

MUSIC APPRECIATION – TUESDAY 12th DECEMBER, SESSION 4

Today, we follow the usual format saying something about each composer and the piece we are about to hear. As we are approaching Christmas there will be just a few items with a religious theme but also more members' choices some "off the beaten track". We start with a rousing piece by Prokofiev.

SERGEI PROKOVIEV (1891-1953): 20th Century Russian music colossus writing in a romantic style but with modern diatonal elements. A child prodigy with a musical background. Eccentric, arrogant and regarded education as a chore. Chess master. Allowed to live abroad but supported the Russian regime. Opportunistic so while living in France eagerly took up the challenge to write the score for Lieutenant Kije. He also wrote Peter and the Wolf and the Love for Three Oranges. He had a very low-key burial as died on the same day as Stalin.

Lieutenant Kije and the Troika Sleigh Ride. The lieutenant is a fictional character. An army clerk mistakenly writes his non-existent name in a list of promotions and is unable to correct the error. The film follows his non-existent career the hoax ending in his fictitious death in battle. The Troika a sleigh drawn by three horses is part 4 of the Suite. Prokofiev wanted to write this composition in a light but serious way. He wanted to make it very accessible, melodious and compelling which it certainly is.

LEROY ANDERSON: (1908-1975). US composer with Swedish parents. Harvard graduate with a degree in music composition. The piece often played by Boston Pops embellished with extraneous elements such as typewriters and sandpaper. Besides the piece we are to hear, wrote Blue Tango and Syncopated Clock

Sleigh Ride was composed in 1948. It evokes memories of a wonderful snowy childhood with horses' hooves and jingling bells. Joyful, exciting, fast-moving with clever use of glockenspiel and cracking whips

JOHN GARDNER (1917-2011): Accomplished but little-known English composer writing in the style of Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob and defying serialism. Taught at Repton School, Royal Academy of Music and St Pauls' School for Girls as also did Gustav Holst and Herbert Howells. His best-known piece which we are about to hear is "Tomorrow Shall be My Dancing Day" Originally a Cornish carol of the 1830s, Gardner adapted and orchestrated it in the 1960s – it has a very catchy melody with interesting rhythmic patterns. It inspired the well-known hymn "Lord of the Dance". Thanks for recommending

PYOTR ILWYCH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893): Half French/half Russian. A clerk after leaving school, so a late developer entering the Conservatoire aged 23. He had an extraordinary 14-year relationship with Nadezhda von Mek viz over 1200 letters but whom he never met. Unsuccessful relationships as a covert homosexual. He suffered from severe antisocial behaviour and irrational stage fright. He probably committed suicide by ingesting arsenic but possibly contracted cholera. He walked at least 2 miles every day and loved foraging for mushrooms. Extremely famous for his ballet music (Swan Lake Sleeping Beauty and

Nutcracker) as well as his symphonies, concerti also the acclaimed 1812 overture which he did not like. We will hear today an excerpt from The Nutcracker where he was very excited to include the celesta invented as late as 1886.

DANCE OF THE SUGAR PLUM FAIRY. Written in 1891. He wanted this mesmerizing romantic piece to sound like drops of water falling from a fountain. The celesta looked like a piano but made bell-like sounds not unlike a glockenspiel. In fact, it is all a dream where Clara was given a nutcracker as a Christmas present by her godfather. In her dream, the nutcracker becomes a handsome prince and she and the prince have to escape the Mouse King. In the finale, the ballerina dances the famous pas de deux.

PETER MAXWELL DAVIES (1934-2016): Wrote music in many different often challenging styles eg Scottish folk-song, plainsong, some classical but more often serial music difficult to listen to. Enfant terrible, openly homosexual, supporter of gay rights, republican views renounced when he was appointed Master of the Queens' Music in 2004. Lived in Orkney and great environmentalist. The piece below requested is in classical mode

FAREWELL TO STROMNESS: Written in 1980 for solo piano as a protest against proposed uranium mining in Orkney. This memorable music is touching, staggeringly simple, unfussy, straightforward and doleful.

JOHN RUTTER (Born 1945): English composer/conductor of choral works and carols although not particularly religious. When young, lived above a pub on Marylebone Road and played the piano at age 5. Educated at Highgate School as also was John Taverner and read music at Cambridge, Prolific and eclectic composer. A workaholic starting at the crack of dawn and continuing without interruption until a break for dinner but stopped composing for seven years due to ME. Some think his music is lightweight and mawkishly sentimental neither classical nor pop but still highly regarded especially in the USA.

SHEPHERDS PIPE CAROL: First published piece telling the tale of a shepherd playing the pipe before reaching Bethlehem. I believe the pipe to be a pennywhistle. Music has different time signatures it is light, bouncy quick, and syncopated with great melodic invention and orchestration.

GEORGE BUTTERWORTH (1885-1915). Privileged background, living first in Paddington and then in York. He was taught piano early on by his mother. Etonian and graduated from Oxford. Great pals with Vaughan Williams sharing a passion for exploring folk songs and then developing their themes into orchestral music. Excellent folk dancer and was briefly a music critic for the Times. He enlisted in WW1, and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. His music is subtle and quintessentially English exploring the spirit of the country for whom he fought and gave his life; dying by a sniper's bullet at the Battle of the Somme

BANKS OF GREEN WILLOW (1914) – requested by a member. It is actually two folk songs and depicts the death of a young mother and child at sea. She falls in love with a sea captain and they elope on his ship after she has stolen money from her parents. Her labour is especially

difficult and realizing she is dying she requests her body be thrown overboard with her baby. He wrote lovely music eg “A Shropshire Lad” and could have been another Elgar or Vaughan Williams had his life not been cut short.

GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858-1924). Most famous Italian opera composer. Came from a family of musicians who over 200 years had worked for the Duke of Lucca. Music was not so much a vocation, but more following the family tradition. Struggled at school being expelled several times. Bohemian and had a playboy lifestyle. When dying of throat cancer, left over 200 million dollars so probably the richest musician of all time.

LA BOHEME: First appeared in 1895. Four struggling bohemians – a poet, a painter, a musician and a philosopher are living together in Paris when one freezing Christmas Eve their lives are changed forever. A girl named Mimì knocks on their door looking for a candlelight, and she and Rodolfo fall in love. However, the rush of love at first sight soon gives way to something much darker – it becomes clear that Mimì is desperately ill, and that Rodolfo, in his poverty, cannot provide for her. Our bohemians try to find their way, but are soon sharply awoken to the harsh realities of life...

Many famous arias eg “Your Tiny Hand is Frozen” and “Yes They Call Me Mimi”. We shall hear the latter aria. Opera which has a sad ending but exquisitely beautiful music portrays Bohemian life in Paris in the 1840s.

ANTONIO LUCIO VIVALDI (1678 -1741): Italian baroque composer. Father was a barber, ordained to the priesthood and later knighted but died lonely and destitute. His orchestral work was paramount in the development of JS Bach’s music. Renowned for his violin concerti – 4 of which form the 4 Seasons.

THE FOUR SEASONS: Winter. The first section resembles a shivering person stamping his feet to keep warm, the middle section warming up beside a crackling fire and the final movement has people both walling in icy conditions while those indoors feel the cold coming in. The Seasons are rightly famous, the music is authentic and evocative evoking sensations through the different passage of time.

RONALD BINGE (1910 -1979): British composer and arranger of light music. Working class background but found work as a cinema organist. He was also professionally involved with Mantovani and his “cascading strings” Prolific – his most recognizable tune is “Sailing By” introducing the shipping forecast. He also wrote the wonderful Elizabethan Serenade which was written in 1951 and renamed in the light of Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1952.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685 -1750): Sublime and most famous Baroque composer also a harpsichordist and violinist He was born in the same year as Handel. During his lifetime other genres were becoming fashionable so some thought his masterpieces were becoming old-fashioned. Music is mathematically precise and complex eg the use of fugues but consoling and displaying when writing it his devotion to God.

CHRISTMAS ORATORIO (composed 1734): This is a series of six cantatas regarding different aspects of the Christmas story. I have chosen a piano rendering by Lang Lang for us to listen to.

GEORGE FREDERIC HANDEL (1685-1759). Extremely famous German Baroque composer of operas, oratorios and concerti. Known as the Great Bear. His father disapproved of his musical vocation but a child prodigy so went ahead. He was a bachelor living in Mayfair and rich, leaving in today's money £2 million. Kind but could be a tartar. Naturalised British citizen 1717. Governor of the Foundlings Hospital in London bequeathing proceeds of Messiah to them. Challenged and nearly died in a duel. His music has been played at all the Coronations since 1727 and the anthem theme tune for the Champions League makes his music known worldwide. Suffered a stroke aged 52, which paralysed his right side. Requested and paid to be buried in Westminster Abbey.

MESSIAH (NOT THE MESSIAH). First broadcast in Dublin in 1742. Custom to stand when the Hallelujah chorus is played. Wesley was at the first performance saying it has good bits but doubt it has staying power. How wrong can you be! It was not originally intended for Christmas and was originally written for quite a small ensemble. The most famous oratorio ever written – he claimed to see angels during the 24 days it took him to write it. It is not an opera as there are no characters, it is simply a very long list of Biblical texts nearly all from the Old Testament. There are three Acts with Hallelujah the last in Act 2. Short snippets from two other arias on the piano before we listen to Hallelujah Chorus.

JEAN PHILIPPE RIO-PY, (born 1983): Known professionally as Riopy, is a French pianist and composer. Self-taught since a very young age, he has performed in many international prestigious halls, and written several albums classified as contemporary classical music. His compositions have been featured in commercials, movie trailers, and feature films.

In January 2022, Riopy's album Tree of Light reached No. 1 on the US Billboard Classical Album chart after a continued 70 weeks in the top 10

SILENT NIGHT RE-IMAGINED: We felt as we approach the end of what has been another terrible year of wars we should play Silent Night, the Carol which paused the First World War on Christmas Day 1914. However, we are going to play this modern version and let us all hope that Christmas and the New Year bring lasting peace to the place where it all began.

CHOIR OF KINGS COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE – We wish you a Merry Christmas

JC 24/11/2023