme bubbles up from below. Perhaps in a nod to Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto,* in which the soloist and orchestra overlap their cadenza, Sibelius truly blurs these lines. In the energetic coda, every restraint breaks loose, and a tone of defiance on the part of the violinist continues to an explosive final note.

The second movement prominently features the warm timbre of the woodwind section, and affords a period of comfort and calm, as though stepping inside a toasty cabin from the blustery cold. The finale, in the style of a rustic and bawdy polonaise (complete with nasal low-stopped horns!), is as comical as its predecessors were serious. Rather than coming off as defiant and argumentative, the soloist instead appears capricious: changing its mind every few phrases to some other musical idea. When the full strings, midway through the movement, take a stab at the theme, played dryly in completely square rhythm with no lilt, the violinist quickly shuts them up, as if saying "let me handle this…" An expansive build, with echoes of the opening movement, brings the concerto to a close.

Hannah Lash
B. 1981

Voynich Symphony
Duration: 40"

The beguiling compilation of illustrated and texted vellum leaves that we have come to call the *Voynich Manuscript* changed hands numerous times, perhaps passing at one point through the collections of Rudolf II, the Hapsburg ruler of the Bohemian kingdom in the seventeenth century, and Athenasius Kircher, the Jesuit scientist, mathematician, and scholar whose plentiful collection of published treatises proved invaluable in the dissemination of scientific and philosophical inquiry during his time. The manuscript was in the possession of several other owners before finally being presented to the scholarly world by the bookseller Wilfrid Voynich. The codex made its “debut” to the academic world, after centuries in hiding in 1921, when Voynich presented it to the College of Physicians in Philadelphia, after having obtained the manuscript in 1912 and studied it in the interim.

Its author, as well as the language of its text, remain unknown. Many scholars speculate that the work is written in a form of code or cipher, its meaning deliberately obscured. Others propose that it is the result of hallucination: a written equivalent to speaking in tongue.

Beyond its text, the manuscript is filled with colorful, playful, and dynamic illustrations of astrological patterns, herbs and plants, and human figures. The illustrations seem to resemble illustrative styles of works found in Italy and Germany, though neither of these connections offer much information that would help to identify the still-mysterious language of the text.

There are elements of both sensuality and humor within the illustrations, which are vibrant and almost surrealistic in their depictions of flora, fauna, astronomy, and the human form. One similarity which may come to mind is the work of the fifteenth century Dutch painter Hieronymous Bosch, who, in his celebrated triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights,* integrates nightmarish and fantastical elements, and unapologetically erotic imagery. To assume that the artistic styles and subjects of the medieval and Renaissance periods were conservative and restrained is a severe oversimplification and underestimation. On the contrary, the bawdy writings of Boccaccio and Chaucer, as well as the theater of Marlowe, Shakespeare, reveal the freedom and fascination of the artist and the scientist in the areas of sexuality, emotion, and, to a certain degree, of the occult.

We should, in examining the Voynich Manuscript as not only an opaque text but as a beautifully crafted and sumptuously illustrated flow of images and patterns, considering it through a humanistic lens. In it, we may seek playfulness, wit, depth, and intention, as we would any work of visual or literary art.

Among the most striking of features within the codex is the repetition of patterns and visual themes throughout sections that seem otherwise distinct. Lash’s symphony replicates this organic unity in music: the final motives of the opening *Herbal* movement become the seeds of the celestial themes

in the *Astronomical*. Reflection and cohesion are natural elements within a multi-movement symphony, just as in a free-flowing tangible work such as the *Voynich Manuscript.*

- *Program Notes by Patrick Jankowski*