
Summer Concert: Henry E Rensburg Series
Shéhérazade
Thursday 5 July 2018 7.30pm

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)
In the South (Alassio), Op.50

In November 1903 Elgar and his wife, Alice, left London for a winter holiday in Italy, with the prospect of a three-day Elgar Festival at Covent Garden the following March. Elgar had been mulling over ideas for a symphony since 1898, and the festival seemed to provide the perfect opportunity to realise the project.

Two weeks after arriving in Italy they settled in a villa in Alassio. But the weather turned wet and cold, and the symphony was getting nowhere. As he wrote to August Jaeger ('Nimrod' of the Enigma variations): "This visit has been, is, artistically a complete failure & I can do nothing: we have been perished with cold, rain & gales – five fine days have we had & three of those were perforce spent in the train. The Symphony will not be written in this sunny(?) land ..."

But though the symphony lay, for a while, out of Elgar's reach, another piece began taking shape. As the weather improved, the Elgars, joined by their daughter, Carice, and Rosa Burley, an old friend of Elgar's and the headmistress of Carice's school, were able to make excursions into the country. Elgar and Carice were amused by the name of the nearby village of Moglio. Other sights made a deep impression, and a visit to the Vale of Andorra fused the whole experience – a ruined chapel by a group of pine trees, a shepherd and his flock of sheep, the Roman aqueduct. The festival was to get a new work after all.

The overture is dedicated to Frank Schuster, one of Elgar's most loyal supporters and one of the festival's organisers. It opens with an exhilarating surge of energy which Elgar rarely equalled. The theme began life as 'Dan triumphant (after a fight)', one of the 'Moods of Dan' – short musical phrases which Elgar used to write in the visitor's book of George Robertson Sinclair, organist of Hereford Cathedral (Dan was Sinclair's bulldog). It eventually winds down to a gentler passage, the clarinets' theme suggesting the rhythm of the name 'Moglio' The dramatic central section, depicting what Elgar called "the relentless and domineering onward force of the ancient day" is followed by the gleaming tranquillity of the 'canto popolare' ('folk song', though the melody is Elgar's own) for solo viola with a delicate accompaniment for strings and harp. The opening music finally returns to end the work in an irresistible blaze of exuberance.

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MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

Shéhérazade

Asie / Asia

La Flûte enchantée / The Enchanted Flute

L'Indifférent / The Indifferent One

While Ravel did not share the poet Léon Leclère's enthusiasm for Wagner – which led Leclère to adopt the extravagantly Wagnerian pseudonym of Tristan Klingsor – the two friends were not without musical and literary tastes in common. They were both interested in exotic subjects, not least *The Thousand and One Nights*, and they were such fervent admirers of Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic poem *Scheherazade* that, in tribute to the Russian composer, they both produced works under the French equivalent of that title. Ravel had already written a *Shéhérazade Overture* in 1898 and, not intending to publish that score, used the title again in 1903 for his three songs to texts from Klingsor's *Shéhérazade*, a recently completed collection of poetry inspired by the alien and yet

irresistible attractions of the East. Sheherazade married King Shahriyar who, instead of killing her in the usual way in which he disposed of his wives, allowed her to spin the tales that make up the Arabian Nights so that she lived.

As an exponent of unrhymed but rhythmical free verse, which he thought particularly suitable for music, Klingsor was a natural poetic ally for a Ravel at that time under the spell of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy's way of word-setting and his sensual impressionism. Ravel's approach here, according to the poet, was to 'transform the text into an expressive recitative, intensifying the inflections of the words into song, heightening all their possibilities without subordinating them to the music'. But why, out of the hundred poems in Klingsor's *Shéhérazade* Ravel selected *Asie*, *La Flûte enchantée* and, in particular, the problematic *L'Indifférent* can only be a matter for conjecture.

Asie

The appeal of *Asie* (the first song in the cycle when the three items are performed in the published order) must have been its far-and-wide dispersal of an abundance of oriental images. Indeed, in spite of its occasional banalities, Klingsor's poem inspired a panorama of a breadth and expressive variety unparalleled in any of Ravel's other vocal works. Beginning with a languorous oboe solo, three invocations of 'Asie' in the vocal part and a little triplet figure on oboe and flute, it presents its basic material in no more than half a dozen bars. The several, apparently disparate episodes of *Asie* are variations on those motifs – the simulation on syncopated strings of the 'bewitching rhythm' of the sea accompanying Klingsor's schooner rocking in the harbour, the three particularly magical passages devoted to the Persia of King Shahriyar and Sheherazade, the pentatonic evocations of China and, towards the end, the climactic recall of the rhythms and harmonies of the swelling sea.

La flûte enchantée

La Flûte enchantée, where the sound of the flute is felt as a lover's kiss, is a fascinating metaphor of music as an erotic experience. Ravel's response to it is a song of correspondingly melodious sensuality, featuring a seductive solo flute and strings that scarcely dare breathe except in a short but achingly passionate abandonment of caution in the middle section.

L'indifférent

The primary attraction of L'Indifférent, on the other hand, seems to be neither oriental nor musical: it is surely the sexual ambiguity of the boy stranger with eyes 'soft like a girl's' and hips swaying in a 'languid feminine way'. Ravel must have been well aware of the interpretation that would be put on this song and, if he were not, the conductor Camille Chevillard soon put him right when he told him, "I sincerely hope you'll have it sung by a girl!" But does this setting amount to a rare confession from a notoriously secretive composer or is it no more than a sensitive gesture towards a poet who made little secret of his homosexual inclinations? Whatever the answer, the voluptuous longing in the vocal line and the contrastingly pure harmonies and gently swaying rhythms of the orchestral accompaniment present an intriguing musical paradox in themselves.

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BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

Concerto for Orchestra

Introduzione: andante non troppo – allegro vivace

Introduction: at a walking pace, but not too slow – fast, lively

Gioco delle coppie: allegretto scherzando

Game of couples: quite fast, playful

Elegia: andante non troppo

Elegy: at a walking pace, but not too slow

Intermezzo interrotto: allegretto

Interrupted intermezzo: quite fast

Finale: pesante – presto – un poco meno mosso – presto

Finale: heavily – very fast – a little slower – very fast

In the spring of 1943 Bartók was in hospital in New York, seriously ill and seriously impoverished. He had written nothing new since arriving in the United States, more or less as a refugee, in 1940 and he was convinced he never would: “Under no circumstances will I ever write any new work,” he had told his wife. Then Serge Koussevitsky came to see him with a commission for a new score for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a cheque for \$500 from the Koussevitsky Foundation as a first half-payment. Within a few months he was out of hospital, convalescing at Saranac Lake and writing his Concerto for Orchestra.

The programme note he wrote for the first performance of the Concerto for Orchestra in Boston in December 1944 is a touching indication of how closely the gradual improvement in his health was linked with the progress of the composition: “The general mood of the work represents – apart from the jesting second movement – a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death song of the third, to the life-assertion of the last one.” The second movement stands apart from that emotional progression only because of Bartók’s natural inclination to construct in ‘arch’ form – in this case a central slow movement with a scherzo on each side of it and matching quick movements at the beginning and the end.

First movement

Bartók also described the work as “symphony-like” with two movements, the first and the fifth, “written in a more or less regular sonata form”. Before the main Allegro vivace section of the first movement, however, there is an Andante introduction which is not only highly atmospheric but also structurally crucial to the whole work, above all in its presentation of the rising and falling fourths and seconds in the cellos and basses and the four-note motif with the semitone inflection first heard on a solo flute and later on trumpets.

It is from the first of those motifs that, after an *accelerando*, the opening theme of the *Allegro vivace* emerges on violins in F minor. This, with a vigorous variant for trombone, is Bartók's equivalent of a first subject. The second subject, based on the four-note motif from the *Introduzione*, is a tranquil oboe melody in B minor. The main themes pass through various developments, including a calmer version of the first theme on clarinets and a splendid brass fugato on the trombone variant. But, because of the composer's natural tendency towards arch form rather than regular sonata form, the second subject is revisited before the first, with the result that the beginning of the movement is reflected in the end.

Second movement

Bartók explained the title of the *Concerto for Orchestra* by referring to its "tendency to treat the single orchestral instruments in a concertante or soloist manner ... especially in the second movement, in which the pairs of instruments appear consecutively with brilliant passages". So in this 'game of couples' the bassoons appear first in sixths, then the oboes in thirds, the clarinets in sevenths, the flutes in fifths and the muted trumpets in satirical seconds, each pair of instruments with its own tune. There is a brief middle section, in the form of a chorale for two different brass quintets, followed by a very much elaborated version of the first section.

Third movement

The *Elegia* begins with the theme that opened the work. Pools of tears (or so it seems by analogy with a similar passage in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*) are reflected in harp glissandos and woodwind arpeggios. High above them is a plangent oboe melody later elaborated by the piccolo. The second main theme, passionately uttered by violins and clarinets with fierce trumpet interjections, is obviously derived from the four-note motif of the *Introduzione*. As in the first movement, the material is developed and the form is arched by recapitulating the second theme first.

But the end of the movement is by no means as desolate as the beginning.

Fourth movement

It is an indication of how cheerful Bartók must have been feeling by the time he got to the fourth movement of the Concerto for Orchestra, the Intermezzo interrotto, that he was able to risk a satirical stab at Shostakovich who, as he knew, was Koussevitsky's idol among contemporary composers. The first part of the Intermezzo is a kind of serenade to Hungary based on two main themes – one a charming, rhythmically intriguing folk dance introduced by oboe, the other a rhapsodic melody on violas which is actually derived from an operetta melody “You are lovely, you are beautiful, Hungary” by Zsigmond Vincze. It is rudely interrupted, however, by a parodied version of a significant theme from Shostakovich's ‘Leningrad’ Symphony. This wicked identification of the Shostakovich theme with a popular number from The Merry Widow is greeted with howls of derision from the brass and peals of laughter from the woodwind. The serenade is resumed and the Intermezzo ends with a flute cadenza as sensitive as the interruption was rowdy.

Fifth movement

The pesante horn call at the beginning of the last movement is immediately brushed aside by the presto activity of the strings but not forgotten. When the moto perpetuo energy can be sustained no longer the horn theme returns, first on second bassoon, then in a fugato, and then in a romantic transformation on the flute. Later, when the presto activity begins again, a kind of descant is superimposed by a trumpet over the restless semiquavers in the strings. In this more racy form it becomes the subject of a marvellously inventive central episode and – after an even quicker presto beginning with whispers on the bridge of the string instruments and gradually reaching a fortissimo climax – it makes a final and expansively triumphant appearance in the coda.