

Charles Gounod: Petite Symphonie in B flat for Wind Instruments (1885)

Adagio – Allegretto

Andante Cantabile

Scherzo: Allegro moderato

Finale. Allegretto

Gounod became a composer almost, but not quite, by accident – he was certainly musical and this gift was demonstrated early on – but he also had strong religious leanings, which were intensified by a four-year period of study in Rome from 1839, where he encountered sixteenth century ecclesiastical music. Returning to Paris via Vienna and Leipzig, he was entertained by Mendelssohn and heard the music of Bach for the first time, which left a profound impression.

He was appointed music director of the Chapel for Foreign Missions, where he performed Bach and Palestrina, as well as his own music, which was well received. However the only way to fame in the French musical establishment was through opera. Gounod first succumbed to the lure in 1850 with Sappho, which sank without trace, as did several further operas, until Faust. From the opening night in March 1859 at the Théâtre Lyrique, Gounod was the most famous composer in France. His subsequent operas were received more politely than rapturously, but only Romeo et Juliette has established any permanency; his own favourite, La Reine de Saba, probably hasn't been seen since 1890. At his death most observers thought that Gounod's fame would rest on his religious works, not the operas, Saint-Saëns wrote "In the distant future, when the operas of Gounod are forever at rest in dusty libraries, the Messe à Sainte Cécile and Mors e Vita [an oratorio] will still have life in them." Posterity has preferred Faust.

In the 1800s the flautist Paul Taffanel had collected a group of musicians to form an ensemble called La Trompette which became internationally famous. Gounod composed the Petite Symphonie especially for this group. The work is a tribute to the French wind playing tradition, for one flute, two oboes, two B flat soprano clarinets, two bassoons and two horns, and is in the most traditional symphonic form, with a sonata-form first movement, which introduced thematic material which is recalled in the subsequent three movements. The long solo for flute in the second movement was intended to highlight Taffanel.

Programme notes by Dominic Nudd, February 2018. Courtesy of Making Music UK.

Richard Strauss: Horn Concerto no.2 (1943)

Allegro

Andante con moto

Allegro molto

Since Capriccio, I have not been writing any 'novelties', only some competent studies for our worthy instrumentalists and devoted a cappella choirs- studio works, so that the wrist does not become too stiff and the mind prematurely senile; for posterity Horatio, for posterity!

(Strauss to his biographer of choice, Willi Schuh, 10 May 1945)

'Modesty' is not the first characteristic that comes to mind when considering Richard Strauss. This is, after all, the composer who cast himself squarely as the eponymous leading man of *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life) and who allowed the intimate details of his home (and, to employ a euphemism, 'love') life to be vividly depicted in the *Sinfonia Domestica*. But times changed, and the composer changed with them. The enigmatic 'for posterity' referred to in the above letter has certainly come to Strauss' aid; his late works are now considered, by and large, to be masterpieces.

The events of the second world war had affected Strauss deeply, prompting a crisis both of depression and resignation. It could be expected that these late works would reflect the former. However, while the 'study for 23 strings', *Metamorphosen*, presents as a searing and emotionally painful reaction to the destruction of

his beloved Munich the Strauss of this and the other late works is one who has turned inwards and reverted to classical inspiration (to characters from antiquity; to classic literature such the works of Goethe; and musically most obviously to Mozart). Gone are some of the (for some listeners) more problematic musical characteristics- the 'brilliant hollowness' and 'profound superficiality' that was heard by composer and thinker Ernest Bloch and the preponderance of *nervenkontrapunkt* ('nervous counterpoint', a term used by the composer to describe the dense interaction of various musical ideas all at the same time).

Indeed grace, refinement, delicacy, a sense of care-free well-being- these are the dominant characteristics of Strauss' final compositional period, and the **Second Horn Concerto** proves to be as perfect a distillation of this mature style as any other.

Strauss' final opera, *Capriccio* (with a libretto by the conductor Clemens Krauss) premiered in 1942. It is widely considered to be the crowning glory of the composer's operatic *oeuvre*, although its lack of popularity in comparison to the earlier 'blockbuster' operas can be attributed perhaps to the opera consisting of a fairly lengthy discourse on the relative importance of words versus music. The heroine, Countess Madeleine, must ultimately decide between two suitors- one a poet and the other a composer. Whatever ambiguity the libretto provides with respect to Madeleine's ultimate decision on the matter, the music speaks for itself- the final scene, the heroine's monologue is as glorious as anything that the composer wrote for the female voice (and the competition here is fierce!).

That final scene is introduced by the celebrated *Mondscheinmusik* (moonlight music), one of Strauss' loveliest inspirations. Here we have a distillation of the composer's late style; we also have one of his very finest horn solos. Surely no coincidence, therefore, that the work composed immediately after the premiere of *Capriccio* was the concerto under present consideration.

The **Second Horn Concerto** can be considered to be the first orchestral work of this late period, representing the first large-scale orchestral composition since *Ein Alpensinfonie* (1915). While a gap of six decades separates the two horn concerti, they work well as a pair since Strauss' style was coming full-circle. (That the two works share the same key is more than likely a result of E-flat major being well-suited to the horn).

The solo horn itself opens the first movement, briefly promising something in the heroic vein (essentially outlining an E-flat major chord, beginning with an energetic leap) before almost immediately settling down into something more lyrical. Strauss' care for colour and texture leads to moments where solo horn and woodwind soloists interact in dialogue.

After a more animated climax, the music dies down before moving seamlessly into the central *andante con moto*. Here we can discern the continuation of the noble horn solo from that last scene of *Capriccio*; this is music so well-suited to the expressive capabilities of the instrument that it takes on characteristics of the human voice. The whole movement is, in fact, reminiscent of Strauss' vocal music (to the point where parts of the melody resemble the music of the 'presentation of the Silver Rose' scene from *Der Rosenkavalier*). In the spirit of the chamber-music approach to the work as a whole, the melodic material is at times shared amongst the orchestral wind soloists.

The final movement, following the standard set by Mozart in his four horn concerti, is composed in the 6/8 metre. This is the most obviously virtuosic of the movements and provides a jovial and exciting conclusion. Worth listening out for is a stunning *coup de theatre* towards the close of the movement where the soloist is joined by the orchestral horn players- Strauss' theatrical instincts certainly did not diminish over time! The concerto was premiered in Salzburg in 1943 and has enjoyed wide success ever since, becoming the most loved and performed horn concerto of the twentieth century- 'for posterity Horatio' indeed.

Programme note (c) Owen E Walton, 2024.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 6 in F ("Pastoral"), Op. 68

- I. "Awakening of cheerful feeling on arriving in the country" (Allegro ma non troppo)
- II. "Scene by the brook" (Andante molto moto)
- III. "Merry gathering of country-folk" (Scherzo: Allegro)
- IV. "Thunderstorm" (Allegro)
- V. "Shepherd's song: Happy, thankful feelings after the storm" (Allegretto)

The first major work to emerge after the personal crisis of the onset of Beethoven's deafness was the Eroica Symphony, and the mood of the Fifth Symphony, written four years later, has much in common with that of the Eroica. Bridging the gap between the fierce, defiant Fifth and the mighty, restless Seventh is the utterly different "Pastoral" Symphony. This reveals a facet of Beethoven rarely seen – his love of nature. This symphony is programme music, and it is the first truly great example of a style of composition subsequently exploited by many Romantic-era composers such as Franz Liszt and Richard Strauss.

The first movement depicts the exhilaration of first contact with the intimate presence of Nature. In his writings, Beethoven stated that he loved to roam in the woods, through the thickets, and among the trees, the flowers, and the rocks. In the second movement, a perfectly constructed Andante, the murmurous flow of the water, beautifully represented by the lower strings with two muted solo cellos, is also functional on strictly classical lines as an accompaniment to the principal themes. Even the bird-songs at the end of the movement – cuckoo, nightingale, and quail – are answered by a fragment from an earlier melody, and they make a normal pair of four-bar phrases. Although they are a conventional conclusion to the movement, they give it a dash of colour. The third movement – a scherzo, the form that Beethoven used to displace the formerly-used Minuet and Trio – describes villagers and peasants in a scene of merrymaking, and Beethoven presents an amusing caricature of a village band. The fourth movement follows without a pause, and there is no warning of its arrival. The realism of this movement is astonishing; violins play the patter of raindrops while cellos and double basses rumble ominously, and the full fury of the storm breaks in the full orchestra with timpani, which are not used anywhere else in the work. The storm's ferocity increases and reaches its climax with the entry of alto and tenor trombones; as it subsides, oboes and violins play a brief lyrical melody based on the raindrop figure at the beginning of the movement. A rising scale on the flute leads straight into the last movement, which is a normal classical Rondo. The main theme introduced by the clarinet is taken up by the horns and finally realised fully by the first violins as it becomes a hymn of thanksgiving, which dominates the movement.

The programme of the work was not Beethoven's invention, but it took Beethoven's genius to transform Justin Geinrich Knecht's crude original 1784 concept, "A Musical Portrait of Nature," into the classical work of art that the world knows as "The Pastoral".

Programme notes by Ted Wilks, August 2007. Courtesy of Making Music UK.