

CONCERT 25th Aug 2020

Dear WHO members and friends,

As we enter the last week of August it has truly been “the winter of our discontent”. Let us look forward to some easing of the restrictions as numbers of cases drop and the spring weather brings hope for the future.

The one work for this week is again a major orchestral repertoire piece conducted by one of the greatest of 20th century conductors. The work is the Béla Bartók “Concerto for Orchestra” and the great Decca recording and filming from the Bartók Memorial Concert in 1991 with the Chicago Symphony conducted by Hungarian born conductor Sir Georg Solti.

This mammoth piece remains one of Bartók’s most popular works and compared to his earlier works displays a relaxation in style, where his usual use of terse motifs gives way (one could say) to more traditional concepts. Above all the triad is returned to the fundamental harmonic unit of the music Hooray. Bartók, particularly as a young composer, took over folk tunes unchanged or with little alteration and built piano pieces from them. Listen to “Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs” for example, opus 20 written in 1920. The works of Zoltan Kodály and indeed Stravinsky in his Russian period, displayed how much compositional freedom a composer can retain in the folk-song style for all its apparent restrictions. They both had a better feel for orchestration and chords that envelop the melody. On the other hand, Bartók’s style at this time was governed essentially by melody. His chords were formed as products of the melodic intervals without regard for harmonic logic. However, he was the author of many studies of Hungarian and Rumanian folk-music, and emerged as a leading advocate of folk-music, especially with regard to its applications to contemporary music. Just for the record Stravinsky turned his back on the whole folk-music philosophy and entered on his period of Neo-classicism. Schoenberg and many others also held this common hostility to folk music at that time, but these views have since been supplanted by quite different attitudes.

Forward 20 years and Bartók and his wife arrive in New York in 1940, escaping the horrors of war in Europe. He had left all behind him except his reputation. After a couple of years of struggle, 1943 was an important turning point for Bartók. Approached by the great Serge Koussevitzky and the foundation in his name, he was commissioned to write a piece for the conductor and his Boston Symphony Orchestra. Bartók called it a concerto rather than a symphony partly because of the alternations of full orchestra sound and chamber music episodes, and partly because of his virtuoso treatment of solo instruments and instrument groups. These elements are quite apparent throughout the five movements and signal a unique quality in this work. Bartók refers to the sternness of the introduction, which is in sonata form and includes a virtuosic brass fugue in the middle. He describes the second movement’s ‘play of the couples’, which is a procession of paired instruments alternating with a brass chorale as ‘jesting’ and the elegy section as a ‘lugubrious death-song’. I would suggest in memory of the fate of his homeland. The third movement finds Bartók at his most nostalgic. He combines Hungarian motifs with a sense of great loss and the sadness of a refugee. Recall Rachmaninov’s third symphony from some weeks back, where the composer was in a similar situation. That message is reinforced in the fourth movement where a musical quotation ‘You are lovely, you are wonderful, Hungary’, is abruptly interrupted by a parody of the war theme from Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 7, which was greeted by a hideous laugh from the orchestra. All is not doom and gloom however, and Bartók refers to the finale as the ‘life assertion’. It’s his message to younger composers back in Hungary and contains flying passages in the strings, Romanian folk music and a wonderfully rousing and heraldic ending. I thoroughly recommend listening to this epic piece. Gennady Slavsky and Fred Shade I’m sure, fondly recall as I do, the recording of this work with MSO Conductor Laureate Hiroyuki Iwaki in 1989 along with “The Miraculous Mandarin”. But now to the YouTube recording of Solti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. I have particularly chosen this performance because of the inextricable nationalistic tie between composer and conductor. Both Solti’s parents were Jewish and Solti, the rising star as a conductor in the 1930s, fled to Switzerland for the duration of the war. As he had no authorisation to work as a conductor, he supported himself as a piano teacher and accompanist. Establishing himself post war in England

(Covent Gardens) and Europe as a brilliant opera conductor, he eventually accepted the position of Chief Conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1969. He held that roll until 1991 at which time he was given the title of Conductor Laureate after building the reputation of the orchestra into one of the world's finest. His style was tough and uncompromising, sometimes bringing himself into dispute with his musicians. It was often said that unlike many conductors Solti was unbelievably tense during rehearsals, then relaxed in performance. One thing that was indisputable was the quality of performance and recordings he produced around the world, and the legacy he has left. In 1995, to mark the 50th anniversary of the UN, he formed the World Orchestra for Peace consisting of musicians from 40 nations. His 1000th concert was to have been held in October 1997 but he died suddenly and peacefully in his sleep in September. He was 85. After his death he received a State Funeral in Budapest and his ashes were interred beside the remains of Bartók in the Farkasréti Cemetery.

Solti's last recording was of the Bartók Cantata Profana and the Kodály Psalmus, Hungaricus, a winner of one of his record 24 Grammy Awards.

This is fantastic music with wonderful playing, with an intensity in Solti's conducting style that demands total respect, dedication and excellence. An orchestra and conductor at the top of his game. Enjoy.

PS next week Mackerras.