

CONCERT 29th JUNE 2020

Dear WHO members and friends,

As the weeks roll on and the situation for live music playing in large orchestral groups seems a distant pleasure I believe we all need to sublimate the lack of opportunity in this area with other activities. As music lovers I hope you are finding time to medicate with the availability of so much great music to listen to and draw succour from its artistic beauty. I hope my small concert offering each week helps the enjoyment as we all journey in what musicians call “the art of listening”.

Let us begin in the traditional way with an extra strength dose of fun and a recording of “The Thieving Magpie Overture” by Rossini. Look up a great performance with Claudio Abbado and the Vienna Phil.(WPH NJK in 1991). This is truly music of sheer joy. The overture written in 1871 in an “Opera Semiseria” plot style, almost opera buffa, was one of Rossini’s quickest written operas. Renowned for his ability to fast stream his compositions the rapid writer Rossini was still forced to finish under great pressure for it to be ready in time. One story is that he was locked in his room throwing the sheets of the orchestral score out the window, to be rehearsed hot off the presses. Anyway, although the opera itself, with a plot centring on a servant wrongfully condemned to death for the theft of a silver spoon, may not have been one of his best, but What An Overture! From the fantastic drum roll to wake up the audience, the delightful conversations between orchestral sections and instruments to one of the most emphatic orchestral builds in the repertoire is, in every sense, a hit. No wonder it has been used by so many film makers and animators.

I would like to feature one of the less touted instruments of the orchestra this week, the Viola. Most musicians and audiences don’t regard it as a solo instrument but see its place as an accompanying harmonic colour in orchestral or chamber music. How wrong they are! Concertos by Telemann, Carl Stamitz, William Walton and Bartok, the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante and in the roll of Quixote’s sidekick Sancho Panza in the Strauss tone poem ‘Don Quixote’, have given the viola a unique solo voice. In my humble opinion never more so than the rarely heard work (unfortunately) of the Berlioz “Harold in Italy”. I first heard this work in the 60s with the great Scottish/ American violist William Primrose, and was then privileged to experience the unforgettable sound of Wolfram Christ, the principal viola with the Berlin Philharmonic, here in the 80s. Most virtuoso viola soloists used to perform on 18th century Italian instruments. Paul O’Brien, the Principal of the MSO for many years, played one. The instruments were not much larger than a violin, were deeper but made for smaller 18th century hands. The sound was sweet and beautiful but designed more for a chamber setting. Primrose also played an Italian instrument but then his reputation was secured when performing with greats such as Isaac Stern, Pablo Casals, Jascha Heifetz, Emanuel Feuermann, Gregor Piatigorsky and other virtuosos in famous chamber music recordings. The two instruments he owned during this period were the “Brothers Amati” and the “MacDonald Stradivari”. (Most famous Italian instruments have a personalised name.) Realising the limitations of projecting over the orchestra in large concert halls, he changed to a modern viola made by William Moennig, and then one by Pierre Vidoudez on which he recorded “Harold in Italy” with Sir Thomas Beecham. Wolfram Christ had long arms and a large hand. His viola was a modern European made instrument of great quality, measuring nearly 19 inches, a size most players would not be able to hold, let alone play. From the first notes in rehearsal after the lengthy orchestral tutti, the sound was extraordinary, completely filling an empty Hamer Hall. I never again doubted the viola’s solo credentials. There is a good YouTube to watch and listen to this really interesting work. Performed by Antoine Tamestit with the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra conducted by Israeli conductor Elisha Inbal, the filming follows the orchestral score well enough to allow the viewer an insight into Berlioz’s quirky orchestration. The work, sometimes referred to as a symphony with viola obbligato rather than a concerto, was originally commissioned by Paganini to show off his new Strad. After seeing that it didn’t feature the soloist playing throughout he paid for the work, and never performing it, stating that it was “too full of rests”. Fancy a viola player complaining of that these days! (Joke) For a full account of the first performance look up “Hector Berlioz website- Harold in a Italy Memoire Chapter 45”

My last suggestion and probably the most unknown of the three is a work by Brazilian composer Hector Villa-Lobos, who took European orchestration and traditions and intertwined them with his love of Brazilian folk tales, characters and the music of his native land. Not only a composer but also a highly skilled cellist and guitarist, Villa-Lobos wrote over 2000 works including nine Brazilian Bachian works for different instrumental combinations. These are entitled “Bachianas Brasileiras” Nos. 1-9.

Today YouTube “Bachianas Brasileiras number 7”, performed by the RTVE Symphony Orchestra. Also known as the Spanish Radio and Television Orchestra, this fine band of musicians is based in Teatro Monumental Madrid with chief conductor Pablo Gonzalez. Their performance of Spanish music and that of composers from Central and South America are first rate. Number 7, written for full symphony orchestra, was first performed in 1944, conducted by Villa-Lobos in Rio de Janeiro and dedicated to the Minister for Education Gustavo Capenema. I like this work very much and would love to perform it at some stage with WHO.

That’s probably enough music to get your head around for this week. I hope you enjoy the journey and if you haven’t come across any of the works before, try to listen again, later in the week. The second time around gives one a much greater opportunity to come to like and understand new works. Thanks for the feedback and news from those who emailed, I hope I have replied to you all.