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VLADIMIR ASHKENAZY  
HELSINKI PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

JOSEF SUK  
ASRAEL

ONDINE

## Josef Suk (1874–1935)

### Asrael – Symphony for large orchestra in C minor, Op. 27

The musical history of the Czech nation over some three centuries has often been something of a family affair. The dedication of several generations of a single family to performing, teaching and composing has been a phenomenon of Czech musical life from the seventeenth century to the present day. In the eighteenth century the most famous representatives of this tendency, largely because of their impact on German music, were the Stamitz and Benda families. While there was less of a trend towards migration in the romantic era, distinguished families of musicians were still a vital part of Czech culture, and, spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the most famous of these musical dynasties: the Dvořáks and the Suks.

The first notable Suk in this distinguished line was the composer, Josef. Born in the Bohemian village of Křečovice, he shared a similar musical background to many provincial musicians - learning from his father who was also the local teacher and choirmaster. The climax of Suk's musical studies was the year spent between 1891 and 1892 as a pupil of Antonín Dvořák at the Prague Conservatory. After this, Suk divided his career between professional violin playing – mainly as second violin in the Czech Quartet – and composing. If some of the works of the 1890s show affinities with his teacher, Dvořák, there were numerous indicators of a clear personal style in which minor key melody, a fine ear for instrumental sonority and a tendency toward melancholy are prevalent characteristics.

By the early years of the twentieth century Suk had acquired an unmistakable compositional voice and the music of his maturity shows remarkable distinction and originality, most clearly in evidence in the great orchestral works, *Ripening (Zrání)*, *A Summer's Tale (Pohádka léta)* and *Asrael*. If the stellar reputations of Janáček and



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Martinuo have tended to obscure the virtues of Suk's genius in our time, he is at last through performance and recording beginning to emerge from the shadows. While his link with Dvořák, cemented by his marriage to the composer's favourite daughter Otylka (Otilie) in 1898, was a central one in Suk's creative life, his music was far more than an extension of his teacher's style. Suk's greatest work, the *Asrael* Symphony – taking its name from the biblical angel of death – is deeply bound up with tragedy. The idyllic happiness of the few years after his marriage to Otylka was brought to an abrupt close in 1904 with the death of Dvořák. The unexpected demise of his father in law, on 1 May 1904, was the initial stimulus for a five-movement symphony, but Suk's grief was compounded a year later with the death of his young wife, Otylka. When this occurred, Suk had already completed three movements of the symphony and was working on the fourth. After this still greater blow, he abandoned the existing fourth movement and his plans for a variation finale, and replaced them with two *Adagio* movements, completing the whole in 1906. The first movement impresses immediately as an eloquent outpouring of sorrow evoking a sense of desolation anticipating Shostakovich at his most powerful. Although written to the memory of Dvořák, there is virtually nothing in the musical language of this extraordinary movement which could be described as derivative. A personal note is struck by the use of a 'death motif' (a rising and falling pair of augmented fourth intervals) from Suk's music for the play *Radúz and Mahulena*, a pair whose love he associated with his relationship with Otylka. As a whole, the movement encapsulates the tragedy of loss heightened by moments of great sweetness.



Josef Suk in 1906



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Two shorter movements follow: the first makes use of a theme which is reminiscent, appropriately enough, of the chromatic main motif of Dvořák's Requiem Mass of 1891, developing it into an intense and terrifying funeral march. The third movement is a fantastic scherzo, full of masterly orchestration and lightening contrasts, which both maintains and enhances the sinister tone of the previous movement; its central section, though rich in nostalgia, offers only brief respite. Its gentler vein, however, is taken up in the fourth movement - the first of the two written expressly for Otylka - which offers a fragile consolation before the return of apparently relentless tragedy in the remarkable finale. The 'death motif' on the drums heralds a final movement that ranges broadly from the grief-stricken outbursts of this opening through an energetic, occasionally grotesque central section to the moving, but understated and certainly unsentimental comfort of the coda. Dedicated 'to the noble memory of Dvořák and Otylka', Suk's *Asrael* symphony is a masterpiece of the late-Romantic repertoire which can easily be compared in scope and emotional range to Bruckner and Mahler.

**Jan Smaczny**

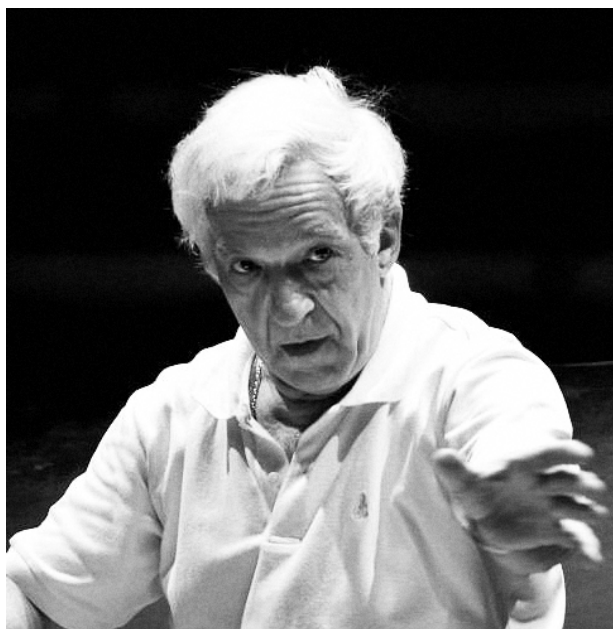


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## Vladimir Ashkenazy

In the years since Vladimir Ashkenazy first came to prominence on the world stage in the 1955 Chopin Competition in Warsaw, he has built an extraordinary career, not only as one of the most renowned and revered pianists of our times, but as an artist whose creative life encompasses a vast range of activities and continues to offer inspiration to music-lovers across the world.

Conducting has formed the largest part of his activities for the past 20 years. Formerly Chief Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic (1998–2003), and Music Director of NHK Symphony Orchestra in Tokyo (2004–2007), he assumed the new position of Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in January 2009. Ashkenazy maintains strong links with a number of other major orchestras with whom he has built special relationships over the years, including the Philharmonia Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony and Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin. Vladimir Ashkenazy is featured on several Ondine releases; he has recorded Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 "From the New World" (ODE 962-2D) and works by Richard Strauss with the Czech Philharmonic, as well as Bruckner's Symphony in F minor with the DSO Berlin. Further recordings with the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra include Rautavaara's Third Piano Concerto "Gift of Dreams", commissioned by Ashkenazy as a concerto which he could conduct from the piano.



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## Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra

The Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, the oldest professional symphony orchestra in the Nordic countries, was founded as the Helsinki Orchestral Society by the young Robert Kajanus, its first Chief Conductor, in 1882. Well known today for its tradition of performing Sibelius, it also premiered many of his major works, often with the composer himself conducting. The orchestra undertook its first foreign tour to the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, and since then it has visited most European countries, in addition to visiting the USA and Japan, both on four occasions. The orchestra's current Chief Conductor is John Storgårds, who assumed his position in autumn 2008, having previously served as Principal Guest Conductor from 2003.

The Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and Ondine have maintained a long-standing exclusive partnership with, among others, an edition of the complete Sibelius symphonies under the direction of Leif Segerstam (ODE 1075-2Q)



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## THE 2xHD MASTERING PROCESS



This album was mastered using our 2xHD proprietary system. In order to achieve the most accurate reproduction of the original recording we tailor our process specifically for each project, using a selection from our pool of state-of-the-art audiophile components and connectors. The process begins with a transfer to analog from the original DSD master, using cutting edge D/A converters. The analog signal is then sent through a hi-end tube pre-amplifier before being recorded directly in DXD using the dCS905 A/D and the dCS Vivaldi Clock. All connections used in the process are made of OCC silver cable.

DSD and 192kHz/24Bit versions are separately generated, directly from the analog signal.

2xHD was created by producer/studio owner André Perry and audiophile sound engineer René Laflamme.

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