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Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

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Sunday Afternoon Classics

Peer Gynt

Sunday 20 January 2019 2.30pm

EDVARD GRIEG (1843-1907)

Peer Gynt: Suite No.1, Op.46

Morning Mood

The Death of Åse

Anitra's Dance

In the Hall of the Mountain King

“The most remarkable thing he did”, writes *The Bluffer's Guide to Music* of Edvard Grieg, “was to write incidental music to Ibsen's weird play *Peer Gynt*. The pleasantness of the music must have induced many people to go and see *Peer Gynt* and to get a bit of a shock”.

Harsh – but sort-of fair. Ibsen's fantastic tale takes his hero Peer Gynt into the darkest corners of Nordic folklore and 19th-century psychology – hardly the sort of thing, you'd think, for a composer (as Debussy put it) of “bon-bons wrapped in snow”. But Ibsen knew what he was doing – and Grieg responded to the drama with a string of glowingly vivid tone-pictures. Written in 1875, and first performed with the play in February 1876, Grieg's music comprises 23 movements for a theatre band. Re-scored in 1888 for a conventional orchestra, he made four of them into the first of two concert suites – and pretty much guaranteed himself a place in every school orchestra's repertoire for the next century.

In *Morning Mood* Peer wakes, robbed and deserted, in the Arabian desert. Grieg's radiant portrayal of a crisp, sunlit morning feels more northern than Arabian, and more rapturous than disillusioned – but no less beautiful for it. A tender lament for strings accompanies the death of Peer Gynt's mother Åse. Ibsen makes this scene portray Peer's frivolous insensitivity; Grieg goes straight for the heart. Then there's a deliciously sinuous oriental dance for the seductress Anitra – a mirage-like scene, echoed in Grieg's muted orchestral colours. And *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, Peer flees a horde of pig-faced trolls in a mountain cavern. Ibsen was tongue-in-cheek about Norwegian folklore, and so's Grieg. It's grotesque, angular and bizarre – and there are a couple of nasty shocks in store. This fairy-tale has claws...

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) Piano Concerto No.3 in C minor, Op.37

Allegro con brio / Fast, with spirit

Largo / Very slow

Rondo: allegro / Rondo: fast

Beethoven wasn't just a revolutionary. He may have rebelled against his teacher Haydn, but when it came to Mozart, his attitude was more like hero-worship. After listening to a performance of a Mozart piano concerto, he turned to his young pupil Ferdinand Ries and said: "The likes of us will never be able to do anything like that".

But Beethoven was never the type to refuse an artistic challenge – even one of his own. The Mozart concerto in question was No.24 in C minor, and between 1797 and 1800 Beethoven created his own C minor Piano Concerto. Different key signatures had different meanings for Beethoven, and his stormy "C minor mood" is his most personal of all – think of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony! But in Beethoven's C minor concerto, it's a very different story. No outbursts of rage here. It's the last piano concerto in which he kept the three movements, Mozart-like, in proportion with each other. And since Mozart begins his concerto with a low, unison phrase for strings... so does Beethoven. The musically-literate audience that heard him give the first performance at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on the night of 5 April 1803 would have spotted the resemblance immediately.

And yes, it's an act of homage. But it's anything but an imitation. Beethoven's vision was very different from his hero's; but it shows itself in quiet poetry rather than barnstorming heroics. Mozart always finished his first movements with the orchestra alone; but Beethoven allows the piano a few last words – to magical effect. The hushed, glowing slow movement is one of the tenderest ten minutes he ever penned. And at the end of the *finale* he switches both key and time signature, to dazzling effect. It's nothing like Mozart – and that's the highest compliment Beethoven could have paid him.

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JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957) Symphony No.4 in A minor, Op.63

Tempo molto moderato, quasi adagio / At a very moderate speed, as if slow

Allegro molto vivace / Very fast, lively

Il tempo largo / Very slow

Allegro / Fast

Sibelius began work on the Fourth Symphony in 1910, during a period of intense personal crisis. Two years earlier surgeons had removed a tumour from his throat. Although the operation was successful, Sibelius was terrified of the cancer recurring. For a while he gave up cigars and alcohol, though abstaining from the latter was a severe trial of strength and led to terrible withdrawal symptoms. Many of the works he wrote around this time are touched by a sense of isolation and the closeness of death; but there is one piece above all which it is hard not to see as a personal confession 'From out of the depths' – the Fourth Symphony (1911). Entries in his diary at the time he was working on the Symphony give some idea of the range of his mood-swings:

August 16 When will I get this development [the first movement] finished? i.e. be able to concentrate my mind and have the stamina to carry it all through. I managed when I had cigars and wine, but now I have to find new ways. I must!

August 30 Inspired. The development is ready in my head. I dare say I shall have the whole movement sketched out today.

September 22 All my youth and childhood, the former with its terrible storms and after-effects. The corpses still rise to the surface. Help!! Du musst dich zusammenraffen [You must pull yourself together].

If only I could rid myself of these dark shadows. Or at least put them into some new perspective. If you can't do that, put the past behind you. You mustn't go under, there's too much on the plus side.

Taken by themselves, some of these jottings may appear melodramatic. Put them beside the music of the Fourth Symphony and the expressions of pain become believable enough. And there is one line which may be particularly relevant to the outcome of the symphony – where Sibelius says that if he can't rid himself of his “dark shadows”, he might be able to “put them into some new perspective”. The Fourth Symphony contains some of the darkest and most unsettling music he ever wrote; the minor key ending offers no consolation. But listening to this symphony, one may feel that at the end inner blackness and despair have been faced with courage and resolution, and indeed put into new perspective. Perhaps the radiant optimism of the next and much more popular Fifth Symphony (1915-19) was only possible because Sibelius was prepared to confront those shadows fully in the Fourth.

Whatever the listener feels – and Sibelius was never the kind of composer to insist on one particular interpretation – there's no mistaking the originality and imaginative power of this music. In fact early audiences were shocked: in Sweden the Fourth Symphony was booed, while American critics condemned it as “ultra-modern” and “dissonant and doleful”. The opening is like a door opening slowly on a sombre new world. Cellos, basses and bassoons, playing *fortissimo*, spell out the interval of the tritone – a step of three whole tones – which is to dominate the symphony almost until the very end. A solo cello sings sadly, then the music rises to a climax, with baleful brass and anguished violins.

The second theme brings temporary warmth and repose, but the music that follows (once more initiated by the solo cello) soon strays into haunted country. A more or less straightforward recapitulation leads to a brief, spare coda for timpani and strings – just five bars. (Sibelius's economy of means in this symphony is masterly.)

At first, the *Allegro molto vivace* second movement feels like release from gloom. But gradually the shadows return, the dancing figures grow more and more uneasy. Then with a sudden doubling of the tempo the music becomes stormier. The end is disconcertingly sudden: violins hint at the opening oboe theme, then, with three quiet drum taps, the music abruptly halts.

The slow third movement is perhaps the most original of them all. From a few scraps of motif on flutes, Sibelius gradually assembles a heroically striving tune – the process is rather like watching a speeded up film of a plant growing. But the mood remains bleak. One writer described this movement as like “a lost soul looking for a final home”. In the end, the striving comes to nothing. Heroic aspiration has failed.

Nothing prepares us for the finale. Strings seize on the last note of the *Largo* and make it the springboard for an energetic, apparently positive *Allegro*, the mood brightened by the chiming of a glockenspiel. But, as in the second movement, uneasiness grows. Eventually the music builds to a desperate, grindingly dissonant climax in which tonality teeters on the brink of total disintegration. At its high-point the glockenspiel tinkles for the last time, then the finale plunges into a gloomy coda. The end is curiously matter-of-fact: forlorn bird-calls from flute and oboe, then string chords cadencing stoically in the minor key, *mezzo forte*. Anguish there may be in this music, but never sentimentality.

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