

### WHAT MEN LIVE BY JIŘÍ BĚLOHLÁVEK'S FINAL WORD ON THE MUSIC OF BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ

Jiří Bělohlávek (1946–2017) was an important worldwide ambassador of Bohuslav Martinů's music. For the Supraphon label alone he recorded nearly forty of Martinů's symphonic compositions, concertos, and stage works, and many of these were world premiere recordings. The premiere recording of the opera-pastoral *What Men Live By* was made from three concert performances in December 2014 (the production earned a nomination for the International Opera Award). Martinů composed it to his own libretto in America at the turn of 1951–52, and he had a clear idea concerning its performance: *"It must not be played 'pathetically', but joyfully. ... The text strongly tempts one to come up with a very serious, 'deep' conception, but that is not what I had in mind. To me, it is a rather joyful work, and what the listener*



*must feel is not some sort of religious moral (lesson), but instead joy. The moral is in fact in the joy."* Recording of the Symphony No. 1 that accompanies *What Men Live By* on the album that will be released on 19<sup>th</sup> October (SU 4233-2) was made in January 2016, and it joins the earlier releases of Symphonies Nos. 3–6 (SU3631-2, SU4007-2). It was part of a planned but unfortunately unfinished complete set of Martinů's late orchestral works. Anyway this recording shall endure as living proof of what was a very special constellation of humanity and artistry.

Discover more about this extraordinary world premiere recording **in video trailer with Jiří Bělohlávek** <http://y2u.be/0CQ6pdrujtE> and in our interview with the chief executive producer for classical music on the Supraphon label Matouš Vlčinský, that you'll find below.

**Supraphon is now coming out with previously unreleased recordings by Jiří Bělohlávek more than a year after his death...**

I'm sorry the Maestro did not live to see the recording released and that it is his final word on the music of Bohuslav Martinů. Together, we had made big plans for a number of other recordings in the years to come, but these plans were never realised, unfortunately...



### These plans involved other compositions by Bohuslav Martinů?

Yes. Jiří Bělohlávek loved Martinů's music, and he devoted himself to it exhaustively all his life. It is no exaggeration for us to say that among all conductors, whether from this country or abroad, it was above all Jiří Bělohlávek who blazed the trail for Bohuslav Martinů's music to reach concert stages. If you look at Bělohlávek's

discography as a whole, Martinů's music unquestionably holds a place of distinction in it, and during the maestro's tenure as chief conductor of the Prague Symphony Orchestra, he recorded a remarkable number of Martinů's compositions for Supraphon, including many world premiere recordings. When listening to Bělohlávek's recordings, I get the impression that there was a fundamental resonance between the order and rhythmic structuring that are so characteristic of Martinů and Jiří Bělohlávek's inner world.

### And what about the plans that were not realised?

With the Czech Philharmonic, we wanted to finish a complete set of the symphonies and to supplement it with more of Martinů's later symphonic compositions – his beautiful *Parables*, *Estampes*, *Frescoes* etc. Together with the third through the sixth symphonies, which had been recorded earlier, the complete set was to have been released on four CDs. Jiří Bělohlávek was very committed to completing this set, but he only managed to add a recording of the Symphony No. 1. We also wanted to supplement the opera *What Men Live By* with another short opera.

### So the CD is the release of fragments from two more extensive unfinished projects...

That is sadly the case. Jiří Bělohlávek did not live to finish any more of them. Under normal conditions, it would not have occurred to me to combine an opera with a symphony on a CD, but the first time I listened to this CD compilation, I was surprised by how nicely the works go together.





Let's talk some more about the opera *What Men Live by*. Martinů completed it in 1952. How is it possible that the world premiere recording of this opera did not appear until 2018, more than sixty years later?

There are several reasons why this opera has not yet found a home on opera stages around the world. For one thing, it is rather short – 40 minutes – so in a live performance, it is necessary to add another operatic work. It is written for

very specific chamber forces, neither very large nor very small. And the opera also lacks any virtuosic vocal writing, and none of the roles or even arias would be viable on their own. The opera takes its inspiration from Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy's tale *Martin the Cobbler*. At the heart of this touching, powerful story is the affirmation that no person is alone and that we can encounter God in other people and find the meaning of our own lives through service to others. Martinů himself referred to the work as an opera-pastoral, and as a whole, it resonates greatly with the message of Advent and Christmas. The opera's musical component is correspondingly very accessible for audiences, uncomplicated and beautiful.

### **How did Jiří Bělohlávek arrive at this work? Was this one of his long-term plans?**

I have been told that Maestro Bělohlávek was also hesitant at first and avoided this score for a number of years; it just did not interest him much. But once he had decided to give a concert performance of the opera, he fell totally in love with it. He even supposedly came up with the idea that the Czech Philharmonic should perform it every year during Advent. I think the depth of the subject matter resonated deeply with his knowledge and possibly even with the illness that further deepened certain aspects of his humanity during his final years. But that is just my own speculation.

### **How was the recording itself actually made?**

The Czech Philharmonic performed the opera at three of its subscription concerts in December 2014, and this live recording was made from the concerts.



One little curiosity about this production is the engagement of the Czech Philharmonic concertmaster Josef Špaček as the narrator. Thanks to having studied for several years at the Curtis Institute of Music and the Juilliard School in the United States, the young violinist speaks excellent English, and he took on the role of narrator as a great challenge.

**There is also a Czech version of the opera *What Men Live By* (Čím lidé žijí), but you chose the English version for the recording...**

Yes, mostly because that is the original version. Martinů wrote the opera in America, and it was clear to him that there was no chance of a performance of the work in any version other than that in English. He wrote the libretto in English himself based on the tale I already mentioned, and the Czech version was not written until later.

**What are your expectations from this recording? Do you suppose it might awaken greater interest in live performances of the opera?**

I believe that the recording could return the breath of life to this work and pave its way to opera houses around the world. I have been noticing over the last few years how there is a growing awareness of Bohuslav Martinů's music among listeners, critics, and presenters; in other words, the world is discovering the beauty and magic of his music. This is also shown by the international success of the recently issued Supraphon recordings of his compositions (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Madrigals, the Cantatas of the Czech Highlands, the piano trios etc.). I think that *What Men Live By* will be a revelation to many listeners. And I think the recording of the First Symphony with Jiří Bělohlávek and the Czech Philharmonic is eagerly anticipated by many who know his older recordings of the other symphonies. Bělohlávek's tenure with the Czech Philharmonic during the last five years of his life was a very happy time for both parties, and in the orchestra's sound one now hears the new qualities that were developing during this period. This recording shall remain as living proof of what was a very special constellation of humanity and artistry.

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