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Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

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Thursday Series

Mahler 5

Thursday 24 January 2019 7.30pm

Sponsored by Hill Dickinson

ALBAN BERG (1885-1935)

Violin Concerto

Part 1

Andante – / At walking pace

Allegretto / Quite fast

Part 2

Allegro – / Fast –

Adagio / Slow

Alban Berg was born in Vienna of a cultured and wealthy family. Having shown early, if raw, musical talent he became a student of Arnold Schoenberg who exerted a profound influence on the young man. Along with another of Schoenberg's pupils, Anton Webern, the three men formed a grouping that was to be dubbed the Second Viennese School. It represented a reaction to what they felt were the excesses of musical romanticism. Instead they sought to organise music in a more ordered and rational manner. Radical as their approach was, it was at the same time fundamentally traditional.

Berg's Violin Concerto was his last completed composition and is generally regarded as his finest and most accessible. In February 1935 the American violinist Louis Krasner commissioned the work and at this early stage Berg intended to write a purely abstract work (that is, a work with no reference to anything but itself). However, that April Berg was deeply affected by the death of Manon Gropius, the 18-year-old daughter of Walter Gropius, the renowned architect, and his wife Alma, widow of the composer Gustav Mahler. Hence the concerto, composed during the summer by Lake Wörthersee in Carinthia, became a requiem for the highly gifted Manon, the score being inscribed with the words 'In Memory of an Angel'. Its premiere took place in Barcelona with Krasner as soloist in April 1936, by which time Berg had died from blood poisoning resulting from an insect sting.

According to the composer the first two of the concerto's four movements are a character portrait of Manon Gropius; the third movement represents the terrible illness (infantile paralysis) which afflicted and eventually killed her; while the fourth – variations on the chorale 'Es ist genug! So nimm, Herr, meinen Geist' (It is enough! Take then my spirit, Lord) from Bach's Cantata No.60 – is essentially a prayer for the repose of Manon's soul (there are some wonderful organ-like sonorities here). It has also been suggested that Manon's talents as an actress are reflected in the violin writing as it alternates between soulfulness, lyricism and skittishness. In addition there are theories that Berg's intentions were actually autobiographical. But whatever its meaning, the concerto's greatness lies in its masterly blend of complexity and sheer simplicity.

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GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

Symphony No.5

Part I

1. *Trauermarsch: In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt. / Funeral March: With measured tread. Strict. Like a procession.*
2. *Sturmisch bewegt. Mit größter Vehemenz / Stormy. With utmost vehemence*

Part II

3. *Scherzo: Kräftig, nicht zu schnell. / Scherzo: Vigorous, not too fast*

Part III

4. *Adagietto: Sehr langsam / Adagietto: Very slow*
5. *Rondo-Finale: Allegro – Allegro giocoso. Frisch / Rondo-Finale: Fast – Fast, playful. Fresh*

When Mahler began his Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1901, he must have felt that he'd survived an emotional assault course. In February, after a near-fatal haemorrhage and a dangerous operation, he had resigned his post as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. His relationship with the musicians had been uneasy at best, and some of the press (especially the anti-Semitic press) had been poisonous, but leaving such a prestigious and lucrative post was a wrench. At about the same time Mahler met his future wife, Alma Schindler, and fell passionately in love. That at least was a hopeful development, but still emotionally challenging. Some composers seek escape from the trials of personal life in their music, but Mahler was the kind of artist whose life and work are inextricably, often painfully interlinked. Unsurprisingly, the Fifth Symphony bears the imprint of recent experiences throughout its complex five-movement structure.

But as Mahler was at pains to point out, that doesn't ultimately give us the 'meaning' of the Fifth Symphony – this isn't simply autobiography in sound. For some time Mahler had struggled with the issue of how much to tell his audiences in advance. The problem was that people would insist on taking his words at face value, rather than listening for the kind of messages music alone can convey. Here, for the first time in a symphony, Mahler neither used sung texts nor provided a written programme note. There are however clues to deeper meanings for those who know his music well – especially his songs.

Part I

The first movement is unmistakably a grim Funeral March (we hardly need the title to guess that). It opens with a trumpet fanfare, quiet at first but with growing menace. At its height, the full orchestra thunders in with a massive funereal tread. Shuddering string trills and deep, rasping horn notes evoke Death in full grotesque pomp. But then comes a more intriguing emotional signpost: the quieter march theme that follows on strings is clearly related to a song Mahler wrote around the same time, 'Der Tambour'sell' (The Drummer Lad), which tells of a very young army deserter facing execution – no more grandeur, just pity and desolation.

Broadly speaking, the second movement is an urgent, sometimes painful struggle, as though the Symphony were now trying to put thoughts of Death behind it. The shrill three-note woodwind figure heard at the start (a leap up and a step down) gradually comes to embody the idea of striving. Several times aspiration falls back into melancholic reverie, with echoes of the Funeral March. At long last the striving culminates in a radiant brass hymn tune, with ecstatic interjections from the rest of the orchestra. Is the answer to Death to

be found in religious consolation – Faith? But the mood doesn't last long enough to achieve a clinching climax; affirmation collapses under its own weight, and the movement quickly fades into darkness.

Part II

Now comes a surprise. The Scherzo bursts onto the scene with an elated horn fanfare. The character is unmistakably Viennese – a kind of frenetic waltz. Perhaps some of Mahler's acutely mixed feelings about his adopted Viennese home went into this movement. But the change of mood has baffled some writers: the Fifth Symphony has even been labelled 'schizophrenic'. Actually 'manic depressive' might be more appropriate. Some psychologists believe that the over-elated manic phase represents a deliberate mental flight from unbearable thoughts or situations, and there are certainly parts of this movement where the gaiety sounds forced, even downright crazy – especially at the end. Mahler himself wondered what people would say "to this primeval music, this foaming, roaring, raging sea of sound, to these dancing stars, to these breath-taking iridescent and flashing breakers?" Still Mahler cunningly bases the germinal opening horn fanfare on the three-note 'striving' figure from the second movement: musically the seeming disunity is only skin-deep.

Part III

Now comes the famous *Adagietto*, for strings and harp alone, and with it another profound change of mood. Mahler, the great *Lieder* composer, clearly intended this movement as a kind of wordless love-song to his future wife, Alma. Here he quotes from one of his greatest songs, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* ('I am lost to the world') from his *Rückert Lieder*. The song ends with the phrase 'I live alone in my heaven, in my love, in my song', and Mahler actually quotes the violin phrase that accompanies 'in my love, in my song' at the very end of the *Adagietto*. Alma herself would surely have recognised that, and read its meaning.

This invocation of human love and song proves to be the true turning point in the Fifth Symphony. The finale is a vigorous, joyous contrapuntal display – genuine joy this time, not the Scherzo's manic elation. Even motifs from the *Adagietto* are drawn into the bustling textures. Finally, after a long and exciting build-up, the second movement's brass chorale returns in splendour, now firmly anchored in D major, the symphony's ultimate home key. Is this then the triumph of Faith, Hope and Love? Not everyone finds this ending entirely convincing; Alma Mahler had her doubts from the start. But one can hear it either way – as ringing affirmation or as forced triumphalism underscored by doubt – and it still stirs. For all his apparent late-romanticism, Mahler was also a very modern composer: even in his most positive statements there is room for doubt.

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