

CLASSICAL MUSIC STUDY 2018

January 2018: HECTOR BERLIOZ

This month's presentation by Michael Johnson was a continuation of his series on the works of Hector Berlioz with some emphasis on his choral music. We started with the opening to the **Te Deum**; originally intended to praise Napoleon but ending up as a salutation to Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert. Originally scored for an orchestra of 100 plus instrumentalists, two SATB choirs and a boys' choir of 600. The orchestra and chorus was to be at one end of the church whilst at the other end, an organ powerful enough to match the choirs and instrumentalists was required. A CD and two speakers struggles to do justice to these demands.

The **Grande Messe des Morts (Requiem)** was commissioned by the French government to commemorate the soldiers who died in the July revolution of 1830. When finally performed in the church of Les Invalides, Paris. Again, like the Te Deum, the orchestration was on a grand scale requiring a very large orchestra, a choir of more than 200 voices and four brass bands stationed in the four corners of the church. At its premiere in 1837 during the **Tuba Mirum** where the brass represent the last trumpet sounding to call the dead to judgement the conductor stopped to take a pinch of snuff and only the intervention of Berlioz himself held the brass together.

Michael's third piece was the **Resurrexit** from the **Messe Solennelle**; the score to this work which Berlioz claimed to have destroyed was missing since 1827, only being found in 1991.

Away from the grandeur of these major choral works we next heard the soothing and lyrical Shepherd's farewell from the **Enfance du Christ**.

For much of his life Berlioz had a fascination for the story of Faust and in the years 1846-46 he composed eight scenes of which we heard **The Hungarian March**, the **Ride to the Abyss**, **Pandemonium**, where Faust goes to hell and the **Epilogue** where the soul of Marguerite ascends to heaven.

David Dobbs

February 2017: SHOSTAKOVICH SYMPHONIES

Kath's presentation of a selection of Shostakovich symphonies put paid to any lingering suspicion that his orchestral music was in any way inaccessible to the general music lover.

Symphony No 1, his graduation piece, at the age of 19, from the Petrograd conservatory was both tuneful and full of Slavonic promise and was met with critical acclaim. At this time the music of Shostakovich had no political message; he even failed his Marxist Methodology exam in 1926.

By 1936 politics loomed large and his work was denounced, starting with his opera **The lady Macbeth of the Mtensk district**. Such was the disapproval of the authorities that he voluntarily withdrew his fourth symphony.. The official comment was that this was a soviet artists response to just criticism! With the 5th symphony he was rehabilitated.



With **the 7th** Shostakovich produced his great **Leningrad** symphony, written in part during the siege and completed after his evacuation to Moscow. The 1st movement is well known for the incessant Snare drum theme, reminiscent in its intensity and pervasiveness of ravel's Bolero. When premiered in Leningrad, such had been the devastation and loss of life that only fourteen professional musicians could be found; the numbers were made up from anyone in the city who could play a musical instrument.

The 9th again saw him fall foul of the authorities. The music was censored as not reflecting the spirit of the soviet people and being full of filigree trifles. Similarly **the 10th** was denounced for its non-Russian output Rehabilitation came in 1953 with the death of Stalin.

For a composer with so many political problems Shostakovich still found time in **the 10th** not only to include DSCH (Dimitri Shostakovich) a reference to his own name in German musical notation but also the name of one of his students with whom he fell in love, Elmira Nazirova. By a convoluted mixture of German and French notation her name becomes E La Mi Re A which translates into the more recognisable E A E D A and this gets played nine times on the French horn!

David Dobbs

March 2017: PROKOVIEV

Our March meeting featured Prokoviev, ably presented by David Dobbs. It was a whistle stop tour around Prokoviev's long and varied output – chamber music, symphonies, ballet, opera, music to enthuse children.

It made me realise just how much he wrote and how his style evolved over the years. What struck me most of all is the quality of bitter-sweetness in much of his mature music. It's very easy on the ear, but there's a sad and perhaps sceptical edge which stops the sweetness from becoming saccharine.

One of the earliest pieces we listened to was very modernist in style. David's overview demonstrated that Prokoviev never lost the desire to take music further and endow it with his distinctive personal and Russian voice. It made an excellent counterpart to the Shostakovich we explored in February

Paul Martinez



April 2018: NOCTURNES AND LULLABIES

A small but select gathering was hosted by Kath and Steve for Jill's presentation on Nocturnes and Lullabies. The time line of the lullaby would appear to run parallel to the history of the human family with references on Babylonian clay tablets.

There are worldwide similarities in sounds and rhythms with repetition being a key feature in getting a fractious child to sleep. Jill presented a range of examples to illustrate her thesis although, from a purely personal view, the Zulu example seemed to be anything but soothing. The nocturnes that were played certainly lived up to their intended purpose of being relaxing and driving away the terrors of the night!

An obvious starting point featured the Nocturnes of Chopin with Vladimir Ashkenazy playing selections from the well known E flat major, F sharp and B major nocturnes. Perhaps less well known was the dark and menacing excerpt from the A minor violin concerto of Shostakovich. On a lighter note, before we had coffee to lift us from the sleep which was rolling over us, was the nocturne by the Spanish composer Torroba played by John Williams on the acoustic guitar.

The second half of the presentation started with a Borodin string quartet; the Scheherazade theme on the cello leaving everyone feeling on safe ground. Perhaps less well known was the Tchaikovsky nocturne Op 19 for the cello major followed by a very dark Nuage by Debussy. The programme ended in the safe hands of Chopin with the B flat minor and F major (No 1) nocturnes.

May 2018: THE TONE POEMS OF RICHARD STRAUSS

The counter attraction of a garden visit left us with a slightly smaller than usual group for Colin Jones' presentation but the faithful were rewarded with a very informative and musically pleasing meeting.

A short biography of Strauss and a brief resume of the genre revealed the orchestral tone poem to be a product of the mid 19th to the early 20th century with Franz Liszt leading the way. This introduction led straight to the music which in Colin's presentation consisted of three works, a departure from the usual format of a larger number of shorter excerpts.

As soon as the first piece, *Don Juan*, started I suspect that a number of the audience, myself included, realised that we had been listening to tone poems for many years without ever formally recognising them as such.

Moving on to the second piece, *Death and Transfiguration*, depicting the imaginary death of an artist; judging by the contented reaction of the listeners the music rapidly eradicated lingering doubts that it would not be pleasing to the ear. The music was written to illustrate a poem by his friend Ritter depicting scenes from the life of a dying artist moving through the innocence of childhood; the struggles of manhood; the achieving of worldly goals and finally his longed for transfiguration from the infinite reaches of heaven.

Finally, everyone was on home ground with *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Based on a philosophical novel by Nietzsche the opening bars *Sunrise* were instantly recognised as the dramatic opening of the film *2001 A Space Odyssey*.

Thank you Colin

David Dobbs

June 2018: WHO'S AFRAID OF SCHOENBERG?

Part 4 of Paul's series of talks on the development of music for the piano was actually entitled *Solo Piano – New directions, 1940 – 2000*. This period was a time of experimentation where the boundaries of musical genres were crossed and broken with a consequent need for the re-education of listeners' ears.

And so to the music: Our ears were assaulted with tempestuous sounds; a pounding blur of fury, but very quickly the anguished looks of the audience, were replaced with contented smiles. This was not the dreaded modern piano that we were expecting, it was the finale of *Beethoven's piano sonata No 23, the Appassionato*. Tempestuous was Beethoven's own description and the Pounding blur of fury the words of a nineteenth music critic. The lesson that we can take from this is that we should open our minds to the new and unfamiliar. Who knows, we might enjoy.

The meat of Paul's programme followed with music, at times vaguely familiar, at times new and strange. In spite of prejudice *Schoenberg's Suite for Piano* was easy listening; *Gould's Boogie Woogie* etude was jazz with a classical undertone and *Messaien's Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jesus* was contemplative and relaxing.

Some of the music on offer, *Gage's sonata for a prepared piano* and *Nancarrow's studies* using overlaid recording tracks for example left a feeling of So What? but nothing that we heard could be described as offending the ear.

The real test would be to travel in time and see what had survived after a couple of hundred years.

Thank you Paul for an educational programme.

David Dobbs

June 2018: ERNŐ DOHNÁNYI

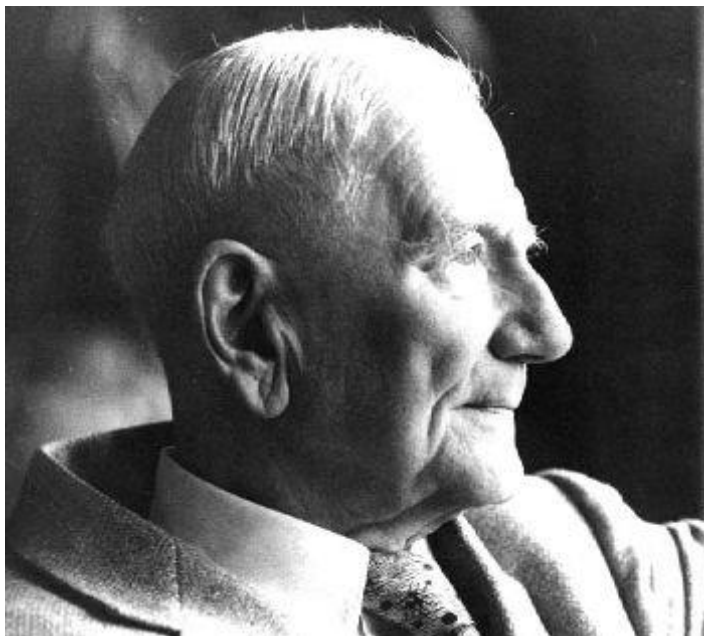
We were treated to an excellent introduction to the music of Ernő Dohnányi from David Dobbs.

Erno who? Well Dohnanyi (approx. pronunciation doc'narni) was a composer, pianist, teacher and administrator who had a glittering musical career in Hungary from the days of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire, the short lived revolutionary regime of 1919, the dictatorship of Admiral Horthy, the German occupation in 1944, through to the soviet regime.

During the second world war he saved the lives of many Jewish musicians, but this didn't stop him from being accused of collaboration and Nazi sympathies by the post war authorities. He settled and continued his career in the United States.

Most of us were largely unfamiliar with his music which is very melodic and romantic. Perhaps his most well-known piece is the Variations on a nursery tune. The tune in question is ***Twinkle, twinkle little star*** which might sound a bit unpromising for a set of variations. Dohnanyi demonstrated, however, that even this simple tune could provide the inspiration for a very varied set of piano music and also could be orchestrated in a highly entertaining and occasionally surprising way.



Many thanks David for expanding our knowledge and appreciation.

Paul Martinez

August 2018: EDVARD GRIEG

Due to holiday commitments a smaller than usual group met to hear Maggie Martinez's presentation on the life and works of Edvard Grieg. Born in Bergen, Norway in 1843 into a middle class family; his great grandfather having fled from Scotland after the battle of Culloden. His father was a diplomat and mother a piano teacher and he started his musical education with her at the age of six. By the age of fifteen he had enrolled at the Leipzig conservatoire studying the piano and composition. Grieg made his debut as a concert pianist in Sweden in 1861 and graduated from the conservatoire in 1862.

In his early professional life he was influenced by the Danish composers J P Hartmann and Niels Gade and his fellow Norwegian Rikard Nordraak, composer of the Norwegian National anthem.

In 1870 he met with Franz Liszt who was very favourably impressed with his ***Violin sonata No 1*** and the ***Piano concerto in A major***.

In the period 1874-76 Grieg wrote, at the author's request, the incidental music to Ibsen's play ***Peer Gynt***.

Throughout his life Grieg suffered from ill health having lost his left lung to repeated attacks of respiratory diseases. He died of heart failure and lung disease in 1907.

Maggie's presentation could almost be described as *Sing along with Grieg* such was the melodic content of her choice including such favourites as Solveig's cradle song; the Wedding day at Trolldhagen; In the hall of the Mountain King and the A major piano concerto to name but a few.

Thank you Maggie.

David Dobbs

September 2018: S

Over the years that the classical music group has been active we have become used to easily understood descriptive titles for the presentations. What then were we to make of the enigmatic title S given to Ian Robey's recent presentation at Kath and Steve's house.

It did not take long for the mystery to be resolved; each piece of music was composed by someone whose name began with S. It is to be hoped that Ian has not set a precedent for future presenters otherwise there will be major problems looming when Q or Z is announced as the title.

Not only did we have a music programme, we also had a tour of musicians' graveyards as Ian took pains to give us the dates of the composers' deaths. This added to the humour of the morning!

In his usual humorous style Ian presented us with a programme of easy listening with thirteen tracks including composers ranging from **Satie's Gymnopédie** through a **Scarlatti piano sonata** to **Shostakovich** with the nocturne from the **Gadfly** with many more both well-known and rarely heard titles. A fourteenth track slipped through the S classification when we heard Bryn Terfel singing **Shenandoah**. Just this once we can allow this deviation from the rules.

Thank you Ian and not forgetting Kath and Steve for hosting the meeting.

David Dobbs

October 2018: To the Barricades

A smaller group than usual met at Kath and Steve's to hear Brian's presentation on music for revolution, uprising and war.

The programme opened with **Shostakovich's symphony No 11**, sometimes entitled The Revolution. Even without a prior knowledge of the composer's intention the dark, sombre opening which built in violence spelled out the message of revolution and war. Such was the background that inspired Shostakovich, drawing upon the initially peaceful people's revolt and subsequent massacre of 1905 and the Hungarian uprising of 1956.

Khachaturian's ballet music **Spartacus** again drew on the theme of revolt. This time in Imperial Rome and the third servile uprising led by the slave Spartacus.

A very different revolt was illustrated in **Felix Mendelsohn's Reformation** symphony. The revolt this time was Martin Luther's break with the Roman Catholic church, specifically over the sale of indulgences which promised release from purgatory and hell in return for money. Although the music, with its hints of well-known hymn tunes sounded peaceful, the scale of violence and its duration was widespread across

Europe for several centuries.

A composer and a symphony new to many of us was **Sir Granville Bantock's Hebridean symphony**. The third movement of **Sturm und Drang** well illustrated the violence of uprising and the peace which can follow.

Once more Shostakovich made a dramatic appearance with his **Festival** overture celebrating the 1917 Bolshevik revolution.

The finale to the morning's music came as a major surprise to us all; **The Ballad of Joe Hill** sung by Paul Robson was a poignant reminder of the violence that, so called, civilised people can vent upon the innocent in a political struggle.

Thank you Brian and also our hosts Kath and Steve.

David Dobbs

November 2018: ARMISTICE

Michael presented us with a programme of music, some well-known and some new to a large section of his audience, which used violent martial themes, nationalism and peace to illustrate the title of Armistice.

An appropriate opening was from **Sir Edward Elgar's Variations on an original theme**. The **Nimrod variation** is heard at the Armistice day remembrance celebrations across the land in military and religious settings.

Following on was **Beethoven's opus 91, Wellingtons victory at the battle of Vittoria**. This was far removed from the calm and peace of Nimrod. Nationalist and triumphalist to the core, the orchestration was at times more a battle reconstruction than a musical offering

The opening of **Beethoven's symphony No 5** with its familiar Knocking of fate motif kept the martial theme moving forward, ably supported by Shostakovich's **The assault on beautiful Gorky** from the suite The unforgettable year 1919.

There then followed a complete change of mood with **Gorecki's Symphony of sorrowful songs** (Symphony No 3). Of all the music presented this had the most profound effect, especially as Michael had provided us with the libretto in English. From a composer better known to many of us for his early Weberian, avant guard music this composition from 1976 seemed a Road to Damascus conversion.

Soon we were back on the more traditional of war and peace with **Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture** celebrating with nationalist themes ,church bells and cannon fire the defeat of Napoleon by the Russians at the battle of Borodino.

More warfare followed with the 7th symphony of Shostakovich, **The siege of Leningrad** composed during the bitter fighting in 1941.

The presentation concluded with **John Williams' Hymn to the fallen** from the film score of The saving of Private Ryan. Not strictly in the canon of classical music but a fitting end to Armistice

David Dobbs

December 2018: A Miscellany of Christmas Music

Any of us expecting the usual run of Christmas music, a miscellany of carols and songs from the shows, were quickly shaken from complacency by the rich and varied programme presented by Colin Jones. Not only was a very large part of the musical offering unknown to most of the audience, that in itself a real treat, but many of the bogeymen composers whose names strike fear into conservative audiences proved to be human with melodies that soothed the savage breast and calmed the worst fears.

The programme started with the **Kyrie a Christmas mass** by the first of many new names, Edmund Pascha written in the mid-18th century. This was easy listening, helped by the easy recognition of the words of the Kyrie.

A further aria, **The child stretches out his arm** from a mid-18th century Christmas oratorio by Leopold Eybler had a similar comfortable feeling with the shepherds standing by the crib.

Then came the chance to say I don't like his music when we heard works by **Bela Bartok** and **Arnold Schoenberg**. What a surprise; they are human after all!. The Schoenberg was particularly interesting as well as easy on the ear due to the ensemble of Piano, harmonium, two violins and cello.

The third name in the terrible trilogy of composers was **Paul Hindemith**; here again this was nothing like the hardcore, mature Hindemith that we were expecting; instead we had a charming Christmas fairy tale **Tuttifantchen** written in 1922.

Colin continued to surprise us with music by Jean Sibelius, Bohuslav Martinu and another Christmas fairy tale **The little Christmas Elf** by written in 1917 by Pfitzner.

A final encore treat was **Christ is born today** by Jan Pieterszoon (1619) sung by the Nottingham Harmonic Society with two of our CMAG stalwarts Colin and Nick in the choir. Why not? If you've got it, flaunt it!

David Dobbs