

## CONCERT 24<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Dear WHO players and friends,

As restrictions slightly ease we must count ourselves fortunate that we seem to have averted the worst of this pandemic. I watched the funeral service of a very close family friend in London broadcast on line. She passed away a month ago after two weeks in hospital with no visitors. Children stuck overseas and in England had to watch on TV, very hard to imagine.

Anyway, to the beauty of music.

Let us begin this week with the overture from the third orchestral suite of Johann Sebastian Bach in D major BWV 1068, performed by the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra conducted from the harpsichord by Ton Koopman. The designation "overture", sometimes also called "prelude", comes from Paris in the middle of the 17th century. The typical construction was a slow and very rhythmic introduction, followed by a regular or irregular fugue or imitation, with fast flowing passages throughout. A first example of the early form is the overture to the ballet 'Alcidane' in 1658 by court composer Jean Baptist Lully. Lully conducted the Royal instrumental music at the court of Louis 14th at Versailles and was a fine composer in his own right. He suffered the ignominy of being the first conductor to occasion his own death while directing, the baton in those days being a large wooden staff thumped on the ground to maintain a beat. Poor Lully smashed the rod into his foot, contracted gangrene and passed into musician's folklore as the first of many conductors who have metaphorically "shot themselves in the foot" on the podium. Anyway, I digress!

Lully's overture to the opera 'Serse' performed in Paris in 1660, shows a three-part overture with a return to the slow introduction following the fugue. Bach, like others, relied on knowledgeable musicians who had travelled to Versailles for understanding of the overture. They brought back detailed accounts of overture suites in the French style and playing manners such as tempo and bow stroke differences. He quickly understood how to distinguish between the stylistic peculiarities, either Italian or French, and interpret them according to their taste.

Many late 18th and 19th century musicians, including ones as eminent as Mendelssohn, regarded the overtures such as the one you are about to hear to be great music, but pompous and affected in style. They consequently relaxed the sharply pointed rhythms in performance. It is only with the scholarship and investigation of the last 50 or so years, and initially centred in the Netherlands, that the vibrancy and passion through consideration of the playing manners has allowed us to fully appreciate the composers' original intent. Listen out for the three defined sections and the wonderful rhythmic bowing and brass playing. Percussionists watch the fantastic wrist movement in the timpani creating an exhilarating trill effect. I would encourage you to enjoy the rest of the suite. The famous Air, wonderful Gavottes, Bourree and Gigue.

The second work I have chosen returns us to the 20th century where orchestras had developed to the size and power we know today.

The Bartok 'Concerto For Orchestra' remains one of the most accessible and popular works of this famous Hungarian composer. It was written in 1943 while he was living in exile in America.

The work is titled a concerto because, in true Bartok style, it alternates between a tutti orchestral sound and smaller virtuoso treatments of single instruments or groups of instruments in chamber or solo sections. Bartok himself referred to the 'sternness' of the Introduction with its virtuosic brass fugue in the middle. The second movement "Play of the Couples" is a procession of paired wind instruments alternating with a brass chorale. He refers to this movement as 'jesting'; the third marked 'Elegy' as a 'lugubrious death song'. As was the case with the middle movement of the Rachmaninov 3rd symphony I gave you last week it, contains folk motifs and is in essence a nostalgic yearning for his homeland. This message is reinforced in the fourth movement where the melody 'Hungary, you are lovely you are wonderful' is interrupted by, as Bartok writes, a laugh from the orchestra and a parody of the war theme from Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony. A statement of the takeover of Hungary by the Soviet Union.

Bartok rounds out this monumental composition with, as he states, the "Life assertion" of the Finale, full of Romanian folk music, much of it collected and saved from extinction by his epic journeys into isolated regions cut off for centuries by lack of access. He traversed mountain tracks by mule,

collecting and recording music on tape. The Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Sir Simon Rattle, features this movement in a fantastic performance. It's brilliantly filmed, but to see more than the two to three minutes offered freely, you will have to sign up to the orchestra's Digital Concert Hall. Well worth it to hear and see such a great orchestra in full flight. There are other recordings but this is my favourite.