

## CONCERT 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Hello WHO members and friends,

As we have become the Pariah State fielding the scorn and derision thrown at us from elsewhere in Australia, let us not forget that we have been voted the most “liveable city” more times than the other capitals put together. This is but a blip in our social and cultural life and things will improve.

Today’s concert will be slightly shorter due to personal circumstances and obligations, but will be made up next week with a fanfare of exciting and uplifting music.

For now, let us enter back into the world of great slow movements from 5th symphonies.

Dimitri Shostakovich, the great 20th century Russian composer, wrote 15 symphonies but probably his best known and always popular, was number five. A quote from well-known music scholar and Shostakovich specialist, Simon Morrison, claims this work is “A landmark heroic period piece, ...a narrative representation of a hero’s life and death”. It was composed in 1937 at the height of the Stalinist purges when thousands including artists, writers and musicians disappeared. Shostakovich became a prime target due to a personal attack in Pravda as a consequence of Stalin attending a performance of his opera “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk”, and being singularly unimpressed. The inference at the time was that Stalin had himself written the denunciation of the opera, accusing the composer of “catering to the perverted taste of the bourgeoisie” and what’s more “lacking class consciousness”. Even had he not personally written the piece he would have authorised it with the effect of a personal and unquestioned attack.

About as bad as it gets!

Fearing for his life and/or freedom, Shostakovich had one chance to redeem himself with the fifth symphony, and expunge the asterisk next to his name. He actually had a suitcase packed next to the front door, so much was his concern. Nor did he sacrifice or compromise artistic considerations; in fact his predicament seemed to have spurred him on to incredible heights. The largo is one of the most moving laments ever written, full of anguish and intensity and completed in three days. This supreme expression of grief at a time when such emotions were not favoured, saw members of the audience at its premiere with tears in their eyes. The fourth movement abruptly followed, changing the mood with furious explosions of brass and timpani in a finale as rousing and grand as any. The ovation after that first performance lasted 45 minutes securing redemption, popularity and probably his life.

Jump forward to 24 September 1956 at the conclusion of a concert featuring the fifth symphony and violin concerto. Shostakovich was obliged to sit on stage enduring speeches, buckets of cut flowers and testimonials (all of which he loathed,) and endure the thunderous applause that greeted the announcement that he had just been awarded the Order of Lenin. How he must have smiled to himself recalling the times in ‘37 leading up to that first performance. Two days later, on 26 September, he threw a banquet in a Prague restaurant to which he invited 140 guests. Not one was an official!

Look up “Shostakovich 5th symphony 3rd movement Largo” with Dmitri Kitajenko conducting the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra, one you may not have heard of before but attracting very fine professional musicians. This is one of the great symphonies to play and is in the repertoire of all professional orchestras.

Now we come to the other great 20th century slow movement from fifth symphonies. Mahler symphony number five, the famous “Adagietto”. The symphony was composed in 1901/1902, mostly at his summer residence at the village of Maiernigg on the shores of Wörthersee in Carinthia, Austria. Built in 1900, this was Mahler’s summer home up to July 1907 at which time the death of his daughter Maria saw him abruptly leave, never to return. It was sold a year later. These years there witnessed the completion of his fourth symphony and the composition of the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th symphonies plus settings to 10 poems by Friedrich Rückert. Five of these became Rücklieder, the other five Kindertotenlieder (Songs on the death of children).

Look up “Karajan Mahler Symphony number 5 Adagietto” for a beautiful recording accompanied by stunning vistas of the Maiernigg area. And put a visit to the composing hut on your bucket list, next time you are near the area. We WILL return to normal. This sublime music and its birthplace has outlived the Spanish flu, two world wars and well over a century of time.

Finally the best known of all slow movements from 5th symphonies, the “Andante cantabile” from Tchaikovsky Symphony No 5 in E minor opus 64. Tchaikovsky struggled with this work and it had been 10 years since his Symphony No 4. It was written in 1888 between May and August, not a long time one could say, but for this great composer full of self-doubt, a troubled journey. The first performance was conducted by the composer in November of that year receiving a lukewarm reception. It was not until after his death that this mighty symphony gained its rightful place in the most enjoyed orchestral works of all time.

The Andante cantabile movement begins with the tragic sonority of B minor chords modulating into D major and one of the best loved horn solos in orchestral music. The second theme ‘con moto’ appears with the clarinet in A. This, and the first theme on horn I’m embarrassed to say, I recorded first for the Paul Hogan Show and then for the “Anyhow have a Winfield” advertisement also with Paul. Suffice it to say the beautiful music of this great movement was always much better to perform in concert.

YouTube Tchaikovsky Symphony No 5 Bernstein and Boston Symphony Orchestra. Andante cantabile begins from 16.30 Mark. I love his tempi, slower than Andante, and hard for a principal horn. It doesn’t affect this performance and it is beautifully played, though a little dark on the video. Bernstein made a habit of altering recognised tempi. Harking back to the Shostakovich 5th where the composer affixed tempo markings to his score: Shostakovich wrote of a 1958 performance of Bernstein and the New York Phil. “I was taken with the performance of my fifth symphony by the talented Leonard Bernstein. I liked it that the end of the finale was played significantly faster than customary”.

Great praise indeed!