

Lakeland Sinfonia Concert Society : Concert Calendar 2011-2012 Season

Manchester Camerata 5th November 2011

Symphony No. 10 in B minor

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809 - 1847)

This youthful work is one of 12 String Symphonies written between the ages of 12 and 14. Sunday afternoons in the well-to-do Mendelssohn household in Berlin saw musicians arriving to perform music composed, among others, by Felix and his sister Fanny. The single movement 10th symphony was completed in May 1823, the composer's 14th year; the genius of the boy is apparent throughout the slow solemn introduction and the dramatic quicker music with its two contrasting themes.

Robert Schumann (of Mendelssohn) - 'The Mozart of the 19th Century'.

Rakastava (The Lover) Op. 14

Jean Sibelius
(1865 - 1957)

This little suite of three short movements began as music for unaccompanied male choir using texts from the *Kantelefar*, a collection of Finnish folk verse. Written in 1893, it was entered in a competition but was beaten into second place by a former pupil of Sibelius. A year later, a second version appeared for strings and male chorus but it was in 1911 that this evening's version for strings, timpani and triangle appeared.

The story of *Rakastava* (The Lover) is told in three movements:

I *Rakastava* (a musical portrait) – the music is gentle and lyrical at first but grows in strength.

II The Way of the Lover – a persistent and restless mood dominates the music.

III 'Goodnight my beloved, Farewell' – the longest of the three movements opens with a solo violin playing a theme 'tinged with the sorrow of parting'. Music of greater urgency creates a contrast to this and to the music that follows, where a solo cello adds a poignant voice to the passion-filled string writing.

Violin Concerto in D minor (1822)

Felix Mendelssohn

A year younger than when he wrote the 10th String Symphony, Mendelssohn composed this concerto for his friend and violin teacher Eduard Rietz (b. 1802). No doubt it was performed in the domestic setting mentioned earlier, but little else has been traced of its history. It is known that the concerto was shown to Ferdinand David, for whom Mendelssohn composed the famous E minor violin concerto but the manuscript remained in the possession of the family and was not publicly performed until the middle of the 20th Century.

In 1951 it was shown to Yehudi Menuhin while he was working in New York and he was sufficiently excited to buy the rights for it from the Mendelssohn family. Menuhin edited the concerto, had it published and gave its first modern-day performance in New York in 1952.

The critics at the time admired its 'lively jesting finale in the gypsy style' and found it 'utterly delightful'. Menuhin said that it was 'full of invention and not in any way inhibited', and that it displayed, for the work of a young boy, 'a remarkable freedom'.

It is written in the usual three movement pattern: Quick – Slow – Quick. It features two cadenzas composed and written out by the composer, and the final two movements are joined. Throughout the work the 13 year-old genius shows a remarkable mastery of writing for the solo violin and for the orchestra, as well as displaying an innate gift for melody.

Franz Liszt (of Mendelssohn) - 'Bach reborn'.

String Quartet No.14 *Death and the Maiden* D. 810

Franz Schubert / Gustav Mahler
(1797 – 1828) (1860 – 1911)

'Think of a man whose health can never be restored and who from sheer despair makes matters worse instead of better... of a man whose brightest hopes have come to nothing and whose enthusiasm for the beautiful is fast vanishing and ask yourself if such a man is not truly unhappy'.

In 1823 Schubert, aged 26, writes the above in a letter to a friend. He doesn't mention that he is also broke. The following year sees a worsening in his health and in his financial situation but he still manages to compose, including the 14th String Quartet *Death and the Maiden*. He turns to a song of the same name, written in better times in 1817, for inspiration and ideas for the second movement of this new work

The quartet was performed in the home of one of his friends in 1826 but was not published until 1831, three years after his death. Not recognised in his lifetime, it has since become a staple part of the repertoire.

I The opening of the first movement has a vigour and a passion that is an ongoing feature of the music. Abrupt and violent mood changes occur throughout, although a quiet and more subdued chorale is a welcome contrast. It is not difficult to see in this movement all that the young Schubert was going through.

II The piano accompaniment of the song of 1817 gives Schubert the basis of this second movement, a theme and five variations. The rather hypnotic insistence of the underlying rhythm (rather reminiscent of the second movement of Beethoven's 7th symphony) is found in some form throughout the movement. Schubert does not label it as a 'funeral march' but he knew by now that the syphilis from which he was suffering would eventually kill him.

III This lively scherzo movement was once described as the 'Dance of the Demonic Fiddler', full of momentum, syncopation and dramatic changes in dynamics. In contrast the trio section is a gentle respite.

IV A Tarantella! A vigorous Italian dance that, according to tradition, was a treatment for 'the madness and potentially fatal convulsions caused by the bite of a tarantula spider'. Perhaps Schubert was wishing if only the cure for his 'madness' could be as straightforward!

This evening we hear Schubert's music, originally written for the four players of a string quartet, expressed in the larger string sound world of Gustav Mahler in the late 19th

century. Renowned in his early life as a great conductor, Mahler was then concerned with performance. He arranged the symphonies of Beethoven for an orchestra of his own time, far larger than any that would have been available to Beethoven. Operas of Mozart and symphonies of Bruckner, Schumann and Schubert received the same attention. However, with string quartets Mahler increased the number of performers, but the music remained essentially the same. Concert halls had become much larger and by moving the music from the intimate rooms (chambers), where quartets were performed in the early 19th century, to these larger venues, it served to bring this marvellous music to a wider audience.

So the Mahlerian touch to what is still Schubert's music gives the listener a richer, wider sound. It also creates a problem. Whereas with one instrument per line in the original, now several players have to tackle some very demanding writing and play it in unison, trying to sound as one.

Schubert (1824): 'Each night on retiring to bed, I hope I may not wake again and each morning recall yesterday's grief.'

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