

Water Music: An Exploration into Program and Composition

How do Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák use compositional techniques to enhance the programmatic aspects of water in their symphonic poems “Die Moldau” and “The Water Goblin”?

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1.1 Introduction:

In the late Romantic period, symphonic poems were an integral part of the performing and composing repertoire. Many composers began to base their music on literature or scenes from nature and folklore as the idea of using heritage and folk culture was rising among the premier composers of the time. These composers contributed greatly to the idea that chamber music could follow in the footsteps of operas and be fully programmatic music. These ideals were headed by two Bohemian composers known for their plethora of symphonic poems, Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák. This leads one to wonder **how Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák use compositional techniques to enhance the programmatic aspects of water in their symphonic poems “Die Moldau” and “The Water Goblin”.**

The first piece I will be studying and analyzing is “Die Moldau” by Bedřich Smetana from the larger suite “Má Vlast” meaning “my homeland”. The Moldau was composed in 1874 and premiered in 1875. I chose this piece as it is one of the most easily recognizable and well-known symphonic poems of the Romantic Era. The other piece that I will look at is “The Water Goblin” by Antonín Dvořák. This symphonic poem was composed in 1896, and its premise is based on an old folktale about a Goblin who lives underwater and hunts for humans while they swim.

I will begin by analyzing different details that each composer has used in order to explore the compositional techniques they have incorporated, such as form and stylistic choices used within individual instrument parts. These will then be compared to see whether one was more effective or not, as well as finding out if they can truly emulate the story or theme underpinning the symphonic poem itself. I will use individual part comparisons as well as analyses of recordings

to objectively discuss the feeling that an audience member would feel as they listen to each piece, and relate that emotion back to the effectiveness of each composer's choice of techniques used

The programs of both pieces have one significant commonality that both composers have attempted to portray musically, water. In the Moldau, the program is about the Moldau River in modern day Czech Republic, where the composer hails from. In the Water Goblin, the program is based on a story of a goblin who lives underwater and traps drowning people. Both pieces revolve around the idea of water, but in rather different moods and connotations. The Moldau aims to paint a picture of a sunny stream that gradually grows into a massive river, while the Water Goblin aims to portray a dark and gloomy body of water with terror and horror lurking underneath. These pieces therefore, use similar techniques but in very different ways in order to both show the common program of water while also maintaining their respective mood throughout the piece.

1.2 Style and Idee Fixe in Moldau



Figure 1.1 *Die Moldau*, Measure 1-4. Piccolo and 2 Flute parts.¹

The theme of water is very much present in *Die Moldau*, beginning with the very first measure of the piece. In measure 1 (**Figure 1.1**), a melismatic motive is played in the solo flute. The dynamic marking for this motive is piano, as well as a “lusingando” marking, meaning

¹ Bedrich Smetana, *Vltava*, JB 1:112/2. (Leipzig: Eulenberg, 1914), 1.

that the phrase should be played in a soft and tender way. This conjunct, melismatic phrase is meant to symbolize the small origin of the Moldau River high in the Jizera Mountains. This 7-note melodic idea becomes the *idée fixe* in this piece. The *idée fixe* is then developed in measure 3 into a further melodic idea in the flute.



Figure 1.2 *Die Moldau*, Measure 8-10. 2 Flute parts.²

Smetana then utilizes a technique that was not new, but was certainly more common in the romantic era, which was layering. Layering is the idea of adding more instruments in either unison or harmony of a single developed melodic idea for the purpose of creating a greater, richer sound that makes the audience member feel like the sound and volume is getting continuously larger and louder. Smetana first adds a second flute in measure 9 (**Figure 1.2**), then adding a clarinet in measure 16 and then combining both flutes together with the clarinet in measures 24 and 25. This continuous layering creates a feeling that the music is continuing to enlarge in both size and volume, similar to how a river would get bigger and louder as it continues to flow from the source down the mountainside.

A river also is never broken in its flow, as it always continues to move and never breaks or stops. A river also never feels like it will end, as there is always water running down the course of a river no matter the time or season. Smetana intended to portray this feeling of never-

² Bedrich Smetana, *Vltava*, *JB 1:112/2*. (Leipzig: Eulenberg, 1914), 2.

ending, unbroken waterflow by using the two flutes, starting on measure 9. Smetana has one flute play the ascending melodic idea, and as the phrase continues to rise in the scale, it gets softer, and then the second flute is overlapped, starting low on the register and playing a similar ascending melodic idea. This technique is repeated multiple times in the next few measures, and it creates a rising sound that makes the audience believe that the melody continues to rise in pitch and register, even though it is just two flutes playing within a single octave. This technique is somewhat comparable to a shepard tone, in which two tones are played an octave apart with contrasting dynamics in order to create an effect of a single rising tone. While the technique used here is not quite as extensive as a full shepard tone, the concept of overlapping sounds to perplex the mind into believing that the tone and volume of the piece is continually rising remains.

Another example of Smetana's use of overlapping to create an illusion of unbroken melody starts on measure 36 when the *idée fixe* is handed to the strings section, with the Viola being the instrument to introduce the melodic idea in this section of the piece while other instruments harmonize or follow in unison. Smetana starts the phrase in the Viola, but as the register gets higher, the part gets handed to the 2nd Violin, who plays in the same register, continuing the idea slightly higher before descending in the same pattern, and at the end of measure 37, handing that melody back to the viola. At first glance, this seems odd, as the viola could have easily continued and played that melody in that register with no issues. However, as the water in a river overlaps and gets sent in many directions, Smetana chose to portray that by using two instruments with different textures to play a line that feels like it should be played on only one instrument in order to create a richer, more complex flowing sound.

Ob.

Fag.

Cor. I & II (C)

Trgl.

Viol.

Fag.

Vc. I

Vc. II

Ctrb.

40 dolce

p dolce

p

arco

p dolce

p

p

p

p

E. E. 8632

Figure 1.3 *Die Moldau*, Measure 38-40. Woodwind and String parts.³

After the slow build-up in the introduction, the first major theme is heard on measure 40, while the *idée fixe* is continuing to be played in the cello and viola. In order to create a sound that resembles a wide, fast river running through the countryside, Smetana utilizes clever uses of dynamics and accents in order to create the feeling of a rising and falling tone, similar to the flowing of water. Starting on measure 40 (**Figure 1.3**), all parts play an ascending melody while the dynamics read a full crescendo, with added sforzandos on measure 42 on all parts. Smetana creates symmetry in the phrasing, however, by adding diminuendo on the descending parts of the melodic line. The theme also carries other characteristics previously discussed,

³ Bedrich Smetana, *Vltava*, JB 1:112/2. (Leipzig: Eulenberg, 1914), 5.

specifically how every single part has phrasing that is highly melismatic and conjunct. These phrases are also diatonic in their harmonic nature, as a common I-VI-III-V-I progression is used.

Smetana also intends to portray the deepness and multiple layers of a river by including multiple details that were introduced in previous measures in other parts. While other parts take the melody, the cello part continues to play the 7-note idee fixe. However, in order to stay diatonic and in perfect harmony with the other parts, Smetana chooses to have the cello play the idee fixe in whatever chord is being played at that moment. This transposition signifies another technique that Smetana uses, which is diatonic harmony. Throughout this section, Smetana creates full, closed harmonies that are diatonic in nature in order to create a pleasing sound to the audience, similar to how the sound of a river flowing is generally considered as a pleasing sound. By using these numerous techniques, Smetana effectively portrays the image of the Moldau river in its power and pleasing nature to the audience through the use of multiple aural techniques.



Figure 1.4 *Die Moldau*, Measure 72-74. Timpani part.⁴

Smetana's commitment to the sound extends to the instruments used in this opening section of the piece. As previously discussed, the piece begins with the motive being played by the flute. It is then carried on by the addition of various strings. These instruments generally have a very smooth, flowing timbre as opposed to the often piercing, striking timbre of brass and other woodwind instruments, such as the trumpet and piccolo. One could potentially see the flutes and

⁴ Bedrich Smetana, *Vltava*, JB 1:112/2. (Leipzig: Eulenberg, 1914), 16.

the strings as symbolic of the peaceful, flowing sound of a river starting from its source. Of course, rivers are not always perfectly serene, with rocks and boulders sometimes causing a break in the otherwise peaceful sound of a river. It could be conceived that Smetana recognized this, and therefore added a timpani roll at various points in this opening passage, such as on measure 73 (**Figure 1.4**). The brass, meanwhile, plays short accompaniments to the melody, presumably as a way to enhance the smaller rocks that cause the flowing sound of a river. These contribute to the idea of Smetana following the program very closely, matching every sound with a factor that can be found in the program itself.



Figure 1.5 *Die Moldau*, Measure 80-82. 2 Violin Parts. ⁵

After the opening passage, the program turns away from the river itself to one of the banks, where there are some jubilant hunters who are very happy of their hunt. The melody shifts away from the water, and thus away from the flutes and strings. Instead, this section has a prominent horn melody. However, though the horn melody is now the primary focus of the section, the main flow of the water is not forgotten, as the first and second violins continue to play an extended variation of the main motive. An example of this is on measures 80-87 (**Figure 1.5**), where the violins continue that very motive. Later in the piece, a reprise of the opening passage

⁵ Bedrich Smetana, *Vltava*, *JB 1:112/2*. (Leipzig: Eulenberg, 1914), 19.

can be heard on measures 239, with more instruments used in order to create a more full, rich sound as the Moldau continues to expand in size and power.



Figure 1.6 *Die Moldau*, Measure 330-332. 2 Violin Parts.⁶

Finally, Smetana uses chromatic phrases to model after the flowing nature of a river later in the piece, specifically on measures 330-332 (**Figure 1.6**), where the first and second violins start a crescendo trill at a gap of a major second, giving a feeling of a rising sound. Then on measure 332, the violins, joined by the viola, start an ascending chromatic scale. Smetana uses this technique in order to maintain an unbroken sound, as there are no gaps between notes when a chromatic scale is used. This technique is used in various places throughout the piece, but this specific use of a chromatic scale is very effective, as it draws the audience's attention back to the peaceful and grand river, after the focus was on the St. John's rapids, which was dissonant and cacophonous in nature. By contrast, the succeeding section is more euphonious, with a variation on the same theme that had been repeated twice before in the piece. This section of the piece concludes the focus on the river, as the final section of the piece focuses on a castle. Overall, Smetana uses various techniques throughout the piece that can potentially be employed for the purpose of creating a sound of a river flowing, and therefore, water.

⁶ Bedřich Smetana, *Vltava*, JB 1:112/2. (Leipzig: Eulenberg, 1914), 86.

1.3 Mood and Timbre in Water Goblin

Dvořák's *Water Goblin* is based around the story of a goblin who traps a young maiden underwater after she fails to listen to her mother about being cautious near the lake in which she falls in. The program of this piece is significantly different in mood compared to Smetana's *Moldau*, in that the *Water Goblin*'s program connotes water as a negative substance, whereas the *Moldau* is centralized around the glory of the flow of water down the Moldau River. The focus of this investigation lies between measures 263-403, as this section of music contains a restatement of the theme, and then the "Andante mesto come prima" which is the mystery of the underwater world

Starting at measure 263 (Figure 2.1)⁷, the piece restates the 8 note motive, or the central theme. This section

The image displays a page from a musical score for Antonin Dvořák's *The Water Goblin*, specifically measures 263 through 269. The score is for a full orchestra and is written in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The measures from 263 to 269 are highlighted with a pink background. The instruments listed on the left include: Fl. picc., Fl. I, II, Ob. I, II, Cor. angl., Cl. I, II, A, Fag. I, II, I. II., Cor. E., III. IV., Trb. I, II, E, I. II., Trbn. III. e. Tb., Timp. H. Fis., Trgl., Piatti, Gr. Cassa, I., Viol., II., Vle., Vlo., and Cb. The score features a variety of musical notations, including eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *ff* and *marcatissimo*. A circled number 11 is visible above the first staff.

Figure 2.1 The Water Goblin, Measure 263-269. Full Orchestra.

⁷ Antonin Dvorak, *The Water Goblin*, Op. 107. (Prague: Souborne Vydani Dila, 1958), 26.

of the piece is marked as “Allegro vivo” which alludes to the dynamic nature of Dvořák’s portrayal of the Goblin as the maiden falls into the water and gets trapped by the goblin. Dvořák’s first technique is the use of fortissimo and marcatissimo, beginning at measure 263 where marcatissimo and fortissimo are written for every part. Marcatissimo is the accentuation of every note. Essentially, Dvořák intended for every instrument to play as loudly as they possibly could, and then accent every note, confirming that Dvořák intended a loud and piercing sound in this section of the piece. Dvořák also signifies the power of water through the lack of any legato in any part during this theme. The result is a piece that sounds more cacophonous than euphonious.

Another technique that Dvořák utilizes is repetition and transformation. Throughout the piece, the single 8 note motive is always prevalent and heard. The 8 note motive, however, is originally energetic and dynamic. This cannot always be used in the original format when moods and sections change based on the program. Thus, Dvořák alters the pitch, rhythm, articulation, dynamics, and what part is playing that motive in order to be able to match the section and the program. For instance, the register that the motive shows up in is very important in setting the mood and matching the section that is being played by the other parts. For example, during the restatement of the original theme on measure 263, the motive is being played in the treble clef by instruments such as the violin that generally play on a higher pitch or register. This changes during the transition to the “Andante mesto come prima”, beginning on measure 295, where the oboe and flute play the same motive, though in a lower register. Finally, once the next section begins, the cello plays the 8 note motive, again in a lower register. This slow transition of the motive moving down the scale allows the motive to be heard by the audience while fitting in with the rest of the piece. This could be interpreted as being symbolic of water, which never stops flowing, similar to how the audience never ceases to hear the original motive throughout these sections of the piece.



Figure 2.2 *The Water Goblin, Measure 336-345. Cello Part.*⁸

However, anyone who has gone underwater with goggles would know that once a person is fully submerged underwater, sound becomes a lot more muffled and difficult to hear. Dvořák understood and recognized this, and thus, makes some departures in techniques and intended effects compared to the Moldau. For instance, timbre plays a large role into the intended sound that Dvořák is hoping to create. An example of this is on measure 344 (**Figure 2.2**), where the cello begins to play the main 8 note motive, but in pizzicato. Pizzicato is when a violin or string instrument plucks the strings, rather than play with a bow. The resulting sound is one that is muted and softer, which one could correlate to the way that sound is heard underwater. Another example of this is the use of timpani at a very soft volume. This, along with other instruments that are asked to play at lower and softer registers and volumes, means that the sound can often be heard as distant or muffled, which one could recognize as the way that sound travels and is heard when underwater.

Articulation is another major role in Dvořák's intended sound. Articulation is generally used by composers to create a variety of sound, but for Dvořák, it is an integral part of the sound that is being created, even more so than Smetana with the Moldau. The pizzicato, which is always staccato, is used in certain places throughout the piece. For example, on measure 296, the bass plays softly in pizzicato while other parts play slow, legato phrases. This mix of soft pizzicato with slow, legato phrases could be interpreted as drops of water (pizzicato) falling down

⁸ Antonin Dvorak, *The Water Goblin, Op. 107*. (Prague: Souborne Vydani Dila, 1958), 32.

on the surface while being underwater (legato phrasing). Articulation gains more attention when the theme of this section is played by the strings on measure 336. Here, the timpani are playing a disjunct ostinato while the soloist plays the legato melody. The timpani are also playing at pianissimo, which creates a distant, muffled sound while the violist plays the slow, legato melody at piano, further enhancing the sound that Dvořák is attempting to maintain.

Voice leading and mood is often used by composers in order to establish a feeling within the audience. For instance, this section shares the chromaticism that is also found in the Moldau, however the voice leading around said melody differs significantly. The Moldau has a common, diatonic chord progression, while the Water Goblin has an unusual, chromatic chord progression (i-III-IV-VI-i-V-i). This chord progression contains chords that are very close to each other on the scale, so the sound feels generally chromatic throughout the section. This progression is then accompanied by a lot of parallel motion within the parts, creating a phrase that only moves in one direction as a total. One can thus interpret the sound to be more mysterious rather than the joyous sound of the Moldau. Another factor that contributes to mood is timbre. The prominent instruments heard in this section are the string sections and the timpani, all played at a lower volume. The timbre of strings is generally considered to be more smooth and flowing, as it can be played without ever taking the bow off the strings. For many of the phrases in this section, Dvořák marks the melody of the strings entirely in legato, meaning that the bow should not be lifted from the strings, which further adds to the timbre being more mellow and smooth.

The image displays a page from a musical score for Antonín Dvořák's *The Water Goblin*, Op. 107, measures 346-359. The score is for a full orchestra and is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 346-359) includes parts for Flute I, Oboe I, Cor Anglais, Clarinet A, Bassoon I, Cor III, and Timpani II. The second system (measures 360-369) includes parts for Flute Piccolo, Flute II, Oboe II, Cor Anglais, Clarinet A, Bassoon II, Cor III, Timpani II, Violin I, Violin II, and Viola. The score features various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'f', 'p', 'pp', and 'dim.'. There are also some annotations in the original image: a purple oval highlights a section in the first system, and a yellow oval highlights a section in the second system. A circled number '14' is also present in the second system.

Figure 2.3 *The Water Goblin*, Measure 346-359. Full Orchestra.⁹

An example of Dvořák's parallel motion is on measure 350 (**Figure 2.3**) when the other parts play a repetition of the theme that is introduced in the strings a few measures before.

⁹ Antonín Dvořák, *The Water Goblin*, Op. 107. (Prague: Souborné Vydání Dila, 1958), 33.

The flute, oboe, and English horn all move in one parallel motion down, and then back up, mimicking the movement of the original phrase. Another example of Dvořák's parallel motion is on measure 355 (**Figure 2.3**) when the clarinet and piccolo repeat the same phrase with the same movement. This one directional movement can be heard as unbroken, as none of the instruments are providing a diatonic harmony behind this parallel movement. In addition, the phrase itself is entirely chromatic, meaning that they are at gaps of a half step. This means that there is no gap in the sound, and further enhances the sound that Dvořák is attempting to create. One can potentially interpret the voice leading and choice of phrasing in this section as attempting to create a sound that is unbroken and smooth, like the flow of water in a river.

1.4 Conclusion

“The Water Goblin” and “Moldau” are both pieces that are effective in illustrating a program to an audience, although in two very different ways. These pieces may not sound similar when one listens to them for the first, second, or even fifth time. However, the techniques that the composers use in order to display a program to the audience are remarkably alike. The difference lies in the direction that each composer takes after recognizing a technique that could potentially aid them in portraying a certain program or image. Obviously, it will never be possible to receive a true answer to the significance of the techniques used by the composers. Furthermore, no two people interpret music the same way, as music is a subjective concept and can be viewed through an infinite amount of perspectives. However, there are some clear signs within the composition of these two pieces that lead one to relate to the program, specifically the idea of water.

Both Smetana and Dvořák use similar techniques, such as articulation, choice of timbre in instruments, dynamics, repetition of motives, and melismatic phrases. However, they are used in very different ways. Where Smetana uses these techniques to create a euphonious sound

that conjures an image of a pleasant river flowing down a mountainside, Dvořák uses the same techniques to create a mysterious, dissonant sound that conjures an image of a dark, gloomy lake that houses a potential danger or horror underneath. One can then read the programs that influenced these compositions and see the relation they share to the program at hand. Both Smetana and Dvořák are very effective in illustrating their respective programs, and both are effective in their portrayal of water. There is no way to judge which piece is more effective, as that is subjective to the listener.

Finally, it is subjective what water sounds like, and it is to each's opinion on whether water is effectively portrayed in these pieces. Different cultures may view water in different ways, and there are many different perspectives on whether water is heard by the audience when listening to these pieces. However, from a European classical music perspective, there are known ways to portray water. Using music to create a sound that resembles another environmental sound is known as soundscape, or ambient music. Both composers use multiple techniques to suggest that they recognized the idea of ambient music and incorporated it into their pieces. Whether it's Smetana's mixing of multiple articulations in different parts to create a sound that resembles the sound of water flowing over rocks, or Dvořák's use of pizzicato and timbre to create a muffled sound that resembles the way sound is perceived while underwater, both composers effectively and repeatedly explore multiple ways to portray the programmatic aspect of water upon the audience while listening to the piece.

In conclusion, Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák successfully and effectively use compositional techniques in order to enhance the programmatic aspect of water in their symphonic poems "Die Moldau" and "The Water Goblin."

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