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George Szell

conducts a concert of Czech music

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The Russian Revolution of 1917 brought an end to fighting on the Eastern Front. Technically Austria-Hungary emerged as one of the victorious powers, but it turned out that it was only the war that was holding the empire together. The large, polyglot and multi-ethnic empire rapidly fell apart as individual segments struggled for their own independence. One of the new states that emerged in 1918 was Czechoslovakia and so this year, 2018, marks the centenary of the nation's founding.

George Szell is announced as a Czech conductor for this 1941 NBCSO broadcast, presenting an entire programme of Czech music. The latter is true, the former claim requires clarification. Szell was born in Budapest in 1897, so by birth he was a Hungarian. He grew up in Vienna, and his early conducting career was spent in both France and Germany. However his longest residence, before settling in America, was in Prague as director of the opera between 1929 and 1937, and this seems to be the source of the claim for Czech citizenship. Szell had ended up in the USA partly by accident. He was in transit from Australia to Europe when war broke out and ended up staying in the USA, eventually for good. In 1941 his most pressing need was to find work, and having already declined two invitations from Toscanini to conduct the NBCSO due to prior commitments, he readily made himself available in the spring of 1941. Szell knew that these four nationwide radio broadcasts could establish him as a notable conductor in America. Claiming Czech citizenship (now an occupied country), rather than Hungarian (a country allied with Germany), might have been a deliberate decision, but whether that was Szell's choice or NBC's is not known.

Szell's first NBCSO concert, the week before the one presented here, was warmly welcomed in the press. The New York Times though he had 'established himself as a conductor of truly distinguished abilities.' For the Czech concert, Szell decided to orchestrate Smetana's String Quartet in E minor, believing that 'it deserves wider musical horizons in orchestral form than are possible...for the string quartet.' Two Dvořák pieces were selected to commemorate the composer's centenary. The all-Czech programme was, as one listener noted 'eclectic', but confirmed the opinion that Szell was 'evidently a conductor of the highest rank.'

Although Toscanini grumbled about Szell's rehearsal technique, he evidently held his younger colleague in sufficiently high regard to invite him back for two more NBCSO concerts in 1943. By then Szell had begun a very successful three-year stint at the Metropolitan Opera as well as undertaking guest conducting in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. In 1944 he began an association with the Cleveland Orchestra that would last until his death in 1970.



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GEORGE SZELL A CONCERT OF CZECH MUSIC
SZELL, NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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XR remastering by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a photograph of George Szell

Broadcast of 8 March 1941
NBC Studio 8H, New York City

Due to time constraints all announcements made between performances have been cut, retaining only those at the start and end of the broadcast.

Total duration: 76:37

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1 RADIO Intro (1:41)

2 SMETANA The Bartered Bride - Overture (6:36)

SMETANA (arr. Szell) From My Life (String Quartet No. 1)

3 1st mvt. - Allegro vivo appassionato (7:30)

4 2nd mvt. - Allegro moderato à la Polka (5:08)

5 3rd mvt. - Largo sostenuto (8:57)

6 4th mvt. - Vivace (6:43)

7 DVOŘÁK Carnival Overture (9:05)

DVOŘÁK Four Slavonic Dances

8 Dance in C major, Op. 46, No. 1 - **Furiant** (Presto) (3:47)

9 Dance in A flat major, Op. 46, No. 3 - **Polka** (Poco allegro) (4:40)

10 Dance in C major, Op. 72, No. 2 in E minor - **Dumka** (Allegretto grazioso) (5:36)

11 Dance in C major, Op. 72, No. 7 in C major - **Kolo** (Allegro vivace) (3:00)

12 SMETANA Vltava (Die Moldau) (12:11)

13 RADIO Final announcements (1:43)

NBC Symphony Orchestra

conducted by George Szell