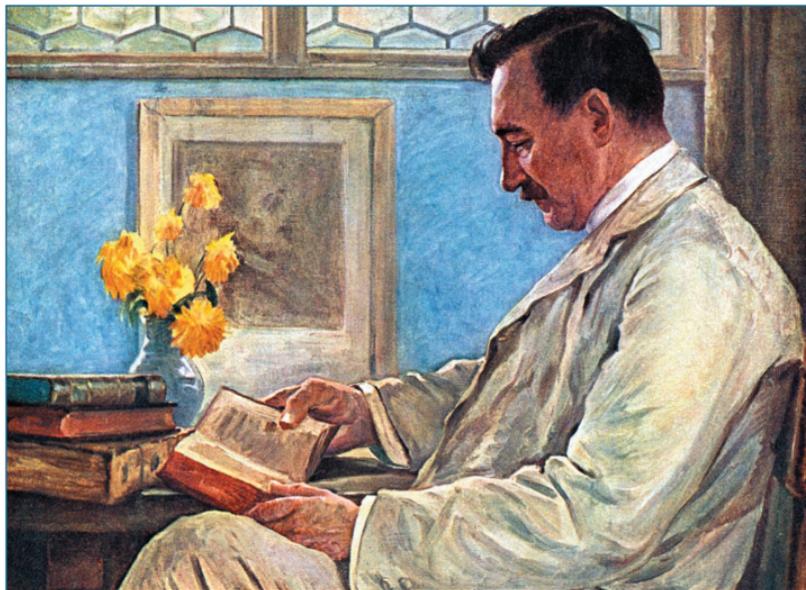


NAXOS

Josef Bohuslav
FOERSTER

**Symphony No. 4, 'Easter Eve'
Festive Overture • Meine Jugend**

**Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra
Lance Friedel**



Josef Bohuslav Foerster (1859–1951)

Festive Overture, Op. 70 *World première recording*

Meine Jugend (My Youth), Symphonic Poem Op. 44 *World première recording*

Symphony No. 4 in C minor, Op. 54, 'Easter Eve'

Josef Bohuslav Foerster was born in Prague in 1859. He studied at the Prague Organ School, and upon graduation he was appointed organist at St Vojtěch Church, taking over the post from no less a figure than Antonín Dvořák. In these years Foerster also had close contact with Bedřich Smetana, and received encouragement from Tchaikovsky and others. In 1888 he married the famous Czech soprano Berta Lauterer, and the couple eventually moved to Hamburg. It was here that Foerster met Gustav Mahler, a fellow German-speaking Bohemian, and the two became friends. The Foersters went with Mahler to Vienna in 1903, where they remained until they returned to Prague in 1918. By the time of his death, at the age of 91, Foerster had become the grand old man of Czech music, teaching many important young composers. In all this time he also composed prolifically. His writing was influenced both by his close connection with music for the church, including a complete mastery of Palestrina-style counterpoint, and by his love of the theatre. Music, and all art, was for Foerster an expression of the beauty of the human soul.

Foerster's *Festive Overture, Op. 70*, was written for the opening of the new theatre at Královské Vinohrady in Prague in 1907. It begins with an arresting kettle-drum solo, followed by an energetic main theme. The richly lyrical second theme combines Czech flair and Viennese elegance. All three of these ideas are soon combined contrapuntally, yet with the utmost naturalness and flowing momentum. In the development another theme is heard, also lyrical but with a striving, heroic character. In the recapitulation, after a dramatic pause, this heroic theme appears wistfully, before the kettle-drum solo returns to lead the music to a rousing conclusion.

The symphonic poem *Meine Jugend* (My Youth) is also a product of Foerster's years in Vienna. The bounding 6/8 main theme suggests the stride of a confident young man, happy with the world. This soon gives way to another

of Foerster's gorgeously lyrical second themes, with a delicacy and radiance of scoring that here almost looks forward to Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. These two ideas are developed with a wide variety of mood and expression, including some meltingly beautiful tranquil passages, until a broad climax is reached. A new, song-like theme then appears, marked *Andante religioso*, which may represent the deep importance of faith in Foerster's life. The recapitulation begins with a brief but fun fugato, perhaps a reference to his years of schooling. The second theme then returns even more richly scored than before, leading to a dissonant outcry, representing the sudden death of the composer's mother. A passage of quiet stillness ensues, followed by the wonderful reassurance of the *religioso* theme. A brilliant coda rounds off the work, bringing the various themes together one last time.

The *Fourth Symphony* is perhaps Foerster's masterpiece. It was written during his first years in Vienna, surely under the spell of Bruckner and Mahler. Like Bruckner, Foerster was a devout Roman Catholic, and the *Fourth Symphony* is a direct expression of his deep religious feeling. The first movement is a Mahleresque funeral march, with a sombre first theme that slowly tries to rise from the depths. Twice the music seems about to reach a climax, only to return to the ominous mood of the opening. Finally a sunnier second theme appears, and the music grows in warmth and radiance until a new, rather childlike theme is heard on the flute. The development sweeps in mightily, with the first and second themes combined in a stormy passage that eventually leads to a huge, wrenchingly dissonant chord in the full orchestra. This gradually dissipates and the opening music returns. The recapitulation soon reaches a climax, where the brass cry out with a version of the second theme as a descending triad, which will become very important later on. The coda begins with an even more contrapuntally elaborate version of the music of the development, the second theme given

forth by the violins 'with maximum exultation'. Despite the tremendous energy released by this passage, the music can only return to the opening theme, pounded out by the full orchestra. The music returns to the gloomy tread of the opening bars, closing with solemn chords.

The second movement brings a complete contrast. Here Foerster's Bohemian heritage comes to the fore with a bucolic scherzo that would be right at home among Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*. He then takes a cue from Bruckner's *Fifth Symphony* by giving us a second theme in a markedly slower tempo, so that it sounds as if we have already reached the trio. This folksy Ländler has such elegance and affected manners, suggesting that it might be aimed at high society, but it is a beautiful one nonetheless. The real trio then comes at a slightly faster tempo, with a chorale-like theme in the brass decorated with snippets of the scherzo theme. The second part of the trio expands romantically, with great swells of sound from the whole orchestra that eventually fade away mysteriously. The scherzo then returns complete, with a very cheeky final coda.

The slow movement begins with the lonely sound of a muted solo violin accompanied by two bassoons, more evidence of Foerster's superb ear for orchestral colour. What can one say about a movement such as this? It is pure, radiant melody, supported by lush harmony and fabulous scoring, all the more moving for its complete sincerity of utterance. The movement ends in a mood of meditative calm.

The finale, the longest and most complex of the four movements, begins with a menacing theme in the low

strings and woodwinds. There soon comes a tender theme in the violins gently striving upwards, which is actually the main theme of the first movement appearing in a new guise. This process of gently striving upwards informs the entire movement. After we reach a broad climax, a solo violin then enters with a new theme, echoed by a solo cello. The music continues in this lyrical vein until we reach a climax on the dominant of A flat. Then a surprise: a drum-roll ushers in a powerful fugue subject in the strings. This is followed by the sweetly expressive sound of the second theme high on a solo violin. The music grows mightily, inexorably, until we reach a towering climax, the descending triad motif sounding again from the brass. Here begins what might be called the recapitulation, with the upward-striving theme returning in the winds, with floating counterpoint above in the solo violin. The fugue subject then bursts forth in the violins, combined with the striving theme in the bass. These two ideas and the lyrical second theme are combined contrapuntally to magnificent effect (again, shades of Bruckner's *Fifth Symphony*). The music surges ahead until the sound is suddenly cut off, revealing the distant sound of a church organ intoning the Easter song 'On the Third Day Our Creator Rose'. The orchestra takes renewed energy from this voice from on high, and the music seems to build ever higher until we are nearing the gates of heaven itself. When we finally reach the home key of C major, the full organ joins the orchestra for a climax of unspeakable splendour and majesty, the descending triad motif blazing forth from the brass like a choir of angels praising God.

Lance Friedel

Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra

The Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1929 as the first professional musical ensemble fulfilling the needs of radio broadcasting in Slovakia. From the start there was a particular emphasis on contemporary Slovak music, resulting in a close connection with leading Slovak composers, including Alexander Moyzes, Eugen Suchoň, Ján Cikker and others. The original ensemble was gradually enlarged and from 1942, thanks to Alexander Moyzes, the then Director of Music at Slovak Radio, regular symphony concerts were given, broadcast live by Slovak Radio. From 1943 to 1946 the Yugoslavian Kresimir Baranovic was the chief conductor of the orchestra. His successors were L'udovit Rajter, Ladislav Slovák, Otakar Trhlik, Bystrík Režucha and Ondrej Lenárd, whose successful performances and recordings from 1977 to 1990 helped the orchestra to establish itself as an internationally known concert ensemble. His successor Róbert Stankovsky continued this work, until his unexpected death at the age of 36. His place was taken in 2001 by Charles Olivieri-Munroe. There are regular concert performances at the Slovak Radio concert hall in Bratislava, while through its broadcasts and recordings the orchestra has also become a part of concert life abroad, with successful tours to Austria, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, France, Bulgaria, Spain, Japan and Malta.

Lance Friedel

American Conductor Lance Friedel is currently enjoying an active career in Europe and the United States. He has served as Music Director of the Providence Chamber Orchestra in Rhode Island and Assistant Conductor of the Peabody Symphony Orchestra in Maryland, and has also directed numerous orchestras throughout the world. He was awarded first prize at the 2001 Mario Gusella International Conductors Competition in Pescara, Italy, and as a result of this prestigious prize, he has been engaged to conduct concerts with orchestras throughout Italy, as well as in Hungary. In 1994 Lance Friedel was the first-prize winner at the Czech Music Workshop in Hradec Králové, and was invited to conduct the Hradec Králové Philharmonic Orchestra the following season. In 1995, and again in 1996, he was awarded first prize at the Marienbad Conducting Workshop in Mariánské Lázně, and was invited to conduct concerts with the West Bohemian Symphony Orchestra. Since then he has been invited to conduct orchestras throughout Eastern Europe, including the Wrocław Philharmonic Orchestra in Poland and the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine in Kiev. He has conducted new productions of *Aida* and *Le nozze di Figaro* in Slovakia, as well as world première performances of several new American symphonic works in Bulgaria. Lance Friedel has attended master classes under such esteemed conductors as Leonard Slatkin, André Previn, and Lorin Maazel, and has attended numerous workshops and seminars, including the Mozarteum Summer Academy in Salzburg, the Aspen Music Festival, and Tanglewood. His conducting teachers have included Gustav Meier, Michael Chary, and Georg Tintner. A graduate of Boston University, he has also studied at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna, and the Mannes College of Music in New York.



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Playing Time
72:33

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Booklet notes in English

By the time of his death, at the age of 91, Foerster had become the grand old man of Czech music. Written under the spell of Bruckner and Mahler, the *Symphony No. 4* is widely regarded as his masterpiece. This deeply religious work begins with a Mahlerian march, followed by a bucolic scherzo that would be at home among Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*. The lovely slow movement provides yet more evidence of Foerster's superb ear for orchestral colour while the finale, the longest and most complex of the four movements, builds inexorably to a majestic climax that has been likened to approaching the gates of heaven.

Josef Bohuslav
FOERSTER
(1859–1951)

Symphony No. 4, 'Easter Eve'
Festive Overture • Meine Jugend

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|---|---------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Festive Overture, Op. 70 * | 9:26 |
| 2 | Meine Jugend (My Youth), Symphonic Poem, Op. 44 * | 15:50 |
| | Symphony No. 4 in C minor, Op. 54, 'Easter Eve' | 47:08 |
| 3 | I. Molto sostenuto | 12:08 |
| 4 | II. Allegro deciso | 10:21 |
| 5 | III. Andante sostenuto | 8:47 |
| 6 | IV. Lento lugubre – Allegro moderato | 15:53 |

* World première recordings

Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra
Lance Friedel

Recorded at Slovak Radio (Bratislava), 8–14 September 2004

Producer: Emil Niznansky • Sound Engineer: Hubert Geschwandtner • Booklet notes: Lance Friedel
Editions: Barenreiter Praha (Festive Overture); Universal Edition, Vienna (Meine Jugend, Symphony No. 4)
Cover image: Portrait of Josef Bohuslav Foerster by his brother Viktor Foerster (Lebrecht Music & Arts)