

Rodion Shchedrin (b.1932)

Concerto for Orchestra No. 1, 'Naughty Limericks'

Whilst Rodion Shchedrin is not hugely well known, this incredible piece is in fact one of five concerti for orchestra written by this contemporary Russian composer. This eight-minute whistle-stop tour of the orchestra is irreverent, audacious and provocative, not only in content but in context. It was written as a gift to the late Mstislav Rostropovich, a figure not without controversy during the Cold War (he would ultimately be stripped of his Russian citizenship). Shchedrin's relationships more broadly with Russian governments across his life are fascinating – he was the head of the Union of Composers of the Russian Federation during the Gorbachev era and yet he also maintained lifelong friendships with figures such as Rostropovich.

"Naughty Limericks" is an inevitably unsatisfactory translation of the original Russian title, *Ozorniye chastushki*, which refers to a genre of brief, irreverent folk songs. Sometimes the work is titled *Mischievous Melodies* or *Mischievous Ditties*, but ultimately its conveyance seems to be of brevity and slightly off-colour lyrical content. Shchedrin has written, "Its specifically musical traits are a four-square and asymmetric structure, a deliberately primitive melody of few notes, driving syncopated rhythm, improvisation, repetition involving variation and most of all a sense of humour pervading both words and music."

Humour is certainly not missing from this piece, and compressed into just eight minutes are some of the most eccentric performance directions in the repertoire. The percussion are invited to use wooden spoons as beaters; the string section is ordered to tap their bows on their music stands; solos come soaring (though certainly not sawing) from the back desks of the violins and violas; and all the wrong beats of the bar are accented continually. Listen out also for the strange chord of B major at the very end, after an insistent finale in B flat.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Death and Transfiguration

Death and Transfiguration is one of the most celebrated tone poems ever written, and chief among its celebrants was Strauss himself who, upon his deathbed sixty years later, remarked less than modestly that the experience of death was exactly how he'd composed it all those years ago. An accompanying poem by Alexander von Ritter was commissioned at Strauss' request, so we know in good detail the images inspired and evoked by this programmatic work.

The opening *Largo* section depicts an old artist dying alone in a dark room. The irregular pulsating rhythm heard at first in the violas and then famously in the timpani is the ticking of a broken clock, heavily associated with the man's faltering heartbeat. The proceeding *Allegro agitato* movement is alive with conflict, as the artist recalls the struggles of his life. The conflict receives no real resolution, but we are thrown instead into a bitterly ironic recollection of happier times, perhaps of the artist's childhood. Just as the music flourishes, the hammer-blow of death is sounded and the artist falls into darkness. But he is then offered divine redemption

and 'transfiguration', ascending to Heaven where he can finally find the peace that he never had in life.

Unsurprisingly, this work owes a great debt to Wagner, who was a huge influence on Strauss. Indeed, even the title derives from *Liebestod und Verklärung*, which was the original name of Wagner's *Vorspiel und Liebestod*. Strauss' treatment of the symbolic motif, often called *Leitmotif* when associated with Wagner, is particularly impressive and subtle. Whilst the 'transfiguration' theme is played by the whole orchestra upon the artist's ascension to Heaven, it is in fact also present throughout the artist's recollection of his life, giving this through-composed work a remarkable sense of organicism reminiscent of Wagner.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Symphony No. 2

I. *Allegro vivace e nobilmente*

II. *Larghetto*

III. *Rondo*

IV. *Moderato e maestoso*

"What is the matter with them, Billy? They sit there like a lot of stuffed pigs." The Billy that Elgar is addressing here is the violinist William Reed, the stuffed pigs the concert-going public, and the occasion the somewhat lukewarm première of the composer's second symphony. Whilst today the work is considered one of the greatest symphonies in the English repertoire, it was in fact sadly underappreciated in its day, and the piece is one of the last that Elgar composed before his relatively early retirement from composition following the death of his wife.

Dedicated to King Edward VII, who had died a year earlier, the symphony was nostalgic even in its own day. Laced with musical allusion, the piece balances moments of sublime grandeur with some of Elgar's most intimate and personal writing. The joyous, bounding energy of the beginning (Elgar's own tribute to a particularly charismatic monarch) gives way gradually to a highly contemplative style, often charged with a profound sense of poignancy. Elgar said later that he had "written out his soul" in the symphony, and there is a sense of the Mahlerian in the piece's unrelenting exploration and nuance of its own musical character.

Attempts to align Elgar's symphonic works to the central European tradition are often overlooked, perhaps out of our desire to paint the composer as an uncomplicated English icon. The solemn, moustachioed face that stared proudly out of the old twenty-pound note is surely an appealing aesthetic, but Elgar's music has a great deal more in common with his contemporary German symphonists than we might expect – fitting, then, that it should be performed tonight alongside Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration*. Indeed, Elgar's interest in the

Germanic tradition was also an historical one, and it is possible to hear elements – often direct quotations – from Brahms' *German Requiem* in this symphony. The very end of the work has also been compared to Brahms' third, as it shies away from a grand, declamatory finale in favour of a more introspective conclusion. Allen Gimbel has even pointed out implicit allusions to *Der Meistersinger*, arguing that in drawing such parallels Elgar is making a statement of his own artistic independence perhaps similar to the character of Walther in the opera.

However, as the great Leonard Bernstein pointed out, whilst the endless intellectual nods to the German composers are impressive, much of the genius of Elgar lies in the originality of his own beautiful melodies and the paradoxical way that such originality is married to a bizarrely familiar, conservative and undoubtedly English sound, despite operating within a style dominated by European idioms and despite also Elgar's aversion to the appropriation of English folk music as means to achieve new tonal possibilities.

The orchestration of this symphony is one of the many things to be marvelled at here: full-bodied, romantic and lush it certainly is, but Elgar's masterful understanding of the sheer variety of possibilities for orchestral colour always dominates. Instruments are grouped in unusual combinations, so that every melody is coloured in a unique and pleasing way. It is testament no doubt to Elgar's rich experience as both an orchestral violinist and later a conductor. The harmony, too, is some of the most adventurous in Elgar's repertoire, and at times the tonal centre is completely lost, giving way to romantic meanders of extraordinary intensity. Unlike the first symphony, the emphasis of this piece seems to be on continuity over dramatic conflict, and tempo changes are often so subtle that it is quite often not until a great climax that we realise how much the mood of the music has shifted.