

CONCERT 17 May 2020

Dear WHO friends,

Here is the concert for this week. An orthodox program: overture, concerto, symphony.

1 Overture to The Sicilian Vespers by Verdi.

Beautiful tunes, triumphal brass and shimmering strings, this is pure Verdi. YouTube: The Orchestra of the Star of the Republic of Belarus conducted by Victor Balarikin. This is an overture rarely heard, so you may not know of it.

The opera is set in Sicily with the background war initially between local Sicilian forces against the occupation army of Charles of Anjou in 1282. The conflict continued ending in semi-liberation in 1302. After a local uprising the battles were often fought at sea between opposing fleets from Naples, Aragon and elsewhere. The opera premiered in June 1855 composed with a French libretto for the Paris Opera. After a few poor attempts to rewrite it in Italian, and with a title change to make it less politically combustible for Italian theatres, it was eventually acceptable. It was reset in Portugal in the year 1640 and named Giovanni de Guzman. By 1861 the original title was again acceptable and has remained. Politics!! In Italy it was first performed in 1855 with nine performances given. The inclusion of a 30 minute ballet after general disapproval was later removed by Verdi.

2 Our concerto for the week is the Mozart Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major. One may wonder why, as he wrote 27 concertos for piano, only 21 are solo piano concertos. The reason is, the first four were compilations by Mozart using adaptations from other composers' sonata movements and scored when he was very young. His first originally composed concerto was No. Five. No. Ten is a concerto for two pianos and No. Seven a concerto for three pianos. So, with my limited mathematical kudos that makes 21 solo piano concertos.

This week's work was written in 1785 when Mozart was 28, and thus was just six years before his death. It was a time of great output, Mozart premiering the work himself at a benefit concert in the National Court. This particular concerto is sometimes referred to as the "Elvira Madigan" concerto because of the use of the second movement in a film of the same name. I don't object too strenuously as, with the use of the Adagietto from the Mahler 5th in the Visconti film "Death in Venice" many filmgoers were drawn to discovering more of the composers' music for the first time. A wonderful recording of this work is with Vladimir Ashkenazy conducting the Philharmonic Orchestra from the keyboard.

This habit of conducting and playing at the same time was a favourite concert attraction for Ashkenazy. I recall a concert I attended at London's Barbican in 1986. He performed four, yes four Mozart concerti from the piano. By the fourth he could hardly raise his arm. Australian violinist Ashley Arbuckle, who was then playing in the LSO as associate principal, told me later that evening that it was a nightmare experience with little, if no, proper communication from about half way through the third concerto. Still he was a great pianist and well worth listening to on this recording. Now, take a break, go to the bar or the kettle, whichever is more appropriate, as it is interval.

3 Comfortable and back in your favourite spot? Good, now for the symphony.

I have chosen the great 3rd Symphony in A minor Op. 44 by Rachmaninov. The recording is an unusual one. YouTube "The American Youth Symphony" performing Rachmaninov Symphony No 3. I love the exuberance of dynamic young players and it assures us that our artistic future is in good hands. It is also well filmed and performed.

The other great Russian Symphonic composer at that time was Shostakovich, who in 1936 was officially denounced in Pravda (the official party newspaper) for failing to write music "sufficiently optimistic in spirit or popular in style". His famous 5th symphony composed in 1937 was a response to his dire position. A close associate, Solomon Volkov, recalled years later that much of the anxiety, fear for his life and grief had found its way into his friend's music. As is well documented, the 5th symphony was hailed by Stalin and his mates as a triumph.

Thirty years older than Shostakovich, Rachmaninov had left Russia in 1917 when he was 44, and never returned. I feel his music was more of an expression of individuality coloured by his pre-

revolution lifestyle and freedom from years abroad. On the other hand, Shostakovich was truly a Soviet composer, who wrote through his circumstances, communal music rooted in collective experience. A fascinating comparison of the genius of both. The later large Rachmaninov orchestral scores: the Paganini Rhapsody, 3rd Symphony and Symphonic Dances marked a departure from his intensely Romantic and melodic style (remember the second piano concerto we performed). He was now, I believe, sounding more fatalistic and melancholy, full of nervous energy. In the 3rd, he starts to explore and use unusual instrumental effects. It has been said that the two outer movements depict a struggle between an organising power and a nostalgic dream of Russia pre 1917. In the extraordinary slow movement the beauty and nostalgia are there for all to hear. The final emphatic chords of the last movement I feel is like an awakening from a dream, a reverie back to the reality, and the sadness of an emigre and as a concert pianist, nomad for the last 22 years, cut off from all he knew and grew up with for 44 years. I love this symphony. I feel it speaks to all who have left the country of their birth their parents or grandparents with memories of pre-existing times that perhaps no longer exist. As a matter of record I also love the Shostakovich 5th but for different reasons.