

**LUCERNE
FESTIVAL**

HISTORIC
PERFORMANCES

audite

Václav Neumann

Dvořák *Symphony No. 8 | The Wild Dove*
Smetana *Prelude to Libuše*

Czech Philharmonic

Václav Neumann

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

Symphony No. 8 in G major, Op. 88

I. *Allegro con brio* 9:46

II. *Adagio* 10:11

III. *Allegretto grazioso – Coda. Molto vivace* 6:22

IV. *Allegro ma non troppo* 10:35

Antonín Dvořák

The Wild Dove, Op. 110

Symphonic Poem

based on Karel Jaromír Erben

– *Andante, marcia funebre – Allegro* – 7:14

Molto vivace – Allegretto grazioso –

– *Andante – Andante, Tempo I* 11:25

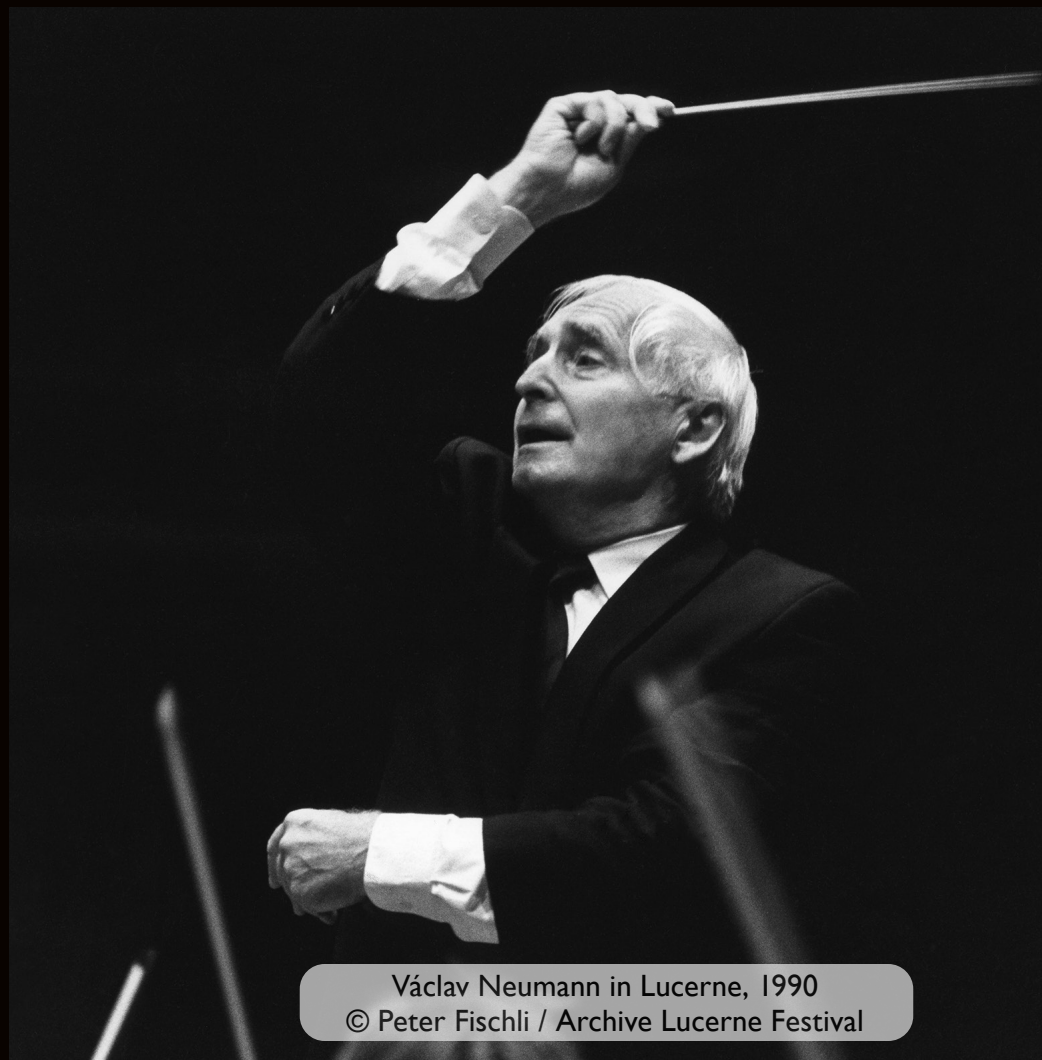
Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

Prelude to the Opera *Libuše*

Maestoso – Più lento – Tempo I 8:49

Czech Philharmonic

Václav Neumann



Václav Neumann in Lucerne, 1990
© Peter Fischli / Archive Lucerne Festival

Václav Neumann

audite



First guest performance with the Czech Philharmonic, 1969
© J. Koch / Archive Lucerne Festival

Master of the singing orchestra

Václav Neumann and the Czech Philharmonic in Lucerne

“I’m quintessentially Czech,” Václav Neumann once professed – a subtle indication that even during the politically turbulent times of the Cold War, he could not imagine any other home than Prague. His Czech identity was also an artistic trademark in the international music world, especially during his years as chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic (1968–1990). Whilst Rafael Kubelík left the orchestra and the country of his birth in 1948, after the Stalinists had come to power, and his successor Karel Ančerl, although an eminent musician, was always underestimated in the West, Neumann managed on countless concert tours to establish the Czech Philharmonic as a cultural ambassador for his country.

Between 1969 and 1990, Neumann travelled six times to the Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern (today’s Lucerne Festival) with the Czech state orchestra, performing nine programmes. Works by Beethoven, Weber, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Tchaikovsky were of course included; after all, the enormously hard-working and inquisitive conductor had more than 400 works in his repertoire, from baroque music to contemporary modernism. The real export hits, however, were Dvořák, Smetana, Janáček, Martinů – and Gustav Mahler, whom Neumann always regarded as a kindred spirit due to his Bohemian origins and the many folkloristic influences in his music. This music was his musical “mother tongue”, which would also inform the warm sound and vocal *espressivo* of the orchestra. Václav Neumann and the Czech Philharmonic were a well-established team who worked together for decades, representing an authentic national musical culture which had developed since the orchestra’s foundation in 1896 and which made an international impression.

Music and politics

In contrast, the political aspect of these performances in the West was ambivalent. The status of a “cultural ambassador” from a socialist country naturally involved official representation of the regime. After the bloody suppression of the “Prague Spring” by Warsaw Pact soldiers in the summer of 1968, the Czechoslovakian regime suffered a severe loss of image and a mass emigration of opposition activists. Following the invasion of the Eastern Bloc troops, Václav Neumann spontaneously gave up his post as Gewandhauskapellmeister in Leipzig and travelled to Prague. There however, in the same year, he took over the direction of the Czech Philharmonic – as successor to Karel Ančerl, who had emigrated in protest. Even today the circumstances of this politically disreputable casting are not entirely clear; it is possible that Neumann regarded his departure from Leipzig, for which he was deeply resented in the GDR, as a personal signal of solidarity with his country.

Václav Neumann

audite



Václav Neumann in Lucerne, 1984
© Georg Anderhub / Archive Lucerne Festival

A member of the Communist Party since 1946, he apparently came to terms with the Czechoslovakian government in the years that followed. His attitude only changed when he sympathised with the “Charter 77” civil rights movement led by the writer and later President Václav Havel: Neumann and his orchestra decisively supported the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989, which was primarily initiated by students and critics of the system.

While Neumann’s exiled compatriot Rafael Kubelík distributed an appeal for donations to support Czech emigrants at the 1968 Musikfestwochen Luzern, Neumann opted at his first festival appearance in 1969 to let just the music speak, his programme including the Sixth Symphony by Bohuslav Martinů, who had remained in exile after the Second World War despite all the temptations, and was therefore little loved by the Czech cultural authorities. After this debut, the first-ever appearance of an orchestra from the so-called Eastern Bloc at the festival, another fifteen years would pass before the Czech Philharmonic and its chief conductor made another guest appearance in August 1984 with two concerts in the old Kunst- und Kongresshaus, as part of the festival theme “Music of Czechoslovakia”. Rafael Kubelík was also invited with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and pointedly conducted Bedřich Smetana’s cycle *My Fatherland* – the patriotic work of Czech romanticism and a resounding beacon of political self-determination across eras and systems.

Neumann countered this with two somewhat unknown pieces by Antonín Dvořák: the Fifth Symphony and *The Wild Dove*, as documented on this CD – one of the four symphonic poems based on folk tales by Karel Jaromír Erben with which Dvořák rounded off his orchestral oeuvre. The Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick found the story of a woman, who poisons her husband, remarries, but is repeatedly reminded of her guilt by the bird of the work’s title and finally succumbs to madness, to be excessively gloomy. However, Dvořák developed an interesting musical form, creating an arc of suspense and working with contrasting material, by using the funeral music from the beginning to underline the woman’s suicide at the end, whilst featuring wedding music in the central section, which is played by village musicians. In a famous recording from 1951 with the Czech Philharmonic, Václav Talich exaggerates the effects of mourning and exuberance. The level-headed Neumann, on the other hand, strictly adheres to Dvořák’s tempo indications, creating a highly organic, beautiful-sounding interpretation of the work.

To open the second Lucerne concert in 1984 Neumann chose a “national” piece: the prelude to Bedřich Smetana’s opera *Libuše*, which, despite its brevity, takes on an important role in Czech repertoire. The opera about the legendary matriarch of the Přemyslids is rarely performed on stage today, but its “double premiere” symbolises the empowerment of Bohemian culture against the foreign rule of the emperor in Vienna at the time. In 1881, *Libuše* was performed as a festive opera for the opening of the new national theatre in Prague. Tragically, the theatre completely burnt down only a short time later,

Václav Neumann



Václav Neumann in Lucerne, 1988
© Stephan Wicki / Archive Lucerne Festival

but was rebuilt in a national tour de force thanks to generous donations and was inaugurated a second time in 1883 – once again with Smetana’s *Libuše!* The radiant fanfare theme of the prelude signals the glory of the Czech nation, which appears to Libuše in visionary dreams at the end of the opera. Neumann did not overwhelm the Lucerne audience with national emphasis in his performance, but rather highlighted the lyrical moments. “The opening fanfares had nothing aggressive or superficial about them,” remarked the critic from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, “but simply seemed unreflectingly festive. The conductor showed that he was not interested in external effect, but in inner truthfulness, by allowing the fanfares to fade away slowly, giving way to the gentle melody of the oboes.”

The “violinist-conductor”

This was a fine observation as, in contrast to the expressive Kubelík, Neumann usually sought to achieve a balance between richly nuanced lines – he spoke of the “singing orchestra” – and a strict, “objective” form in the spirit of musical classicism. This approach to symphonic music was imparted to him by his great role model Václav Talich, who as chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic from 1919 to 1942 shaped the modern sound of the orchestra. Neumann himself initially trained as a violinist and violist; and he always regarded his early dual career as a “violinist-conductor” as an invaluable advantage in working with the orchestra.

Neumann was born in Prague on 29 September 1920, as the son of an engineer. During the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, he studied at the Prague Conservatory, including with the famous violinist Josef Míka. For seven years, Neumann was a member of the Smetana Quartet – playing the viola as part of the original line-up – as well as of the Czech Philharmonic. In 1948, after Kubelík’s emigration, he was given the opportunity to conduct the Philharmonic, and their first joint concert tour also took them to Dresden and Leipzig. However, following pressure from the party, Neumann had to relinquish the coveted post of chief conductor to his older colleague Karel Ančerl and initially earn his spurs in Karlovy Vary and Brno. He also regularly conducted the Prague Symphony Orchestra.

The impetus for his international career did not come from his home country, but from the GDR. In 1956, Walter Felsenstein, the Intendant of the Komische Oper, brought him to East Berlin for his legendary production of Leoš Janáček’s opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*. The director had taken the decision not to engage a seasoned stage practitioner, but a conductor like Neumann who was inexperienced in opera. The production proved to be a huge success and Neumann discovered opera for himself. As music director of the Komische Oper, with which he remained associated for eight years, and as guest conductor in Leipzig, he conducted Offenbach and Verdi, Mozart and Shostakovich, Mussorgsky as well as, time and again,

Václav Neumann

audite



Václav Neumann in Lucerne, 1986
© Stephan Wicki / Archive Lucerne Festival

Václav Neumann

audite

Janáček. In 1964, he was appointed general music director in Leipzig and chief conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra – a post steeped in tradition, which he exchanged in 1968 for the post of chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic following the events of the “Prague Spring”. After a brief intermezzo as general music director in Stuttgart (1970–1972), Neumann returned once again to symphonic repertoire in Prague, and released complete recordings of symphonies by Dvořák (twice), Martinů and Mahler on the state label Supraphon, without neglecting classical or contemporary modern music.

In numerous film portraits and concert recordings for television, Neumann showed himself to be a charming and thoughtful explainer of music, and a conductor for whom clarity of expression was paramount. His conducting style, for all its suppleness and elegance, usually provided a characteristic, clear pulse which he maintained consistently and without violent fluctuations. His interpretations were therefore said to have a certain sense of objectivity. “There was nothing overly direct, clear or even spectacular about the rendition,” wrote the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in 1986 on the occasion of the third Lucerne guest performance with the Czech Philharmonic.

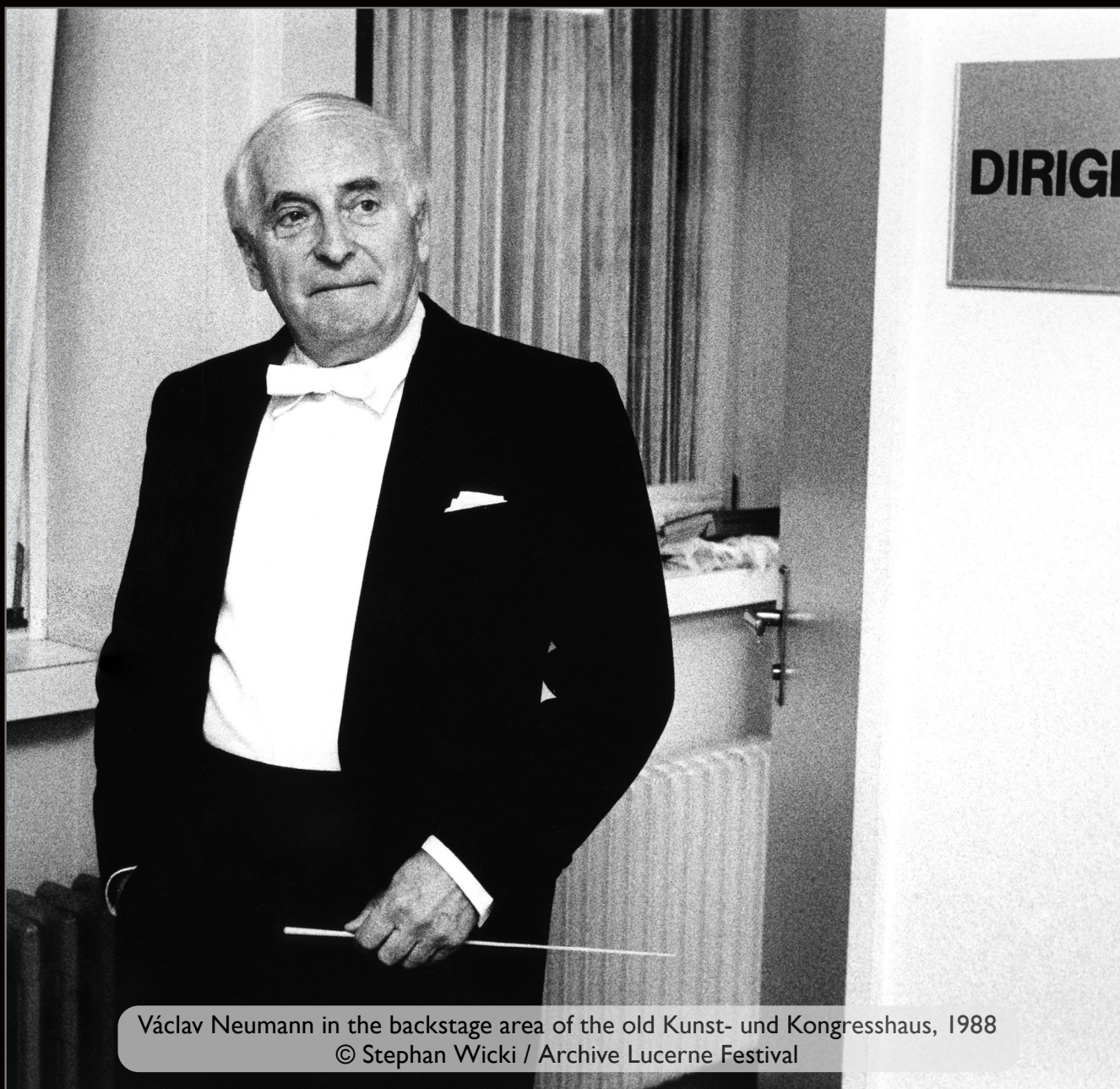
Neumann undoubtedly represented the antithesis of the physically hyperactive or evocative podium stars of his time. He preferred to focus on precise and fulfilled realisations of the musical text – as is exemplified by the recording of Dvořák’s Eighth Symphony, which he conducted at the first Lucerne Easter Festival in March 1988. Despite its lyrically sweeping theme, Neumann consistently interprets the opening as “Allegro con brio”; he conducts the first ritardando where Dvořák actually marks it: at the transition into the development section, which then begins in a slightly slower tempo (“Un poco meno mosso”). Such attention to detail, also in the dynamics, can be found in all Neumann’s readings – and he realises them so organically that there is never any hint of an ostentatious exhibition of “faithfulness to the original”.

In his later years, Neumann combined the precision of his interpretations with the serenity of old age. He died in Vienna on 2 September 1995, shortly before his seventy-fifth birthday.

Michael Struck-Schloen

Translation: *Viola Scheffel*

Václav Neumann



Václav Neumann in the backstage area of the old Kunst- und Kongresshaus, 1988
© Stephan Wicki / Archive Lucerne Festival

Václav Neumann



Václav Neumann in Lucerne, 1988
© Stephan Wicki / Archive Lucerne Festival

audite

recordings: live recordings at LUCERNE FESTIVAL
(Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)



Swiss Radio and Television SRF, all rights reserved

recording dates: August 25-26, 1984 (Dvořák, Op. 110 & Smetana)
March 26, 1988 (Dvořák, Op. 88)

recording location: Kunsthhaus, Lucerne

executive producer: Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff

rights: audite claims all rights arising from copyright law and competition law in relation to research, compilation and re-mastering of the original audio tapes, as well as the publication of these tracks. Violations will be prosecuted.

The historical publications at audite are based, without exception, on the original tapes from broadcasting archives. In general these are the original analogue tapes, which attain an astonishingly high quality, even measured by today's standards, with their tape speed of up to 38 cm/sec. The remastering – professionally competent and sensitively applied – also uncovers previously hidden details of the interpretations. Thus, a sound of superior quality results. Publications based on private recordings from broadcasts cannot be compared with these.



cover: Václav Neumann in Lucerne, 1990
© Peter Fischli / Archive Lucerne Festival

We have made every attempt to clear rights for all material presented here. Should you nonetheless believe that we have accidentally infringed your rights, please let us know at your earliest convenience. We will endeavour to resolve any issues immediately.

research & booklet editor: Malte Lohmann
art direction & design: AB•Design

audite

e-mail: info@audite.de
© 2024 + © 2024 Ludger Böckenhoff

