

CONCERT 19 Oct 2020

I mentioned last week that I would tell the story of my meeting with Spike Milligan and was reminded of that on Saturday so I better keep my word.

When I was playing early music back in the 70s Spike came out to do a one man show at the Comedy Theatre. His mother lived in Woy Woy, on NSW's central coast, and he loved Australia. The men's home, Gordon House (in Little Burke Street down from the Princess Theatre) had just been beautifully converted into a very flashy restaurant and accommodation premises by businessman Ian Sturseeker. I had organised a couple of music functions for him, including the trio consisting of harpsichord, one key flute and cello performing a concert in the interior courtyard of the three story brick building, which created a wonderful acoustic for baroque music. Milligan was living in one of the apartments and used to dine at about 11pm at the restaurant after his show. However, Ian played piped music, mostly popular classical, while diners ate. Now Spike was president of a movement against piped music which even saw him stand up out of his seat on plane take offs and landings until the pilot turned off the recorded music that was invariably played in those days to "calm" any concerned passengers. Both Spike and Ian were strong personalities. Spike said he didn't want piped music and Ian said there had to be some music and would he acquiesce to live music. Spike said yes, and being obtuse, stated he would help pay for a baroque trio, not imagining that Ian could find one. The other alternative was silence.

Well Ian, who wanted music for his other diners, thought he had won.

He rang up and hired me to come in and set up at 11pm for two weeks and payed us quite handsomely taking into account the hour and effort to furnish the harpsichord, stands etc. So there we were on the first night, which was the second night of Spike's show. Spike came over to me and invited us to have dinner with him. I said we were booked to perform but no, he had payed for us for the first week and he wanted silence. We had a lovely meal with Spike chatting about many things, much to Ian's chagrin who sat at the bar seething. I greatly enjoyed our conversation, found common ground in both being born in the East and, of course, in music. This pattern repeated for the next few days. Sometimes we ate with Spike, sometimes he requested solitude so we moved to the bar and chatted with Ian. Not one note was ever played. Spike and Ian sorted out their differences and became good friends and Ian, paying us for the full two weeks, told me after five or six days not to bother coming anymore as he had agreed not to have any music while Spike dined there.

I must say it suited me fine as I was recording all day with the ABC in Ripponlea, and then not getting home till after midnight after eating much later than usual. That top end of the city was so vibrant in those days, with all three theatres in full operation and the ballet and opera on at the Princess. The difference when Southbank opened was extraordinary as all nightlife moved down to the new precinct.

The first work on the program today is a wonderful symphonic poem written by the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi and entitled "Pini di Roma, Pines of Rome". Born in Bologna in 1879 he studied violin, viola and composition in his home town. I suppose he could be regarded as a nationalistic composer as he took great interest in the music of past Italian composers, especially Monteverdi and Vivaldi, of whom I have talked about in past letters. The in-depth study of the music from these master composers and their eras certainly had a strong bearing on the tonality and melodic construction of Respighi's future writing. After graduating in 1899 he travelled to Russia to take further compositional lessons from Rimsky-Korsakov, whose profound influence greatly enhanced the Italian composer's understanding of orchestral colour and use of instrumentation. A later influence was Max Bruch whom he met in Germany. Respighi eventually returned to Rome where he fruitfully spent the last 23 years of his life. His most enduring works were written there, especially his Roman Trilogy: "Fountains of Rome" 1917, "Pines of Rome: 1924, and "Roman Festivals" 1928. Each work depicts an aspect of Italian life both past and present. The music of the "Fountains" is certainly sensual and quasi-Oriental, with his time studying in Russia boldly acknowledged.

The “Pines of Rome” was composed over the period 1923/24. It, like the “Fountains” falls into four sections. The program attached to them was developed by Respighi and Claudio Guastalla (his librettist for five of Respighi’s operas) and is worth reading while listening to the work.

1. “I Pini di Villa Borghesa”

Children are at play in the pine groves they dance around in a circle. They play at soldiers marching and fighting, they are wrought up by their own cries like swallows at evening they come and go in swarms.

(One forgets in our time of relative extended peace in most European countries how influenced by war and military might children’s play was at that time.)

2. “Pini presso una catacomba”

We see the shades of the pine trees fringing the entrance to the catacomb. From the depths there rises the sound of the mournful psalm- singing floating through the air like a solemn hymn, and gradually and mysteriously dispersing.

(This movement displays his great love of early music with the use of Gregorian Aolian and Ionian modes).

3. “I Pini del Gianicolo”

A quiver runs through the air; the pine trees of Janiculum stand distinctly outlined in the clear light of the full moon. A Nightingale is singing.

(Realising that no soprano or instrument could achieve the exact effect of the nightingale Respighi had in mind, he uses 20th century technology and requested that a recording of a nightingale be played on tape from the orchestra. See how skilled percussionists have had to be!)

4. “I pini della Via Appia”

Misty down the Appian Way; solitary pine trees guarding the magic landscape the muffled, ceaseless rhythm of unending footsteps. The poet has a fantastic vision of bygone glories; trumpets sound and in the brilliance of the newly risen sun, a consular army bursts forth towards the Sacred Way mounting in triumph to the Capital.

(This is a spine tingling ending loved by all conductors and audiences, as from a distance the trumpets are heard heralding the approaching Roman Legions. Steadily approaching, there is an intense crescendo in the score with the cymbals and the brass urging the piece to its triumphal conclusion.)

I hope you enjoy this work there are a couple of good recordings on YouTube including a not too bad student performance from the Melbourne Uni Conservatorium. As can be seen it’s an exciting and fun piece to play.

The second work is a concerto for violin and orchestra by Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian. The violin has such a rich repertoire of concertos but this is one not often performed these days, and is a work that excites from the first hearing. There are a few good recordings on YouTube but if you are happy to close your eyes and just listen, the recording of David Oistrakh, the famous Russian violinist (whose son Igor brilliantly performed the Beethoven violin concerto with the MSO in the 80s) with Khachaturian conducting the Moscow Radio Orchestra, can also be found on YouTube. A truly historic recording. Khachaturian arrived in Moscow in 1922 as a 19-year-old who could hardly read music. He began as a cellist but then was accepted into composition class. Such were the rigours of the selective education program in Russia that after 11 years of intensive study his skill had developed to the point he was able to compose such famous works as music for the ballet “Gayaneh” including the famous Sabre Dance, Spartacus, his famous waltz from Masquerade, Trio for violin clarinet and piano and so much more. As an Armenian born to a poor family

in Georgia, he moved to Moscow after the Sovietisation of the Caucasus and rose to be regarded internationally as one of the Soviet Union's leading nationalist composers. His music always reflected the heritage of the folk music of his birthplace, something that was never lost by his years of study in Moscow. It matters not if one doesn't understand in detail the analysis of this fascinating work, which would take too long to map out. Suffice it to say, it is on first hearing intensely enjoyable. This can also be said of the "Pines of Rome" composed only sixteen years earlier. Sit back and enjoy the brilliant solo playing, the great rhythmic interest throughout, the folksong-like lyrical sections and Khachaturian's subtle use of tonal juxtaposition.

Both composers in today's concert were heavily influenced by Moscow training but retained their individual voice, giving us works that, once heard, are never forgotten.