

Lakeland Sinfonia Concert Society : Concert Calendar 2011-2012 Season

Northern Sinfonia 14th April 2012

Metamorphosen

Richard Strauss

(1864 - 1949)

This deeply emotional 'study for 23 solo strings' is the composer's reaction to the destruction of opera houses and concert halls, and therefore German culture, by Allied bombing in the latter years of the war. However, it was the destruction in 1943 of the Munich Opera House, scene of many of his great musical triumphs, that affected Strauss the most strongly. He began to compose an elegiac piece for strings that was to become the *Metamorphosen* being performed this evening.

'It is not written for a string ensemble or for a string orchestra but for 23 solo instruments, specified as 10 violins, 5 violas, 5 cellos and 3 double-basses. Only occasionally do all 23 solo lines play together as, mostly, only a number of the 23 are involved'.

There are a number of ideas that come and go in this 'music of mourning': a series of four dark, heavy chords; a theme of four repeated notes followed by a pattern of falling notes with a rhythm reminiscent of the Funeral March from Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony; fragments from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* and a Strauss opera *Arabella*; and a fragment from Beethoven's Opus 131 string quartet.

At one point in the manuscript, Strauss wrote *Trauer um München* (Mourning for Munich) but in the last ten bars is the most telling wording. Lower strings play the Beethoven Funeral March in full, while upper strings play the Strauss theme with the hint of that music. In the score is written 'IN MEMORIAM'.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Op. 58

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770 - 1827)

Imagine that you are in a freezing cold theatre in Vienna. It is 6.30 pm on 22nd December 1808 in the Theater an der Wien and a concert consisting entirely of works by Beethoven is about to begin. You have heard that a finish of 10.30pm is probable and that it would have been later had Beethoven not decided to omit other works that he had planned to include. As it is, the programme includes two symphonies, a piano concerto, an aria, three movements from a mass in C, piano improvisations by the composer and a fantasy for piano, chorus and orchestra, almost all of which are new to the public ear.

Organising the event at all had been problematic. It had been two years in the planning yet, even so, many of the musicians Beethoven wanted for his orchestra were performing elsewhere in Vienna on that evening so it was not an orchestra of the 'pick of the crop'. Many players in Vienna had been upset by Beethoven's attitude towards them over the years, some refusing to play if Beethoven was in the same room. The first choice soloist for the aria had stormed out after a quarrel with Beethoven and the substitute was barely adequate, proving to be '*nervous and barely heard - the beautiful child trembled more than she sang - she cannot be blamed, considering the cold. We trembled in our boxes, huddled together and all wrapped in furs*'.

The piano concerto was Beethoven's 4th and the soloist was the composer himself, who apparently played *'with astounding cleverness and in the fastest possible tempi. The adagio, a masterly movement of beautifully developed song, he sang on this instrument with a profound melancholy that thrilled'*.

I Allegro moderato – from the very opening Beethoven is in new territory. The audience, brought up on concertos with opening passages played by the full orchestra preparing the way for the entry of the soloist, were probably puzzled when Beethoven sat at the piano and played straightaway a quiet, contemplative passage without the orchestra. The orchestra answers as if in shock at such daring before emerging into more familiar musical territory by eventually taking the lead. The material is based on the repeated notes of the opening piano bars and a second, more lyrical theme. A familiar rhythm is persistent in its appearances – da-da-da daaaa – a rhythm more familiar in the best known of Beethoven's nine symphonies.

II Andante con moto – 'Orpheus taming the wild beasts' is how Liszt described this movement. Stern strings and gentle piano enter into a series of interchanges before the gentleness of the piano writing eventually calms the orchestra. The piano takes command and leads the now subdued orchestra into the finale.

III Vivace – *it takes a while to shake off the mood of the previous movement, but soon the brightness of this exuberant finale takes over. The music is full of contrasts and abrupt changes of mood, rather like the man who wrote it. The ending, after the flourish of a cadenza and a flurry of trills, is almost frenzied in its exuberance.*

Symphony No. 41 in C *Jupiter** K. 551

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756 – 1791)

In the summer of 1788 Mozart's financial state was desperate. His letters to a fellow freemason, Michael Puchberg, are clear evidence of the near panic that almost engulfed him at this time.

Vienna early June 1788:

'Dearest Brother

Your true friendship and brotherly love embolden me to ask a great favour of you. I still owe you eight ducats. Apart from the fact that at the moment I am not in a position to pay you back this sum, my confidence in you is so boundless that I dare to implore you to help me out with a hundred gulden until next week, when my concerts in the Casino are to begin. By this time I shall certainly have received my subscription money and shall then be able quite easily to pay back 136 gulden with my warmest thanks'.

Puchberg noted on the letter, 'Sent 100 gulden'. Days later Mozart wrote again, this time requesting that Puchberg assist him *'for a year or two with one or two thousand gulden, at a suitable rate of interest'*. The letter goes on to inform his benefactor that the family had moved to cheaper lodgings. In a further letter of late June Mozart is *'distressed that circumstances prevent you [Puchberg] from assisting me as much as I could wish'*. The letter ends, *'Do come and see me. I am always at home and have done more work in the ten days since I came to live here than in two months in my former quarters....IF BLACK THOUGHTS DID NOT COME SO OFTEN, THINGS WOULD BE EVEN BETTER'*.

In a fourth letter to Puchberg dated early July 1788 Mozart encloses two pawnbroker's tickets and asks Puchberg to help him with any money that can be raised on the tickets. Despite all this, the

summer of 1788 saw Mozart complete three major symphonies – No. 39, No. 40 and the *Jupiter* – three symphonies totally different in mood and character with only No. 40 exhibiting ‘black thoughts’ of any lasting length.

I Allegro vivace – this movement is rich in ideas, many of which are of an operatic character. Was Mozart hoping to remind potential audiences of his opera pedigree? In the event there is only uncertain evidence that any of the final three symphonies were performed in Mozart’s lifetime. Performances of ‘a symphony’ in Leipzig, and two concerts in Vienna in 1791 conducted by Salieri where ‘a grand symphony’ was performed, provide inconclusive evidence.

II Andante cantabile – violins and violas are muted in a movement that begins in a conventionally melodic fashion but an undercurrent of agitation soon causes ripples in the music.

III Menuetto – back to the good old days with a strong minuet and a trio that suggests Haydn, one of his teachers, with its question and answers section balanced by full blown orchestral confidence.

IV Molto allegro – this is without a doubt a ‘tour de force’. There are five ideas in this finale, the first being four notes that Mozart had used before, notably in his first symphony written at the age of eight. All five ideas are presented and developed until, in the conclusion of the finale, all five themes are brought together in a ‘dazzling display of genius’ that crowns what proved to be Mozart’s final excursion into the world of the symphony.

*According to the diary of Mozart’s son, Franz Xaver, the nickname was given to the symphony by Salomon, Haydn’s great champion in London. It first appeared on a copy published in Edinburgh in 1819 and then on Clementi’s piano arrangement in 1823.

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