

## Lakeland Sinfonia Concert Society : Concert Calendar 2011-2012 Season

### *Northern Sinfonia 26th November 2011*

Violin Concerto No. 5 in A *Turkish* K.219

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
(1756 – 1791)

Four of Mozart's five violin concertos were written at home in Salzburg in the latter part of 1775. The first was written in 1773 but the autograph score shows that date altered to 1775.

According to history, Mozart was never actually taught to play the violin, 'he just seemed to know how'. The story goes that Mozart asked his father Leopold if he could join in a sight-reading session of some new string trios that had been written by a family friend. Leopold was reluctant on the grounds that his son had had no lessons and anyway he was only aged 7. Mozart insisted that it was not necessary to have lessons to play second violin, and as tears welled up in the boy's eyes Andreas Schachtner, who had come along to play second violin, requested that the boy be allowed to play alongside him.

*'Wolfgang fiddled along with me and to my astonishment, I soon realised that I was quite superfluous. I put aside my violin and noticed the tears of admiration & happiness streaming down Leopold's face'.*

*All six trios were played and then the seven year old, made bold by praise from the others, asked to play first violin. In spite of a whole mess of mistakes, Wolfgang actually did play the first violin parts and got through without breaking down once'.*

Although in the usual three-movement pattern for concertos written at that time, there are a few features that make this fifth violin concerto 'un'usual.

**I Allegro aperto** (quick and open) – a lively orchestral opening prepares us for the entry of the soloist but not for the music the solo violin plays. Music that seems to have wandered in from a slow lyrical movement takes centre stage, but once that is out of the way the busy music of the opening is taken over by the solo violin.

**II Adagio** – almost all of this slow movement is based on the opening bars, stated first by the orchestra and then taken over by the solo violin.

**III Tempo di minuetto** – a simple and graceful minuet opens the finale and recurs throughout the movement separated by 'intervening episodes'. One of these is in the 'alla turca' style which was popular at the time and gives the concerto its nickname.

'Turkish' music of the harem borrowed from an earlier opera *Lucio Silla* (1772) gives us an episode of startling contrast to the rest of the movement. 'Alla turca' music has a powerful marching rhythm of 'Left...Left...Left Right...Left' and even though Mozart does without the colourful percussion often associated with this style, the effect is nevertheless exhilarating.

Mozart has one last surprise: the 'alla turca' music seems to be taking over but the graceful minuet music returns, creating another startling contrast. This gentle music takes us to the conclusion of the work where, delightfully, Mozart leaves the music 'hanging in mid air' as if the dance has just ..... ended.

Symphony No.2 in C minor

Anton Bruckner

(1824 – 1896)

The halting progress in the composition of many of Bruckner's nine symphonies reveals a composer who was insecure in his art. Constant revisions, many at the suggestion of well-meaning friends, meant that this second symphony, for example, was revised at least five times right up to 1892, some 19 years after Bruckner had conducted its first performance.

Bruckner's musical background was as teacher and organist in the little village of Ansfelden in Austria where his father was the village schoolmaster. In 1837, on the death of his father, Bruckner enrolled as a chorister in the monastery of St. Florian where he studied organ, piano and theory. He excelled in the first of these studies and in 1861 began studying in Vienna with Sechter, a teacher renowned for his strict adherence to form and rules. He continued to study until 1864, his income derived from various organist and teaching posts.

Hampered by a lack of confidence in his musical ability and a shyness that dogged him throughout his life, he turned to even more study, that of the works of Bach. In 1865 all this was largely abandoned as 'the blinding light of Wagner' transformed his approach to music. Bruckner attended a performance of *Tristan and Isolde*, music written according to the rules of Wagner. As a result Bruckner put to one side all that he had learnt over the past years of study and, taking Wagner as his idol, he set off along a new path.

In accepting Wagner as his greatest influence, Bruckner inadvertently put himself in the firing line of a bitter war that was waging at the time between the musical factions of the anti-Wagner pro-Brahms followers. His confidence suffered; he had a nervous breakdown and suffered from severe depression. Around now, he also began to suffer from numeromania (an obsession with counting: trees, railings, paving slabs, anything at all, and if he lost count he started again) revealing the origin of his practice of numbering every bar in some of his scores.

In 1873, aged almost 50 and scarcely known as a composer, though recognised as a gifted organist, he took his courage and the scores of two symphonies in both hands, and went unannounced to see Wagner. Earlier requests for meetings had gone unanswered so overcoming his shyness he arrived on Wagner's doorstep. Wagner had no knowledge of Bruckner's music but the shy middle-aged man was invited in and the two scores were inspected. The completed second symphony was thought to be 'very nice', while the incomplete third was praised. Bruckner must have left the meeting with his idol in the most positive frame of mind he had experienced for a very long time.

The next day back in Vienna, probably due to the copious amounts of wine consumed during the meeting, Bruckner could not recall which of the two symphonies Wagner had preferred! A letter from Wagner eventually confirmed it was the 'one with the trumpet tune' and so on its completion the third symphony was dedicated, with permission, to Wagner.

This massive step forward emboldened Bruckner to press on with a possible performance of the second symphony by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. At earlier rehearsals the orchestra had been somewhat cool toward the rather lengthy work (at around 70 minutes it was one of the longest symphonies of its day). The attitude of some of the players was bordering on derisory and there were demands for cuts in its length. Bruckner offered a cut of some 32 bars in a work totalling near to 2000 bars with repeats in the scherzo. An impasse regarding this 'unplayable nonsense' saw Bruckner turn to one of his supporters, a member of the local nobility. The resultant 'discussions' saw the work given its first performance by the Vienna Philharmonic on 26th October 1873.

It was a qualified success and Bruckner's confidence strengthened until Johann Herbeck, a friend and conductor, suggested 'a healthy revision'. In addition, the composer's request that he be allowed to dedicate the work to the orchestra was met with silence. His new-found confidence was short-lived and severely dented.

**I *Ziemlich schnell*** (moderately quick) – like the opening of Beethoven's 9th symphony, a model Bruckner used in many of his symphonies, shimmering strings set the scene for a long cello melody interspersed with comments from the first horn. Scales on wind and strings prepare for an important trumpet idea. All of this is in the first 26 bars before a pause brings a halt to the expansion and development of these ideas. These 'pauses' are a feature of the whole symphony and caused much annoyance and frustration among players at the initial rehearsals. Bruckner said of these pauses, '*Whenever I have something new and important to say, I must stop and take a break first*'. Comment has also been made that as an organist Bruckner was used to pauses in music, allowing him to change organ stops and also to allow the echo to fade away in the churches in which he played. New themes for oboe and bassoon are introduced as the music grows in stature and sound as it moves towards the inevitable pause. Trumpets and trombones add weight and also provide a contrast to delicate textures heard on wind and strings. Eventually this extensive movement of almost 600 bars arrives at 'some impressive excitement' for the full orchestra and ends with three final unison notes of C.

**II *Scherzo: Schnell*** – this, the shortest of the four movements, features robust, almost peasant-like stamping music based on one of Bruckner's favourite rhythms: two short notes followed by a varying number of long notes, in this case five. The contrasting Trio is gentle.

**III *Andante: Feierlich, etwas bewegt*** (slow, solemn but somewhat agitated) – Bruckner became noted for his expansive slow movements and this one is a fine example among his earlier works. Its instruction – slow, solemn but somewhat agitated – sums up perfectly the mood created in its rich orchestral sounds and its broad themes. Note an important theme on the horn, which makes a number of appearances, accompanied more and more elaborately as the movement progresses. The ending is relatively gentle as a duet for flute and solo violin passes by and leads us to a famous passage for the horn which, in one of his revisions, Bruckner gave to the clarinet as he considered it awkward and tricky for the horn.

**IV *Finale: Mehr schnell*** (mostly quick) – a peaceful opening hardly prepares us for a military figure on the brass but gives an idea of the contrasts that are to be a feature of this finale. Pauses prepare us for 'something new and important' but the military music and the contrasting opening mood are never far away. As the finale progresses, there are times when an air of indecision pervades the music. Pauses herald new ideas and new keys, threatening the flow of the movement, but Bruckner eases his way towards 'things more positive, albeit taking a scenic rather than a more direct route and pausing to revisit favourite places'. The closing bars, among the loudest and most forceful in this monumental symphony, leave us in no doubt as to the inevitable destination, as the entire orchestra 'hammers out a persistent rhythm in noisy triumph'.

Bruckner's symphonies have been described as 'Cathedrals of sound' but the anti-Wagner faction was less complimentary. Brahms described them as 'symphonic boa-constrictors' and 'a swindle that will be forgotten in a few years', while one critic saw them as 'the anti-musical ravings of a half-wit'. The composer Hugo Wolf said 'One single cymbal crash by Bruckner is worth all the four symphonies of Brahms with the serenades thrown in'.