

Classic FM Series

Háry János

Thursday 7 February 2019 7.30pm

Friday 8 February 2019 1.30pm

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)

Symphony No.49 in F minor 'La Passione'

Adagio / Slow

Allegro di molto / Very fast

Menuet e trio / Minuet and trio

Presto / Very fast

“Sturm und Drang” (Storm and Stress) was the name of a 1776 play by the German dramatist Maximilian von Klinger. But it’s come to serve as a shorthand for an artistic mood that swept across the German-speaking world in the 1770s; a mood of dark, often violent emotion. It’s often applied to the symphonies that Haydn wrote at the first peak of his creative maturity, and when you listen to music as turbulent as this extraordinary symphony, it’s easy to hear why.

There’s just one problem. As far as we know, the symphony was written in 1768 at the great palace of Eszterháza, where Haydn was Kapellmeister to the powerful Hungarian nobleman Prince Nicolaus Esterházy. Built on reclaimed swampland near Lake Neusiedl, Eszterháza might as well have been on an island. “I was cut off from the world” said Haydn, years later. “There was no one to confuse or torment me, and I was forced to become original”. So any Sturm or Drang in his music came from his own super-fertile creative imagination.

And what an imagination! The symphony is in the key of F minor

– a key that Haydn always seems to have associated with a particularly fierce and bitter melancholy - and in a reversal of his normal practice, he places the slow movement first. The first music we hear is the sombre processional tread of the opening Adagio: a powerful way to establish an atmosphere (Mozart showed he'd learned the lesson at the start of his Requiem, 23 years later in 1791). The Allegro di molto that follows, is restless and angular: Haydn's modest wind section of two oboes, two horns and a bassoon add to its bite.

The minuet – supposedly a graceful dance – is stately and positively stern, yielding to a brighter central Trio section with a horn calling over sweet-toned oboes. And like a lightning conductor, the finale gathers up, and then discharges, the symphony's tension: a torrential musical downpour that sweeps with unrelenting drive from first bar to last. It's thrilling.

So why the nickname – La Passione? The nickname seems to date from the 1780s or 1790s – perhaps because Haydn was known to have had the symphony played on Good Friday at Eszterháza, or perhaps because its mood made it seem particularly suitable for that purpose. But there's a twist. One early source suggests that it was assembled from music intended for a play called "The Good-Humoured Quaker": not so much an expression of religious emotions, but a remarkably accurate parody of them. We're unlikely ever to know for sure. Haydn, whose own religious faith was as optimistic as it was sincere, would probably have smiled – and urged us simply to listen.

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)
Violin Concerto No.5 in A major 'Turkish', K219

Allegro aperto / Fast, with openness

Adagio / Slow

Rondo: tempo di menuetto / Rondo: at the speed of a minuet

Mozart's reputation as a child prodigy rested largely on his astonishingly precocious talents as a composer and keyboard player, but his father, Leopold, had high hopes of him becoming a great violinist. Wolfgang, however, had other ideas. Whilst he was a good enough violinist to become Concertmaster of the Salzburg Court Orchestra when he was only thirteen, Mozart lacked the necessary dedication to fulfil his father's ambitions. After the young composer returned from one of his many concert tours he received an irate letter from Leopold: "Didn't you practise the violin at all while you were in Munich? I dare say that would be really deplorable..." On another occasion: "Every time I come home I succumb to a feeling of melancholy, for as I draw near to our house I always half expect to hear the sound of your violin." Mozart wrote and performed his five violin concertos in order to appease his pushy father!

Probably composed in 1775, No.5 in A major is the most brilliant, inventive and witty of Mozart's violin concertos. The opening Allegro aperto (literally, 'lively and open') begins with a breezy orchestral introduction before Mozart springs his first surprise: the soloist appears in a gorgeous flow of lyricism, transporting us into the midst of a meditative slow movement. Then, just as suddenly, as if the whole thing had been a mistake, the movement resumes its original course: a perfect Mozartian balance of gracefulness and impish humour with occasional touches of mild melancholy.

Strangely, the leading Salzburg violinist of the day, Antonio Brunetti, who often performed Mozart's concertos, thought the Adagio "too studied" and Mozart had to write him an alternative, the lovely Adagio K261. How wrong Brunetti was! (In fact, Mozart thought him "a thoroughly ill-bred fellow"). Far from being in any sense pedantic, Mozart's original is wonderful in its unaffected simplicity and innocence. As in the first movement, towards the end there is an unaccompanied

cadenza in which Mozart gives the soloist free rein for improvisation.

In the concluding Rondo a poised minuet theme alternates with three contrasting episodes, the third of which is an energetic 'Turkish' sequence replete with virtuoso flourishes for the soloist, dramatic crescendos and outrageous percussive effects in the lower strings. Although the concerto takes its subtitle from this 'Turkish' episode, it is stylistically more akin to Hungarian gypsy music than to anything from further south.

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RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)

A Faust Overture

The legend of Faust, an erudite but frustrated scholar who sells his soul to the devilish Mephistopheles, exerted its influence on many writers, artists and musicians, among them the great German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). And it was Goethe's version of the story that directly inspired Wagner in composing this overture, a work he originally wrote in Paris in 1840 and revised a few years later. He originally intended it to be the first movement of a 'Faust Symphony', though the larger endeavour was overtaken by even more ambitious projects in opera. Nevertheless, he did revise the overture substantially again in the mid-1850s to offer a more comprehensive view of Goethe's drama, including its love theme. By this time his future father-in-law, Franz Liszt, had composed an extensive 'Faust Symphony', the likely impetus for Wagner to do so.

In a letter to Liszt, Wagner wrote that he intended the overture to depict the "solitary Faust, longing, despairing, cursing, while the feminine floats around him as an object of his longing". The work opens with a brooding slow introduction (we are in Faust's study) before this gives way to a faster section. In this we hear a rising melody, first played by a flute that represents the feminine ideal

(embodied in Goethe's play by the character of Gretchen). There is a deal of storminess (and, not surprisingly, diabolism), but the overture eventually returns to the quiet mood of the opening.

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ZOLTÁN KODÁLY (1882-1967)

Háry János: Suite

Prelude – The fairy tale begins

Viennese musical clock

Song

The battle and defeat of Napoleon

Intermezzo

Entrance of the Emperor and his court

Along with his friend Béla Bartók, Kodály was an inveterate collector of the folk music of their native Hungary and its neighbouring regions. Equipped with manuscript paper and an Edison recording machine, as young men the pair set forth into the remote fields and villages to notate and record for posterity this fast-disappearing musical legacy. As a result the Hungarian countryside and its music permeates everything Kodály wrote.

This is wonderfully evidenced by his folk opera Háry János, a work premiered in Budapest on 16 October 1926. Its unreliable narrator is Háry himself, an ex-soldier and barroom story-teller who regales his drinking companions with outlandish tales of past heroism. Kodály wrote in his preface to the score:

Háry is a peasant, a veteran soldier who day after day sits at the tavern spinning yarns about his heroic exploits... the stories released by his imagination are an inextricable mixture of realism and naivety, of comic humour and pathos ...though superficially he appears to be merely a braggart, essentially he is a natural visionary and poet. That his stories are not true is irrelevant, for they are the fruit of a lively imagination, seeking to create, for

himself and for others, a beautiful dream world.

In 1927 Kodály put together a suite of the opera's orchestral numbers, a sequence that traces the progress of Háy's fantastical past glories. It opens with a musical sneeze – we should not take Háy's story too seriously! Háy is then carried off to the Viennese Imperial Court by a smitten Empress Marie Louise, wife of Napoleon. He is impressed by the opulence of his new surroundings, particularly a musical clock with chiming bells and toy soldiers. After a song the suite depicts the furious Napoleon as he marches on Vienna with his army, only to be defeated singlehandedly by Háy. Finally, now installed as Emperor, Háy enters the palace with his entourage (though he eventually returns to Hungary to be reunited with his girlfriend).

Quite brilliantly orchestrated, the suite features prominent solo parts for viola, saxophone, trombone and cimbalom (a traditional Hungarian folk instrument similar to a zither).

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