

55th Season

THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF SRI LANKA

presents

GERMAN MASTERWORKS CONCERT

Saturday, 18 February 2012

The Musaeus College new Auditorium

Hans Jürgen Nagel, conductor

PROGRAMME

W.A. Mozart: Overture to "Die Zauberflöte", K620
Adagio - Allegro

R. Strauss: Horn Concerto no. 1 in E flat major, TrV 117
I. Allegro -
II. Andante -
III. Allegro
Áron Könczei, horn

L van Beethoven: Symphony no. 5 in C minor, op. 67
I. Allegro con brio
II. Andante con moto
III. Scherzo: Allegro -
IV. Allegro

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Overture to “Die Zauberflöte”, K620

The singspiel “The Magic Flute” was the composer’s penultimate opera, but was the last to be performed. Mozart dates the overture “28 September 1791, Vienna” in his catalogue, which means that it, as well as the March of the Priests in Act 2 (of two), were both completed two days before its premiere at the Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden. It is scored for pairs for flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. The overture is in E flat major, has just two themes, and is in “...a free sonata style, with a great deal of contrapuntal device” (Ernest Newman). The opening Adagio starts with solemn triads which have Masonic significance - his librettist and first “Papageno” Emanuel Schikaneder (1751-1812), had admitted the composer as a Freemason in 1784. This is followed by a jolly fugato Allegro with marked, swift changes in dynamics, and is only interrupted once by the initial idea in the dominant of B flat, briefly. Every instrument in the woodwind has distinctive writing of lightness and cheer, which sharply contrasts with the driving force of the strings and brass. The curtain rises as the final chords are played, to reveal the hero Tamino being chased by a large serpent.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Horn Concerto no. 1 in E flat major, TrV 117

Franz J. Strauss (1822-1905) was the principal horn of the Munich Court Orchestra and was called “the Joachim of the Horn” by the conductor Hans von Bülow (1830-1894). He frequently had his son Richard with him during his practice sessions. And so, it was quite natural that the composer grew up with a deep understanding of the timbre and musical character of the horn, giving it a major role in all of his tone poems (the most famous being in “Don Juan”, TrV 156). Franz disapproved of his son’s adventures in polyphony and structure, and unfortunately never performed the works inspired by him in public. The First Concerto (of two) dates from 1882. It was premiered by Gustav Leinhos, principal horn at the Meiningen Court Orchestra under von Bülow on 04 March 1883, and remains a staple of the solo horn repertoire alongside those by Mozart. It was published as his “Waldhornkonzert” (implying the valveless natural horn), op. 11 (1904).

The three movements are integrated, but have a clearly discernible mood. The first opens with a loud E flat chord (like the Beethoven “Emperor” Concerto) and a rousing fanfare by the soloist. The orchestra is given this idea through the movement. There are hints that the young composer was influenced by Robert Schumann (1810-1856), especially by his Konzertstück for Four Horns, op. 86 (1849). The slow movement with the dreaded key signature of A flat minor (7 flats) owes something to French grand opera. The horn here takes the role of a high baritone singing a gentle lamentation. Listen to the beautiful duets with the clarinet and bassoon, as well as the E major central section over pizzicato (plucked) strings. The finale has flowing melodies for the soloist throughout the entire range of the instrument. The orchestration may call to mind the bright overtures or a piano concerto finale by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847). The exciting coda is a bravura display of horn virtuosity.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony no. 5 in C minor, op. 67

Known simply as “The Fifth”, no musician would ask “Whose Fifth?” or “Fifth what?”. It is the icon of western classical music, and is firmly ingrained into popular culture for its four-note opening motif. This motif is heard throughout the symphony, if only in its inexorable rhythm, so you really need all four movements to tell the full story. The composer began sketching it in 1804, while the completed orchestration dates from 1807 and early 1808, in Vienna. It was premiered at the now famous marathon concert entitled “Musikalische Akademie” at the Theater an der Wien, on 22 December 1808. It is dedicated to two of his patrons, Prince Franz-Joseph von Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky. The composer’s deafness had progressed further since the Heiligenstadt Testament (1802), and his frustration can be heard for the first time with some virulence in this symphony.

In June 1944, the BBC's Radio Londres used the opening bars (dot-dot-dot-dash is "V" in morse code) to tell the French resistance that D-day was near. Nazi attempts to block the signal could not quite drown out the volume of their compatriot's composition. It has since been used in such dissimilar movies as Lorenzo's Oil (1992), Fight Club and Fantasia 2000 (both 1999) and The Longest Day (1962).

The first movement begins with the shock of the famous four notes, in unison strings. The "fate knocking on the door" story was originated by a discredited early biographer, Anton Schindler (1795-1864), so whether the composer actually implied this is unclear. The horns are the catalysts that lead the modulation to E flat, and violins then articulate the only lyrical idea in this key. You may notice that the motif is emphasised by the fourth note being extended for progressively longer durations. This single idea is developed at length, often with strident syncopation effects and plenty of tonal shift surprises in store for the uninitiated.

The slow movement is in A flat major. Its opening theme is a warmly lyrical melody, and is one of the composer's most beautiful, given to the middle strings. The second theme, which sometimes blends with the first, is a steady martial tune which was used by Hitler at state funerals. The movement ends with a combination of the opening and the mood of the central section.

The third movement returns to C minor, the lower strings stating the main idea of the Scherzo, again without harmony. Beethoven had long since dropped the classical notion of a minuet in earlier symphonies. This time, the trio at its centre is a powerful fugato which starts in the lower strings, and passes to the rest of the orchestra seamlessly. Here is Beethoven the revolutionary: orchestral sections are hurled at each other with reckless abandon, as if to cause a musical pile-up of sonorities. Listen to the incredible tension of the bridge passage at the end of this movement. The deep voices of the cellos and double basses underpin a bleak, exposed climbing figure in a section of the violins, always with the rhythmic tapping of the barely audible timpani (as in the Violin Concerto).

The main theme of the finale is a very simple idea, which can be appreciated if it is played with one finger on the piano. But with Ludwig, it is a monumental blaze of C major glory. 3 Trombones, piccolo and contrabassoon now add their contribution at either end of the sound spectrum. The horns are given the expansive second idea, over the full strings. The recapitulation is thrown at the listener at an unexpected moment, with all the more impact for it. The coda begins with the bassoons, and a tense charge up the scale for the entire orchestra, ending with a climactic brass version of the main theme.

The Fifth is perhaps the symphony that best represents Beethoven the human being. As Donald Tovey wrote, it is "among the least misunderstood of musical classics". By the end, the listener has come to terms with this indomitable little man, his creative spirit in the face of adversity and most of all, the greatness of this, his most celebrated creation.

- R.A.