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Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

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Thursday Series

The Gadfly

Thursday 17 January 2019 7.30pm

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

The Gadfly: Suite

arranged by Levon Atovmyan (1901-1973)

Overture

Barrel-Organ Waltz

Galop

Romance

Finale

As a student in St Petersburg, Dmitri Shostakovich earned money accompanying silent movies on the piano but was fired when he became too engaged with what was happening on screen – bursting out in hysterical laughter or forgetting to play for minutes on end. When the film industry started to experiment with pre-recorded music, Shostakovich was no less fascinated. He wrote his first film score in 1928 and his last in 1970, just five years before his death. Among them were scores for documentaries, historical epics and pithy comedies.

Shostakovich claimed that working on film scores kept his musical reflexes alert (the music needed to be precisely cued and cut according to scenes already shot) and allowed him to approach longer symphonic projects refreshed. In 1955, he was asked to write the score for a film based on Ethel Voynich's best-selling 1897 novel *The Gadfly*, which tells the story of a 19th-century British revolutionary in Italy, a constant irritant (hence the title 'gadfly') to the authorities who was eventually shot by firing squad. The Soviet officials who commissioned the film believed it reflected the ideals of the party.

Shostakovich's music was typically varied. It had gravitas and intensity but lightness and wicked pastiche – not only of Italians including Verdi and Bellini but also of other composers' immortalizing of Italy in music (notably Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn).

In 1956, the year after the film's release, Shostakovich's assistant Levon Atovmyan assembled a suite of 12 movements from Shostakovich's full score; the suite of five movements in this performance has been selected from the full suite. Atovmyan re-ordered some of the music, extending and augmenting it where necessary and replacing the original score's church bells, organ and guitar with the more practical glockenspiel, xylophone, celeste and piano. From the opening Overture with its sense of heroic grandeur and anticipation of the battles ahead, to the shapely tune of the famous Romance, Shostakovich never addresses the art of film music with anything less than the utmost seriousness.

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MIECZYŚLAW WEINBERG (1919-1996)

Cello Concerto in C minor, Op.43

Adagio / Slow

Moderato – lento / Moderately – very slow

Allegro – cadenza – andante – allegro – andante / Fast – cadenza – at walking pace – fast – at walking pace

Allegro – adagio – meno mosso / Fast – slow – less movement

Mieczysław Weinberg was born into persecution. He escaped from Warsaw in 1939 just before Hitler's forces murdered his immediate family. When he eventually settled in Moscow, he was subjected to the new anti-Semitism of Stalin's final years. He had survived the Nazis, Stalin and even the Soviet Union by the time of his death in 1996. But he hadn't lived long enough to witness the significant surge in enjoyment of his music that took root in this new millennium.

Weinberg is closely associated with Dmitri Shostakovich, who risked his own life to protect that of his friend and arranged safe passage for the composer to Moscow in 1943 in the first place, before the two had even met. Their music shares a great deal, including – in the case of both men's cello concertos – a certain tense lyricism. But the fortitude with which Weinberg bore his torrid existence made his music distinctively tough. His works contains elements of Jewish, Polish, Russian, and Moldavian folk music and are possessed of a certain ability to see the lighter and darker sides of life as a single, unified whole.

In the space of two days in 1948, Weinberg's father-in-law was murdered by Stalin's men and his closest colleagues, including Shostakovich, were denounced as 'formalists' – their music betraying the Soviet cause. This was the year in which Weinberg wrote his Cello Concerto. It was easier to elude the censors with a concerto for solo instrument and orchestra (rather than a symphony) and Weinberg further bolstered the work's non-formalist credentials by including elements of folk music, notably Jewish klezmer. There is also, in the concerto's moderato movement, what the University of Manchester's Weinberg expert David Fanning describes as "the hint of a habanera". The concerto was first performed on 9 January 1957 by Mstislav Rostropovich, accompanied by the Symphony Orchestra of the Moscow Philharmonia, conducted by Samuil Samosud.

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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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