

CONCERT 6th July 2020

Dear WHO and friends,

Let me begin by reiterating something we all know but was said by Plato near the end of the golden age of Athens around 400BC: “Music gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything”. I couldn’t have put it better myself!!

This week and, perhaps, next as we bunker down for real winter weather without the cold but sunny days outside, activities are becoming more difficult to initiate. I am fortunate to have a lovely East facing view from the house and watching the sun rise over the Yarra Valley and bathe the trees in light has been a great pleasure this last month. The past week has seen a dramatic change with drizzle and mist shrouding our vista, obliterating our view and forcing the abundant bird life to bunker down. More time to enjoy inner pleasures, so I have been enjoying listening to uplifting slow movements and all from the 5th Symphonies of great composers.

It’s remarkable how many wonderful second slow (or slowish) movements come from this source. This week let’s revisit the slow movements of Schubert, Beethoven, Sibelius and a composer of whom you may not have heard. One could perhaps sneak in the beautiful second movement of the Dvorak New World as in the old numbering that was symphony No 5, but it really was his last, and ninth. One could listen to that anytime you need a lift.

YouTube

Schubert Symphony 5 slow movement: Chamber Orchestra of Europe conducted by Claudio Abbado. Schubert wrote this symphony in 1816 along with around 200 other compositions in the same year. He was 19 years old! Can one say that his music was showing signs of maturity at this young age? Definitely so. His great mentor, although dead for 25 years, was Mozart whose compositions were both very popular and being constantly performed at the time. It would be a few years yet before Schubert would come to appreciate the greatness of Beethoven and his immense contribution to symphonic development.

There is elegant originality in this slow movement, the melodies those of a supreme song writer. There are hallmarks of the maturing Schubert in the unusual key change from Eflat to Cflat and the interplay between Woodwinds and Strings. This work is known as “the symphony without trumpets or drums” (sorry brass and percussionists) and is scored for violins 1 and 2, viola, cello and bass, flute, two oboes, two bassoons and two horns. It was designed for the ‘Society of Amateurs’ for which Schubert often composed. This was a group which had grown from a string-quartet held at his house into a small orchestra capable of performing Haydn symphonies and the like. Schubert played violin and piano and must have had a fine voice as he won choral scholarships as a child. I love this movement and can’t get the tune out of my head.

Next we come to the immortal Beethoven and arguably his 5th Symphony with the most universally known motif ‘short short short long’. The second movement is the only movement that doesn’t have the motif which makes this work somewhat unique for its time. Beethoven came late to symphonic writing, doubting his maturity at successfully dealing with the genre. The third symphony, the Eroica was extraordinary. It heralded the beginning of a more mature middle period with added complexity, sophistication and imagination, as well as adding enormous length to the symphonic style. The work lasts around 50 minutes rather than the average 25 to 30 in symphonic writing preceding it. By the C minor symphony No5 Beethoven was doing unheard of things to the form. In the first movement the coda is longer than any other section of the movement. His use of instrumentation is dramatic and what audacity to conceive his delightful, but quirky, oboe cadenza. The triumphal last movement is one of such power and grandness it makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. This was now indeed the work of a master.

Let us listen to the second movement “Andante con moto”. There are so many recordings but YouTube George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra Beethoven symphony No5 2nd movement. The Cleveland is one of the great five American orchestras and can be heard here in full flight. This performance was recorded in 2008. It begins with a beautifully lilting theme in the violas and cello which is answered by violins and then woodwinds. Clarinets and bassoons announce the second theme with a triumphal reply from the brass. Back to the first violins with the first theme and so it goes to second variation, violas and celli faster notes. Then violins are given the green light and are answered by violas and celli. We then hear a remarkable cadence into a solo woodwind section to a

triumphal horns trumpets and timpani. Then an interlude by the woodwinds, variation by woodwinds to the full orchestra playing the first theme in triumphal and uplifting style. Then comes a variation played by the bassoons and answered by violins with cheeky interjections by the oboe until the final variation in the woodwinds playing piano, building and building to a grand tutti. What imagination and genius! Anyone who has performed this symphony would never forget the experience.

Now to Sibelius Symphony No5. In E flat major op. 82. Andante Mosso.

He wrote about this work “as if God the Father had thrown down mosaic pieces from heavens floor and asked me to put them back as they were”.

The symphony was completed in 1915, revised twice, with the third version premiering in 1919, 101 years ago. This is a beautiful theme and variation movement, simple and understated with the absence of constant restraint. The final version reflected the maturing Sibelius having gone through operations in which he nearly lost his life, as well as the Russian invasion and German bombings. From the first chords, the flute duet and accompanying pizzicato strings, Sibelius creates an image of serenity and, from the darkness of the preceding years, a love of his country not from a protective and nationalist viewpoint but one of a real love and appreciation of its intrinsic beauty, his beloved lakes and forests.

The last of this week’s suggestions is probably the most unusual and least known.

Kurt Atterburg was a Swedish composer and engineer. He was also a cellist and while studying engineering enrolled at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. He, like Beethoven Schubert Dvorak and Mahler, wrote nine symphonies.

During the rise of the Third Reich Atterberg maintained contact with German composers and conducted his works in Germany. He was secretary of the International Composers, a Council founded by Richard Strauss in 1934, and his music was sometimes used for propaganda purposes as was common for many composers at that time. He returned to Sweden before the war broke out, where there were suggestions of him being a Nazi sympathiser. At his request the Royal Academy of Music set up an inquiry after the war but nothing could be established. Notwithstanding a lingering doubt in some quarters, Atterberg continued to compose and give much to Swedish music until his death in 1974.

YouTube : “Kurt Atterburg Symphony No 5 slow movement“ accompanying the most incredible footage of the “Graf Zeppelin’s visit to New York” in 1929 and later in Germany. It really is worth watching and the music is masterful.

Well that will probably do it for this week. We can visit more of the great slow movements from 5th symphonies next week with Tchaikovsky, Mahler and Shostakovich.