

Robert Mayer

Concerts for Children

Patron : Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother



3rd April 1971

Price 8p

ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL

General Manager: John Denison CBE

Robert Mayer Concerts

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Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Leader Neville Taweel

Trevor Harvey

The National Anthem	arr. Bliss
Overture: Alexander's Feast	Handel
How lovely are Thy dwellings	Brahms
Classical Symphony	Prokofiev
Dona Nobis Pacem	Vaughan Williams
Beat! beat! drums!; Reconciliation	
Overture: Prince Igor	Borodin

Programme notes by Robert Anderson

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ABOUT THE CHOIR

The Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society. That sounds very grand! But we must be honest and admit that the word 'Royal' belongs to the town (like Royal Windsor) and not to the choir. The Choral Society started in 1904 and has been singing all the great choral masterpieces ever since with distinguished soloists and orchestras. On April 18th, for instance, we shall be singing the works by Vaughan Williams and Brahms, part of which you are hearing this morning. The Choir is considerably larger in numbers than you see today — but that is because some of you sit in what should be the chorus seats, so we have to get the singers on to the platform with the orchestra. I have been for sometime the Conductor of the Choral Society and I am delighted to bring them to sing to you at the Royal Festival Hall.

TREVOR HARVEY

Overture: Alexander's Feast

HANDEL 1685 - 1759

In 1697 John Dryden wrote an ode in honour of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music. He called it *Alexander's Feast* or *The Power of Musique*, and in it he tells how Alexander the Great, the young Macedonian conqueror, ordered a banquet to celebrate the overthrow of the Persian king Darius. The lovely Thais sat by his side at the feast, and the clever minstrel Timotheus struck such wondrous sounds from his lyre that he was able to subdue the thoughts of Alexander to his every whim. Thus at one moment he made the young conqueror feel as proud as even the god Zeus, at another he saddened him by dwelling on the wretched fate of vanquished Darius; with gentle and seductive sounds he fanned the flames of Alexander's love for Thais, and then again he gradually made him fall asleep (not that a player would always take such behaviour as a compliment). But however powerful a musician Timotheus might have been, Dryden thought St. Cecilia a better one, because in her case an angel is supposed to have come down from heaven to listen to her music.

Handel loved the poem, and the man who adapted it for the composer's use considered it was unlikely the world would ever see anything in poetry and music more perfect 'than the united Labours and utmost Efforts of a *Dryden* and a *Handel*.'

Alexander's Feast became very popular, and it was one of the works Handel delighted to perform again and again, doing so even in his old age when he had lost the use of his eyes.

Today we hear only the Overture, which starts with fine pomp and ceremony, as if to set the scene for a royal court in ancient times. The first section is slow, jerky in rhythm, and with a flashing scale for the upper instruments in the second bar. The music quietens tenderly for a while, but the general impression is one of courtly splendour and almost martial strength. The music quickens, and the second violins begin with this firm and manly tune:

Example 1



The other instruments follow this lead and develop it in a lively fugue, chasing the notes up and down the score one after the other. It is very intricate but also very exciting, building up as it does towards a fine climax in dotted rhythm. A moment's silence, and the Overture ends with solemn, stately chords.

How lovely are Thy dwellings

BRAHMS 1833 - 1897

This chorus forms part of the *German Requiem* by Brahms, a work he thought about for many years, started on in earnest during 1865, and first conducted in public at Bremen Cathedral on Good Friday 1868. The *Requiem* has seven movements in all, and this is the fourth, at the very centre of the work. Each movement uses texts from the Bible, and in this case Brahms set part of Psalm 84. Here are the words to be sung today:

How lovely are Thy dwellings fair,

O Lord of Hosts;

My soul ever longeth and fainteth sore

for the blest courts of the Lord;

My heart and flesh do cry

to the living God.

O blest are they that in Thy house are dwelling;

they praise Thee for evermore.

If you know your Bible really well, you will realise that Brahms has left out the verse about the home of the sparrow and the nest of the swallow; maybe he felt that such cheerful little creatures would not be appropriate in a Requiem.

The music begins calmly and gently with a lovely tune on the orchestra. The chorus promptly turns it upside down like this:



Brahms aged 20: a drawing by J. B. Laurens

Example 2



At first the chorus sings all together, but soon they separate out so that first the tenors and then the basses sing a wonderful soaring melody. For the last section of the text all the voices are very independent, taking part in a brief fugue of praise on two main subjects. The end returns to the serenity of the opening.

Classical Symphony, op. 25

PROKOFIEV 1891 - 1953

Allegro

Larghetto

Gavotta — Non troppo allegro

Finale — Molto vivace

For many years Prokofiev's favourite composer was Haydn, and the *Classical Symphony* was written in 1916-17 as a conscious

attempt to produce the sort of music Haydn might have composed if he had lived into the 20th century. Not that any of us can really guess how Haydn might have developed up to the advanced age of 185, or whether he would have reacted to the extraordinary events of the Russian Revolution in 1917 with a work of such charm and wit as this. Haydn was always unpredictable, and so too was this Symphony of Prokofiev's.

The young Russian was a splendid pianist and had a mischievous desire to shock his elders with violent discords and outlandish harmonies. So this work, which sets out to please with its fun and humour, was a surprise when it was first performed in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad). Prokofiev used just the sort of orchestra Haydn employed when he wrote his last symphonies for London, with one exception: Prokofiev has three kettle drums against Haydn's two, and he even amuses himself by playing chords on them.

The Symphony begins with a flourish on the common chord of D (the key of the work), and the violas soon settle to a clucking accompaniment typical of the 18th century. The second tune has a slightly tiddly elegance over its enormous leaps:

Example 3



Once the strings have set the mood of the Larghetto in the first four bars, the violins (later joined by the flute) have a lovely cool tune in the upper reaches of the instrument. Later the bassoons join the pizzicato strings in a mysterious conspiracy that seems to go like clockwork. Prokofiev thinks up some delightful new ideas to accompany the main tune when it returns.

The Gavotte takes easily in its stride all the wrong (or unexpected) notes the composer foists on it. The first section goes like this:

Example 4



The central part is like a nice day out in the country, with rustic tunes and drone accompaniment.

The finale bubbles with activity, and the music dives in and out of different keys with fascinating effect. There are plenty of scales and arpeggios and a jolly second tune starting on the flute.

Dona Nobis Pacem

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS 1872 - 1958

Beat! beat! drums!

Reconciliation

Baritone Solo: Malcolm King

This cantata was first performed in 1936 as part of the celebrations for the centenary of the Huddersfield Choral Society. But it is hardly a festive work. In its five movements the composer expresses his hatred for the idea of war. The first setting we are to hear is of a poem by Walt Whitman, who had himself experienced the horrors of the American Civil War. It is a violent poem:

Beat! beat! drums — blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows — through the doors — burst like
a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet — no happiness must he
have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field,
or gathering in his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums — so shrill
you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums! — blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities — over the rumble of wheels in
the streets;
Are beds prepared for the sleepers at night in the houses?
No sleepers must sleep in those beds,
No bargainers bargain by day — would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? — would the singer attempt
to sing?
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums — you bugles wilder
blow.

Beat! beat! drums! — blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley — stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid — mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's
entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie
awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump, O terrible drums — so loud you
bugles blow.

Vaughan Williams makes much use of this stirring figure, an obvious interpretation of Whitman's shrill bugles:

Example 5



Over the angrily surging orchestra the chorus declaims the words with fierce energy. When the poem is over, the music gradually calms itself and prepares for the baritone solo at the beginning of 'Reconciliation'. Again the words are by Whitman, who tries to draw what comfort he can from the slaughter of war:

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in
time be utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly,
softly, wash again and ever again this soiled world;
For my enemy is dead, a man as divine as myself is dead,
I look where lies white-faced and still in the coffin —
I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face
in the coffin.

So timeless were the sources of Vaughan William's art, he seemed somehow to enshrine in his music the gift of healing; and here the quiet serenity of the setting makes us aware how precious a thing it is to live peaceably with our fellows.

Overture: Prince Igor

BORODIN 1833 - 1887

Borodin's great national opera remained unfinished at his death, and the work of getting it ready for performance was entrusted to Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov, both of whom were familiar with Borodin's intentions. The opera chronicles the struggles of the Russian Prince Igor against the nomadic Polovtsians, his capture by them and eventual escape.

In a sense the Overture is not by Borodin at all, since it was not written down on paper till after his death. But he had often played it on the piano, and there is even a story that on one occasion, when asked to run through the Overture, he suggested that Glazunov might just as well play it instead, since he had already heard the music so often from the composer; and Glazunov's performance is supposed to have been note-perfect. It is what Glazunov remembered that we hear today. But since the whole of the Overture is constructed on tunes from the opera, Glazunov's memory can be relied on.

