

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK - MUSIC APPRECIATION GROUP

The aim is to introduce an item each time that is not mainstream ie interesting and nice to listen to but where one perhaps cannot name or does not know much if anything about the composer. Below I have written potted biographies on four different composers. We shall be listening to CD cassettes playing some music written by each of them and I will play short snatches on the piano to aid understanding before we listen. There is a lot of syncopation in the pieces. Towards the end, I hope attendees will help Ken and me decide what form you want future sessions to take.

Cesar Franck: 1822-1890. He was a French romantic composer, pianist and organist born in Liege (Belgium) A child prodigy with very pushy parents. Tried to enrol at the Paris Conservatoire aged 8 but had to become “naturalized “ French” to be accepted. Concert tour at age 12. Heavily influenced by the works of Wagner and Liszt. His works employ “cyclic” form which means there is a common theme across several movements with repetitions and reminiscences making it feel as one unified piece. Gave up being a concert pianist at age 25 and devoted the rest of his life to playing the organ and composing. After Bach perhaps the best composer of organ music. His music is highly melodic. His wife despised his orchestral music thinking it too emotional and sensuous. He was very humble and unassuming with huge hands – lots of octaves in his music

His most famous piece is his only symphony in D minor. I heard it for the first time as a teenager at the Royal Festival Hall. Grand, brash, ablaze with colour and very emotional it has been described as “marmite” ie you either love it or hate it. Very daring in its time. Championed by Bernstein (more of him later), Sir Malcolm Sargent and Von Karajan it featured annually at promenade concerts until 1960 when it disappeared now appearing as with his symphonic variations in BBC proms about once every 10 years. Finished in 1888, there are only three movements, a scherzo and andante being combined to form the second movement. Like Berlioz who influenced him, his music impacted other French composers such as D’Indy his pupil, Ravel, Debussy and Saint Saens.

Some piano snatches on the first and second movements before listening to the third movement on cassette

Back to Bernstein 1918 -1990. A true “colossus”. Of Russian extraction but Jewish/American he was world-famous as a classical pianist and conductor of classical music. But his music encompassed all genres including symphonies, choral music, and opera but especially music for the theatre and his masterpiece “ West Side Story”. University lecturer explaining classical music to students. Much influenced by Mahler, Aaron Copland but especially George Gerswhin. He had a mass TV audience explaining classical music and was a lifelong human rights humanitarian.

Before listening to “America” from West Side Story I will play and try to explain “Maria”

Gershwin (1898 – 1937) is a particular favourite of mine. For my Grade 8 about 30 years ago I was given a minor piece as a sightreading test. Covered popular, classical and Jazz genres. Frequented Carnegie Hall regularly hearing Rachmaninoff play his own and 2nd and 3rd piano concertos. But he was also influenced by the new style of jazz which he heard. At school, he did not excel leaving at age 14 and was involved in fistfights. He worked in Tin Pan Alley as a song plugger also found work as a musical accompanist. His parents bought a piano intended for his brother. He quickly became famous as a songwriter collaborating with his brother Ira. He composed show music such as Porgy and Bess and an American in Paris. But he also wanted to compose classically hence “Rhapsody in Blue”. But here is the twist – he and his brother were playing pool in a bar in New York when they saw in the NY Times that in three weeks’ time, George Gershwin would be playing his new concerto in Carnegie Hall. He did not panic but in great haste met the deadline and the piece was performed on time with famous attendees such as Rachmaninoff, Ravel, Kreisler and conductor Stopolski. In the audience. Unique and acclaimed enthusiastically although Bernstein who played it frequently said it “was not composition at all but a series of terrific tunes stuck together like flour and water” Rhapsodies are pieces with just a single movement with a great degree of spontaneity and improvisation. Later Gershwin wrote a longer Concerto written more in classical music mode. Recently performed in Proms on 26/08 and 17/300 in Classic FM ratings.

Snatches on piano playing Swanee, Summertime before listening to Rhapsody in Blue. Swanee was composed in 1919 and sung by Al Johnson selling 1 million copies of sheet music, 2 million records and top of the charts for 9 weeks in 1920.

Maurice Ravel: 1875- 1937. Born in Basque country near Biarritz. Composer, conductor and concert pianist but was kicked out of the Paris Conservatoire twice. Most famous French composer in the 1920s and 1930s with great use of orchestration. Like Gershwin much into Blues music and jazz. The friendship between Gershwin and Ravel began in 1928 when Gershwin asked if he could be Ravel’s pupil. In reply, Ravel said why would you wish to be a second-rate Ravel when you are a first-rate Gershwin. However, Ravel’s later music was undoubtedly influenced by ragtime and jazz eg the concerto for the left hand and his second piano concerto. Other very good music perhaps Daphnis and Chloe, La Valse and Pavane for a Dead Infanta. But his most popular work is Bolero made famous by Torvill and Dean – composed late in life with masterful use of different instruments - some guess he was suffering from dementia and dying soon after from a brain tumour. Ravel said of his Bolero – I have written just one masterpiece the Bolero but it has no music in it. There are no modulations just two themes before its climax so is completely repetitive.

On the piano play the two Bolero themes, play a few bars from the adagio in Ravel’s second piano concerto before playing Bolero