

CONCERT 8th June 2020

A very warm hello to all WHO members and friends. I hope you had a peaceful and rewarding week and, if not working for remuneration, at least keeping yourself occupied in 'Corpus et animam mean'.

My first choice in today's program is a favourite of mine.

Ravel "Rapsodie Espagnole". There is a great YouTube recording by one of my favourite conductors, Charles Dutoit, with the De Paul Symphony Orchestra. The Swiss Dutoit was married to one of my favourite pianists, (and for some, the best in the world) the Argentinian/Swiss, Martha Argerich. I fondly recall hearing both a couple of times while studying in Switzerland. The filming of this performance begins (as it should) with a protracted closeup on Dutoit when he was much younger than his now 83 years. It does, however, develop into an interesting and informative visual. Special note should be given to the great Cor Anglais playing.

The work is in four short sections titled: Prelude a la Nuit, Maleguena, Habanera and Feria. Like many French composers (Bizet for instance) Ravel was always greatly interested in the music of Spain stemming from, I'm sure, his mother's influence, as it was the country of her birth. This work was written in 1907-08 but the Habanera (originally a Cuban dance), was initially composed for two pianos at the age of 20 and was later orchestrated for the suite.

Now back to Martha Argerich.

Regarded a child prodigy, Argerich's career really took off when, aged 24, she won the Chopin piano competition in Warsaw in 1964. She has worked with many great composers and her recordings and recitals were heralded as extraordinary by experts the world over. Later in her career Martha had a great interest in the chamber music repertoire for piano. One of the greatest of these works is the incomparable "Schumann Piano Quintet". Of all the chamber works I performed as a professional this was the most enjoyable, and I well remember a performance we gave in the 70s at a packed Dallas Brooks Hall to raise money for Amnesty International. There is a super performance of this amazing work with Martha. Look up "Martha Argerich plays Schumann Piano Quintet".

I gather some members of WHO have taken advantage of the relaxing of distancing and are playing some chamber music. If I can help in any way please contact me. As Julliard faculty member and educator puts it "Chamber Music is a joy shared between equal partners who are working together to create a thing of perfection and beauty. To its participants it is the closest thing to mind reading".

I truly believe that the skills of really listening can be considerably enhanced by small group participation on any instrument. These skills are excellent preparation for the rigours of orchestral playing.

Now back to the Symphonic repertoire

In this next work you get two for the price of one. Great composers often wanted to pay homage to their idols and the Brahms "Variation On A Theme By Haydn" is a great example. The theme is taken from one of the "Feldpartitan" written by Haydn for military band. Brahms was particularly taken by the second movement of the one in B flat major based on an old Austrian pilgrim's song "Chorale St. Antonii", which he used for his variations. Hence it is often referred to as the St. Anthony Variations. It was written in 1873 and is regarded as his first truly symphonic work (he wrote two serenades for small orchestra 13 years earlier). The orchestration includes double bassoon, four horns (two low in B flat two in E flat), trumpets and percussion. The theme is a mixture of five and four bar phrases and his statement of the theme echoes Haydn's own scoring, featuring wind instruments in the melody. Wind players take note for it really is a beautiful sound. For each theme one feature or aspect is picked out, explored and developed. See how you go with the eight variations. The Finale sees the theme repeated again in 17 small variations on top of a fixed bass of five bars. The 18th statement returns to the original theme, ending with pulsating rushing scale passages. This is a great piece for musical analysis but also a harbinger of the monumental orchestral works to come and an insight into the blossoming sophistication and understanding of a great symphonic composer.

There is a great YouTube recording: "Brahms Variations on a Theme by Haydn - Nikolaus Harnoncourt" performed in 1996.

Next week I will discuss the early symphonies of Dvorak, the reasons for the change in their numbering and listen to his Symphony number 4 (in the new numbering) in D minor.