

Observations: Suk's Angel of Death is not for the faint-hearted

By Jessica Duchen
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The Asrael Symphony by Josef Suk is no piece for the faint-hearted. In fact, it could be the most hyper-emotional piece of classical music you will ever encounter. It's one of those late romantic, larger-than-life creations to which devotees of unusual repertoire flock in droves when – or if – the chance arises. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Asrael was performed in the UK once in a blue moon. Yet in Suk's native Czech Republic, this symphony is rather like Elgar's "Nimrod" in Britain, a national musical icon wheeled out on significant state occasions. Its outing tomorrow with the London Philharmonic and its principal conductor Vladimir Jurowski is the centrepiece of the UK's Czech Festival. In 1904, the prodigiously gifted Suk, aged 30, began to write his Symphony No 2, subtitled "Asrael" (the Angel of Death), in direct response to the death of his father-in-law and former teacher, Antonín Dvořák. But within two months, when he had completed three of the five movements, his wife, Dvořák's daughter Otilka, also died.

"The fearsome Angel of Death struck with his scythe a second time," he wrote, "Such a misfortune either destroys a man or brings to the surface all the powers dormant in him. Music saved me and after a year I began the second part of the symphony, beginning with an adagio, a tender portrait of Otilka."

Later in the 20th century composers and musical analysts alike would reject the idea that music should contain such personal emotion. Here the composer's grief blazes with such raw intensity that it's almost too harrowing to listen. "Now we are finally rediscovering late romanticism," says Jurowski. There are other reasons for Asrael's neglect abroad; not least, it is very difficult to play, and, Jurowski adds, "atrociously difficult to conduct." The strings in particular are subjected to a workout rather like a musical Prague Marathon. "Suk was a fantastic violinist," Jurowski says, "but all his life he played second violin. It's almost as if he wanted to prove his virtuosity in some way by writing incredibly demanding orchestral parts".

It would be tempting to think that Suk never quite emerged from behind the coat-tails of his famous father-in-law: as a tribute Asrael is replete with quotations from, for example, Dvořák's Requiem and his opera Rusalka. Jurowski suggests, though, that it is not Dvořák who has ultimately overshadowed Suk, but Janáček, his contemporary, whose reputation has undergone perhaps the most dramatic transformation of any 20th-century composer. His Taras Bulba and Eternal Gospel feature alongside Asrael in tomorrow's concert. As always, perhaps the best is the enemy of the good.

Tomorrow, Royal Festival Hall, London (0844 875 0073)