SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1266

The GREAT VIOLINISTS – Volume X

VÁSA PRÍHODA (1900-1960)

In discussions about schools of violin playing, we hear little about the Czech school; yet fiddlers from the Czech lands played an enormous role in European music from the Baroque era onwards, and the so-called Russian school, which now rules the world, had important Czech elements in it. If we look only at those Czech violinists who stayed at home, we can detect a royal line of succession, which, in modern times, includes František Ondrícek, Jan Kubelík, Jaroslav Kocian, Vása Príhoda, Alexander Plocek, Josef Suk and Václav Hudecek. Vása Príhoda, whose centenary falls in the year 2000, had his heyday in the interwar years and, like his elder compatriot Kubelík, was thought of initially as a virtuoso, which tended to obscure his more lasting virtues. This programme includes music of Paganini and other 'fireworks', for which he was famous, some excellent Bach, and his celebrated interpretation of the Dvorák Concerto.

Václav (Vása) František Príhoda was born at Vodnany on 22 August 1900 and by the time he was three he was playing a tin toy violin. He was taught from the age of five by his father Alois, himself an excellent violinist who ran a well-known musical school at Nusle. Alois Príhoda had studied with Otakar Sevcík and the composer Zdenek Fibich, and was a friend of Jan Kubelík, in whose father's orchestra he had played. Sensibly, he did not push Vása and the boy began serious studies only at eight. At ten he entered the Prague Conservatory to study with an excellent teacher, Jan Marák, brother of the tenor Otakar and concertmaster of the National Theatre. As Marák had studied with Sevcík's teacher Bennewitz, young Vása received an unusually integrated programme of instruction, Marák's teaching leading on naturally from that of his father. In 1912 he gave his graduation concert and went on a provincial tour, in 1913 he made his Prague début with a recital at the Mozarteum and in 1915 he played Paganini's D major Concerto twice with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra in Smetana Hall, also giving a recital with Otakar Marák. In 1919 he toured Switzerland, Yugoslavia and Italy, but ended up penniless. He took a job at the Gran Café Italia in Milan, spicing light music with Paganini's *Mos?* Variations and Tartini's *Devil's Trill* Sonata. He so impressed the clientele that a subscription was raised to sponsor an orchestral concert for him. Thus, on 27 December 1919 he was heard by Milan's most prominent musical resident, Arturo Toscanini. The programme included Paganini's D major Concerto (with the Sauret cadenza) and the *Paisiello* Variations; and a remark by the great conductor, to the effect that Paganini himself could not have played better, spurred Príhoda's backers to find him more work. By the end of the season he had played 84 concerts in Italy and had been allowed to play Paganini's violin in Genoa. In due course he also made a series of

acoustic 78rpm discs in Milan for the Fonotipia associate of Odeon.

From then on, his success was constant. He toured Argentina, Brazil and North America and made vertical cut "Diamond Discs" for the Edison company. In the last years of the acoustic era he made further records for Deutsche Grammophon in Berlin and for the next 20 years he stayed with that company. He first came to Britain in 1926. On one occasion he shared a Royal Albert Hall concert with Pablo Casals. The programme was rather bizarre: Príhoda performed virtuoso music in the first half, and after the interval Casals played unaccompanied Bach. Príhoda was now receiving huge fees and was able to indulge his enjoyment of good living, fine clothes and fast cars. In 1930 he married the violinist Alma Rosé, daughter of the celebrated quartet leader and concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic, Arnold Rosé. She was no more than averagely gifted as a fiddler, but was ambitious to have her own career, which led her more and more into light music. The marriage fairly soon foundered. Meanwhile Príhoda's European tours took him as far as the Soviet Union in 1931, and he even visited North Africa and Palestine. In Berlin he organised a trio with the pianist Michael Raucheisen and the cellist Paul Grümmer. Apart from the Paganini, his concerto repertoire took in Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Vieuxtemps, Wieniawski, Brahms, Dvorák, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius, and he played Saint-Saëns's *Havanaise* and Vieuxtemps's Ballade and Polonaise. Favourites in the sonata repertoire included Schubert, Schumann and Franck, and his programmes often featured Dvorák's works for violin and piano – his recording of the Sonatina with Raucheisen was much admired.

Príhoda's rather laisser-faire attitude during the Second World War and the last years of the Third Reich has come back to haunt him ever since. He played publicly in Germany, making a belated début with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra on 8 November 1940 with the Dvorák Concerto under Leo Borchard. He also toured both as a recitalist and with his trio. He also taught at the Munich Academy and the Salzburg Mozarteum (where he had been on the roster in the late 1930s), and made recordings for Deutsche Grammophon. His last wartime German appearance, a recital, was at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 18 May 1944, and his final wartime concert was given at the Smetana Hall in still-occupied Prague on 31 March, 1944. In the fevered post-war atmosphere he was charged with collaboration, made to pay a hefty fine and forbidden to give concerts in Czechoslovakia. He moved in 1946 to Rapallo in Italy and then, in 1948, to Turkey, taking Turkish nationality. Still more unpleasant insinuations further soured his last years. In 1944 Alma Rosé had perished in Auschwitz, where she had led the famous women's orchestra. Príhoda was accused of making no attempt to save her. It was further said that he had divorced her only because she was Jewish. In vain he pointed out (privately, as he tried to retain some dignity for both himself and for Alma) that two years after the marriage to Alma had ended, he had remarried and that his second wife, too, was Jewish. He had long considered all ties between him and Alma severed, he had believed she was safely in England with her father. Only after the war did he learn that she had returned to

Europe, been captured and sent to Auschwitz. The controversy has recently been re-ignited by a partisan biography of Alma.

Príhoda's playing declined a little in the 1950s, especially after he suffered a severely broken arm in 1954. In particular his vibrato, which had always been rather personal, loosened. Even so, radio recordings issued in recent years by a German enthusiast show a still vital violinist with interesting things to communicate in Mozart's third violin concerto, as well as in warhorses such as Vieuxtemps' fourth concerto and Tchaikovsky's concerto. In 1956 he returned to Prague for the Spring Festival and his interpretation of the Dvorák concerto at the Smetana Hall on 30 May was greeted with enthusiasm. He may have been past his best, as a recording of the event proves, but his compatriots were ready to forgive him. Two years later he made recordings for Cetra of Bach and Mozart concertos, Tartini's *Devil's Trill* Sonata and other pieces. He died of a heart attack in Vienna on 26 July 1960, leaving his 1710 Stradivarius, the Camposelice, to the Czech state. It has since been played by Josef Suk.

As a violinist Vása Príhoda was a great individual in an era of great individuals. His technical command was such that he could play a verse of Schubert's song *Litanei* in harmonics and still make the result sound lyrical. His double-stopping sounded effortless and was exquisitely in tune. He enjoyed indulging in pyrotechnics, but could also deliver a laid-back, genial performance of Dvorák's E minor Slavonic Dance in the Kreisler arrangement. He loved playing de Sarasate, the lilting Spanish Dances as well as the zippy *Zigeunerweisen*. As a man he was easy to get on with and not very intellectual – his accompanist for the second half of his life, Otto A. Gräf, recalled him as being 'naïve, jovial'. His own compositions, a number of which he recorded, were simple and enjoyable. With his French colleague Maurice Vieux he shared a passion for fishing and, like his German colleague Adolf Busch, he loved playing with model railways.

The programme for this Compact Disc has been chosen from Príhoda's superb Deutsche Grammophon-Polydor records made in the late 1930s and early 1940s; they were beautifully engineered and had only limited distribution. The most important performance is that of the Dvorák concerto which, despite being given with a German orchestra and a Dutch-born, naturalised German conductor, is a welcome corrective to the lack of stylistic consciousness shown in the piece by today's jet-set soloists. Compare it with the rhythmically ill-defined treatment of the Cello Concerto by most non-Czech players. Had it received wider circulation at the time, it might have offset the misleading impression of the music given by the bland, insipid Menuhin and Kulenkampff versions. Recently a live recording of similar vintage by Busch – who made a special study of Dvorák's music – was discovered and turned out to be wildly exciting. Príhoda, of course, had the style in his bones. His interpretation is more flexible than the Busch reading or even of that of his successor Josef Suk, but it is always solidly based in Dvorák's rhythms. In recent years the fluid Príhoda way has been revived by Hudecek. Príhoda approaches the concerto with the stylistic attributes of his day, the constant

portamento, for instance, but with the ease of a player to whom the music is second nature. His tuning is often creative, as in the lyrical interlude of the Finale, where he ever so slightly flattens his intonation. The effect is unforgettable. His sensitive double-stopping at various points and his lyrical relaxation in the slow movement gracefully evoke Bohemia's countryside.

Príhoda did not perform much unaccompanied Bach. His two party pieces were the Chaconne and the first two movements of the C major Sonata, which he treated like a gigantic prelude and fugue. A radio recording of 1954 shows him still in command of Bach's style, but inevitably the 1943 version, here, shows him in an even better light. Like most violinists of his generation he liked to play the *Devil's Trill* Sonata, but, unlike them, he composed his own cadenza rather than use Kreisler's version; this recording catches his interpretation at its peak. In Paganini's *Paisiello* Variations he unnecessarily employs Gräf as accompanist, but displays his vibrant, gutty tone and exciting command of spiccato, flying spiccato and left-hand pizzicato. Bazzini's *Dance of the Goblins* for once has a really devilish air to it, going some way to explain how in his early days Príhoda was compared with Heifetz.

Tulley Potter

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records thanks Raymond Glaspole for making available records for tracks 1 to 5. Thanks are due also to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

Copyright Notice: This digitally transferred compilation with its notes is copyright, it may not be broadcast, copied, hired out, publicly performed or stored in a retrieval system without written permission.