

MUSIC APPRECIATION - TUESDAY 9TH JANUARY - SESSION 5

Today, our topic is "Nature". We shall be listening to compositions mainly suggested by members. I will this time mainly focus on the genre of music and the background to the pieces chosen. The further back one goes the much greater output. Earlier composers were full-time employees of either the Church, local municipalities or wealthy aristocrats. One such was Haydn who pioneered the symphony, writing 108 in total. But then, he had only small orchestras, wrote for a few instruments/voices and had copyists to assist him. He was the "Classical" bridge between Baroque composers followed by classical Mozart and early Beethoven before the freelance Romantic composers post-1800 held sway. We start with Haydn and finish with living contemporary composers such as John Barry and Ludovico Einaudi.

Franz Josef Haydn (1732–1809). Austrian. His father was a wheelwright and his mother a cook. Left family home aged 5 to be a choirboy in Vienna.. Very religious. Mozart's mentor and taught Beethoven. Impoverished when his voice broke but found patronages working for Esterhazy for 30 years before moving to London in the 1790s. Bulbous nose. Earned more in one year in London than all his time with Esterhazy. His musical style was light, gay, elegant and humorous. The piece we are to hear "With verdure clad the field appears" from his "Creation" (1798) is a delightful pastoral soprano aria with birdlike sounds played by the woodwind. The oratorio was inspired by Handel's Messiah and Milton's Paradise Lost

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827). Arguably the greatest classical composer. German, from a very humble family. Infant musical prodigy. Perceived Haydn as his musical father. Thought Mozart was overrated. He started life as a pianist but already becoming deaf in his 20s turned to composing. Wrote very little until well into his 20s. Pre-1800 mainly "classical mode" but then "sparked" the "Romantic" era. Nicknamed the Spaniard because of his dark complexion. Unlucky in love and poor at managing his finances. An improviser with a great variety of colour, texture and contrast of sounds. He expanded the use of rhythm and syncopation. Wrote 9 symphonies of which the 3rd, 5th, 6th and 9th are best known. He preferred the 8th. We are to listen to the "Shepherd Hym" from his Pastoral Symphony written in 1808. This depicts an Arcadian shepherd gathering his flocks after a thunderstorm.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847). German. Child prodigy – later a virtuoso pianist, conductor and composer with 750 works in every genre of music. Died early after a series of strokes. Also a gifted painter, athlete and linguist. Very widely travelled making at least 10 UK trips mainly to Scotland. He knew Queen Victoria who found him the most amiable and most talented composer since Mozart. Happily married. His talented sister was also a composer. I am going to play "O For The Wings of a Dove" before we hear the Hebrides Overture. Felix wrote the first lines for Fingals Cave while sitting there. The basalt rocks form a dome where the noise from the sea is similar to the sound of music in a cathedral. The former is an anthem "Hear My Prayer" which was first played on a London organ in 1844.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908). Early career as a Russian naval officer. Country boy soaked in local folk music. His "Romantic" style has a distinctive nationalist Russian flavour. Privileged background. Very tall and striking appearance, looking every inch like a teacher. Wealthy. In his mid-40s he moved into theatre. His best-known piece is Scheherazade which inspired the creation of "Aladdin". We are to hear "Flight of the Bumblebee" which for a pianist is almost impossible to play. This is part of an opera composed in 1900. The Prince is transformed into a bumblebee by a magical swan so he can fly to meet his father the Tsar who is unaware he is still alive. Makes great use of strings to create frenetic buzzing.

Charles Valentin Alkan (1813–1888). A Parisian and strictly practising Jew. He translated the whole of the Old Testament into his native French. Eked out a living as a virtuoso pianist and sometimes composer. Member of Chopin's circle and had a love/hate relationship with Franz Liszt who felt intimidated by his virtuosity. Wrote almost exclusively for the piano. He would withdraw for long periods from society. The piece I will play, "Song

of the Mad Woman on the Seashore” was composed in 1844 and is fortunately quite simple. The left hand with a constant and insistent sound of the sea while the right-hand plays the forlorn and isolated woman suffering from mental illness.

Camille Saint-Saens (1835-1921). French. Child prodigy. Expert in many other fields eg astronomy, botany, archaeology and mathematics. Organist, conductor, pianist, and composer and championed developing composers. Let’s hear the “Elephant” from Carnival of the Animals which was a zoological phantasy he wrote abounding with wit, charm and superficiality for which he is famous. The heavy galumphing noises in the left hand do picture painting while the right-hand melody is subdued even when it becomes florid later on. He wrote several piano concerti, and many choral works but would not allow the work we have heard with equally famous animals such as the “Swan” to be performed as he thought it would damage his reputation as a serious composer.

Sergei Prokoviev (1891–1953). Ukranian living in Russia. A music colossus writing in a romantic style but with diatonal elements. Musical family – he began composing at age 5. Eccentric, arrogant and lazy scholar. Chess master. Aligned himself with Stravinsky. Made his living as a composer, pianist and conductor. Time does not allow us to play Peter and the Wolf, so John will remind you of the key themes from the light-hearted composition for children. The narrator explains what is going on and introduces them to different instruments. Look on the internet for the version with Peter Ustinov as narrator.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). Born in Basque country. Composer, conductor and concert pianist. He was kicked out of Pais Conservatoire twice. Nevertheless arguably the best/most famous French composer of the 1920s and 1930s. Great orchestrator. Became friends with George Gershwin and was influenced by blues music and jazz. Celebrated for his Bolero. We are to hear “Sunrise” from “Daphniz and Chloe” in his earlier style. This is a choreographic symphony (1912) and arguably his masterpiece.

Louis Moreau Gottschwalk (1829-1869). Father Anglo/German Jew/mother Creole. A child prodigy with early education in Paris. His music whilst romantic, was exciting, melodic, and full of Haitian and Cuban rhythms. On his death, he was the most famous composer in the Western Hemisphere. Probably was the major influence in the introduction of ragtime at the end of the 19th century. The piece we are to listen to is the “Banana Tree”. Creole, very fast, with a catchy and syncopated melody.

Cecil Armstrong Gibbs (1889–1960). Composed in a traditional English style. Writer and conducting of mainly choral music and songs. School teacher, so composition, which started in his 30s was only a part-time occupation. But he was prolific and versatile although thought of as quite lightweight. We are to listen to “Dusk” part of a longer work which is charming and well-constructed. Often played on Classic FM who probably regard him, unfairly, as a one-hit wonder.

Flanders and Swann: On a less serious note we are to hear the highly amusing Hippopotamus song written by Michael Flanders and Donald Swann composed in the 1950s. Part of “At the Drop of a Hat” a show I saw in the West End with the immortal words “Mud, mud, glorious mud, nothing quite like it for cooling the blood.”

Ralph Vaughan-Williams (1872–1958). Related to Charles Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood. Father was a vicar – he was an agnostic and committed socialist. Met and became friends with Gustav Holst at The Royal College of Music. He played piano as well as violin and was a great collector of folk songs from an early age. Music quintessentially English and bucolic but he preferred town life living in Dorking. He got inspiration from both Ravel and Wagner. Handwriting was atrocious. He was left-handed but, was made to write with his right hand – his popularity has grown markedly since Classic FM. with the “Lark Ascending” being either first or second in the Hall of Fame for many years. Written in 1914 but the first performance was much later. Based on an 1880s poem about a skylark – it works so well as it combines folk elements, has beautiful melodies and is nostalgic.

John Barry (1933 - 2011). English composer and conductor of film music including scores for eleven of the James Bond films between 1963 and 1987. In 2001, Barry became a Fellow of the British Academy of Songwriters, Composers and Authors, and, in 2005, he was made a Fellow of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. Barry was married four times and had four children. We are to hear the theme tune from “Out of Africa”. The story is from a book written in the early 20th century telling of the vicissitudes of a Dutch settler but the music evokes the wide open spaces and the majesty of the wild animals in Africa.

Ludovico Einaudi born 1956. Italian. Folk guitar roots. Studied piano under the avant-garde composer Berio who taught him to have a very open way of thinking about music. Writes traditionally mainly for dance and cinema. First prize for piano at the March 2023 Globe Awards. I am going to play I Giorni written in 2001. Inspired to write this after hearing a 12th-century Mali folksong. It tells the tale of hunters killing a hippopotamus and the subsequent mourning of the village.