

Serenade to Music

The sung text of the choral items appears in the printed programme.

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934) **Cockaigne, Overture (In London Town), Op.40**

Despite the success of his *Enigma Variations* in 1899, the following year found Elgar in dire financial straits: “I *must* earn money somehow”, he told his friend August Jaeger (the inspiration for ‘Nimrod’), “I will *not* go back to teaching & I think I must try some trade – coal agency or houses.” Even a commission from the Philharmonic Society for a new orchestral work failed to cheer him up: “What’s the good of it?” he complained to Jaeger, “Nobody else will perform the thing.”

Happily, Elgar was wrong: the resulting work, *Cockaigne*, a vivid musical picture of old London, soon became one of his most frequently performed and best-loved works in Britain, Germany and America. According to Elgar: “It calls up to mind all the good-humour, jollity and something deeper in the way of English good fellow-ship ... abiding still in our capital.” He dedicated the piece “to my many friends, the members of British orchestras”, and conducted its premiere at London’s Queen’s Hall in June 1901.

The overture opens with the jauntiest of tunes, characterised by an energetic, rat-tat-tat rhythm. A gloriously expansive melody follows, one suggested to Elgar in London’s Guildhall where, as he put it, “I seemed to hear far away in the dim roof a theme, an echo of some noble melody.” As the scene shifts to a secluded public garden the mood becomes more tranquil and intimate with a sweetly expressive “lovers’ theme”, as Elgar described it; the ‘Guildhall’ melody then reappears in a very different guise, portraying that favourite London stereotype, a cheeky cockney street urchin. After the various themes are heard a number of times, there is a swirling crescendo and a military band appears in all its brash splendour, its tune blared out on cornets and trombones (Elgar was actually teaching himself the trombone at the time). The band recedes into the distance and organ-like sonorities suggest the peaceful atmosphere of a church (a passage adored by Elgar’s wife, Alice). The various themes gradually reappear, first as if in the distance, and then more substantially, before the overture culminates in a majestic *nobilmente* coda and one final burst of infectious energy.

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RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872-1958) **Serenade to Music**

“I should love to write – to have the honour of writing – a piece in your praise if I can manage it ... Is there any poet you can suggest who could write some words appropriate to the occasion? How about asking the Poet Laureate?”

So wrote Ralph Vaughan Williams in response to a request from Sir Henry Wood, founder of the Proms, to write a work in his honour. 1938 marked the 50th year of Wood’s distinguished conducting career and a special tribute concert was to take place at the Albert Hall, the proceeds of which were to be donated to a hospital ward for sick musicians. A star turn of the concert was the greatest virtuoso pianist of the day, Sergei Rachmaninov, who performed his Second Piano Concerto with a special orchestra made up of members of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the London Symphony Orchestra and the London Philharmonic Orchestra. So great was Rachmaninov’s pulling power that his schedule dictated the date of the event – 5 October 1938.

The piece produced by Vaughan Williams for the concert was *Serenade to Music*, a setting not of words by the Poet Laureate John Masefield, as he had suggested to Wood, but of Shakespeare: Lorenzo and Jessica's discussion about music from Act V of *The Merchant of Venice*. Originally written for 16 solo singers with orchestral accompaniment, Vaughan Williams later made various arrangements of the work, and also sanctioned this version for chorus and orchestra.

The Shakespeare passage chosen by Vaughan Williams concerns the so-called music of the spheres. During the Elizabethan period there was a neo-Platonic belief that the angels sit on the spheres and, each singing their particular note, create a harmony of ravishing beauty. Nevertheless, maintained the theory, in his fallen, mortal state, man cannot hear these heavenly sounds.

In Vaughan Williams's setting an orchestral introduction sets the nocturnal mood, a mood further enhanced by the entry of the exquisitely harmonised vocal lines. In contrast are musical treatments of words referring to man's incapacity to hear the music of the spheres – 'we cannot hear it', for example, is sung in a sombre unison. Imitations of hunting horns herald the invocation of Diane, goddess of the hunt. Appropriately enough, the passage beginning 'The man that hath no music in himself' is the work's darkest. By the end, however, 'sweet harmony' reigns. At the work's premiere back in 1938, Rachmaninov, an audience member in the concert's second half after his exertions in the first, wept at its sheer beauty.

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About the composer – Nico Muhly (b.1981)

Nico Muhly is one of today's foremost composers with a wide scope of work written for soloists, ensembles, and organisations including pianist Emanuel Ax and mezzo-soprano Sophie von Otter, countertenor Iestyn Davies, violinist Pekka Kuusisto, New York City Ballet, New York Philharmonic, Cincinnati Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, American Ballet Theater, Paris Opéra Ballet, Barbican Centre and Wigmore Hall.

Film credits include Muhly's scores for *Joshua* (2007), Best Picture nominee for *The Reader* (2008) and the Sundance selection for *Kill Your Darlings* (2013).

With designer/illustrator Maira Kalman, Muhly composed a vocal work based on Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*, and he has worked with choreographer Benjamin Millepied to create new pieces for the American Ballet Theater (*From Here On Out*), the Paris Opera Ballet (*Triade*), and the Netherlands Ballet (*One Thing Leads to Another*).

He has also lent his skills as performer, arranger and conductor to other musicians, including Antony and the Johnsons (The Crying Light), Björk (Medulla, Drawing Restraint 9, Volta), Bonnie 'Prince' Billy (The Letting Go), Doveman (The Conformist), Grizzly Bear (Veckatimest), and Jonsi from Sigur Rós (Go).

Recordings of his work can be heard on a variety of labels including Bedroom Community, which he cofounded in 2007 with Icelandic musician and producer Valgeir Sigurðsson.

Muhly's first full-scale opera, *Two Boys*, had its US premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 2013.
www.nicomuhly.com

NICO MUHLY (b.1981)

Second Service

world premiere – Liverpool Philharmonic 175th Anniversary Commission

The Second Service is a setting of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis canticles, which, traditionally, are sung before the New and Old Testament readings in an Evensong service.

The Magnificat is the shocked reaction of the Virgin Mary at the news that she is carrying Christ in her womb; there is, in this setting, an electrified, anxious musical gesture that keeps returning which is of a very loud chord followed by an echo: a sort of jolt. The text moves from the personal to the universal, and this setting alternates between intimate and soft music and music better suited for outdoors.

The Nunc Dimittis, meant to be the canticle of Simeon (the devout man who meets the baby Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem), is the music of an old man at peace with dying: the rhythmic footprint is irregular,

ponderous, and heavy. We begin to hear the anxious loud-soft gestures of the Magnificat return on the text 'to be a light to lighten the Gentiles', and after a nearly identical recapitulation of the end of the Magnificat's 'Glory be to the Father', the second 'Glory be to the Father' ends softly and strangely.

Nico Muhly © 2014

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949) **Also Sprach Zarathustra, Op.30**

This was the sixth of Strauss's tone-poems, if you include *Aus Italien*. It was composed in 1886, between *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Don Quixote*. Strauss conducted the first performance on 27 November 1896 in Frankfurt. On the score he described it as a 'tone-poem (freely after Nietzsche) for full orchestra' and he inscribed the manuscript with Nietzsche's lines: 'Too long has music been dreaming; now let us awaken. We wandered by night, now let us walk by day'.

Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical prose-poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* was published in 1885. Zarathustra (Zoroaster) was a Persian who lived about 600BC. He said he was the prophet of the spirit of light and good. Nietzsche seized upon Zarathustra as a means of propagating his own views on man's destiny and purpose expressed in highly emotional and rhapsodic terms. The poem comprises over 80 short discourses by Zarathustra (i.e. Nietzsche) on topics such as virtue, chastity, love, science, war, priests, women, etc. Each discourse ends with the words 'Also sprach Zarathustra' ('Thus spake Zarathustra'). Zarathustra spends much of his time in solitude in a mountain cave from which he emerges at intervals to inform men of the wisdom he has gathered. One of his mystical beliefs is the idea of the *Übermensch* (Superman): 'I teach you the Superman... The Superman is the meaning of the earth'.

Nietzsche's ideas were highly fashionable in the last quarter of the 19th century and they attracted several composers. Mahler set some of Zarathustra in his Third Symphony and it is the basis of Delius's *A Mass of Life*. (Delius was perhaps more of a Nietzschean than any of the others.) Until their split, Nietzsche was a disciple of Wagner and was highly responsive to music. He even said of his Zarathustra that 'I almost believe it belongs among the symphonies'. Strauss read Nietzsche while he was at work on his opera *Guntram* (1894) and was attracted not only to the beauty of the poem but its antagonism to conventional religion, especially those creeds which claimed that the meek should inherit the earth. In attempting the seemingly hopeless task of conveying the Nietzschean philosophy in purely orchestral terms Strauss wrote: 'I meant to convey in music an idea of the evolution of the human race from its origin, through the phases of development, religious as well as scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the Superman. The whole symphonic poem is intended as my homage to the genius of Nietzsche'.

Having set the background of this work, I now advise you to forget all about it and enjoy the music simply as an example of Strauss's superb mastery of colour and form. It is a symphonic fantasy (composed for huge orchestra) inspired by sections of Nietzsche's book, and the musical argument is based on the conflicts of the key of C major, represented by Nature, and its nearest but (harmonically) most distant key, B major, represented by the Spirit of Man. It is C that we hear first, sustained for four long bars by organ, double basses and double bassoons, as the work opens with a description of *Sunrise*, a passage made familiar in a new context through its inspired use in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The Nature theme is announced three times by four trumpets in unison, with ferocious drumbeats between each declamation and the organ giving a thunderous groundswell to the climax. When the organ has ceased, the main structure of the tone-poem begins. The first section is *Von der Hinterweltlern* (literally *Of the Backworldsmen*) meaning those of naive beliefs, and we hear, in the key of B minor, the Spirit of Man theme, pizzicato on cellos and basses, followed by an obviously satirical quotation on horns of the liturgical plainchant theme for 'Credo in unum Deum' There follows a gloriously Straussian episode for strings in 16 parts, softly accompanied by the organ and with soloistic passages, which represents man's fervent if naive belief in a divinity (forerunner of the great melodising passage for orchestra in Act 1 of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and also anticipating one of the Marschallin's themes in *Der Rosenkavalier*).

This reverie is dispelled by the entry of a cor anglais, as a solo viola leads into *Von der grossen Sehnsucht* (*Of the great yearning*). This is a development section, in which the pendant in thirds clashes with the Nature theme. The polytonal effect of this conflict of C major on the prevailing B major caused a sensation in 1896 and is still remarkable, even if we are used to much worse things. The organ now quotes plainchant, this time the *Magnificat*, answered by the horn's Credo; and Zarathustra's resistance to it, by a new

ferocious theme on the lower strings, becomes increasingly excited and carries over with a tremendous harp glissando into the next section, *Von der Freuden und Leidenschaften* (*Of Joys and Passions*). This is in C minor, with a new *molto espressivo* theme of a characteristically sensuous and passionate nature, decked out with all Strauss's orchestral allure. Trombones protest at this self-indulgence with an important new theme, labelled by some analysts as the *Disgust* or *Satiety* motif.

Joys and Passions gives way to *Das Grablied* (*Song of the Grave*) in the contrasted key of B minor, with softer more restrained orchestration (solo oboe, solo cello, solo violin), a magical passage of muted orchestral tones. Bass clarinet and solo cello make the transition to the fugue, *Von der Wissenschaft* (*Of Science*). This is an *Adagio* for the deep-toned instruments. Strauss shows scientific musical erudition by using all 12 degrees of the chromatic scale and arranging them in five different tonalities and three rhythms. This solemn academic display gradually becomes more emotional and is relieved by the return of the Spirit of Man theme, which sweeps skywards on the violins and takes new exultant forms including a dance for the high woodwind accompanied by harps and strings. But the greyer textures return to dispel the premature gaiety and to combine in a vehement return of the fugue in the next section, *Der Genesende* (*The Convalescent*). This is an important chapter in Nietzsche, when Zarathustra recovers, transfigured, from a mental breakdown. In Strauss the scene becomes an amazing passage of virtuosity. The climax of the fugue is a C major chord for the whole vast orchestra. There is a pause, and *Satiety* is sombrely discussed on the low-toned instruments. Out of this pit comes a section celebrating all the colours of the post-Wagnerian orchestra, changing the mood to light-hearted humour and converting *Satiety* into a quotation from *Till Eulenspiegel*. The frenzied gaiety gives way to the *Tanzlied* (*Dance Song*), Nietzsche's *Dance of the Superman* To a delicate accompaniment a solo violin plays - a Viennese waltz!

Solemn commentators have tut-tutted here over Strauss's failure to match the Superman ideology, but there can be little doubt that this is another example of Strauss's sense of humour. He did not believe in Superman any more than you and I do, but the Waltz was to become one of his own trump-cards, so why not use it here?

The *Tanzlied* has a long and important development in which several of the main themes of the work recur, including a recollection of the *Joys and Passions* episode. The music is ravishingly lyrical, dancing forward to the fringe of Count Octavian's Vienna and glancing backwards to the romantic ardour of *Don Juan*. At the height of the dance a bell sounds and the *Nachtwanderlied* (*Night Wanderer's Song*) begins. In Nietzsche's book Zarathustra interrupts the joyful dance of his disciples with a drunken outburst from which the bell recalls him in time for him to expound his final message. In Strauss the strokes of the bell grow softer while the *Disgust* motif becomes less emphatic throughout a *diminuendo* for the whole orchestra. From the key of C the music goes into B major for the quiet and beautiful *Epilogue*. Here the Spirit of Man is heard on the bassoon as a counter-theme to a motif from the *Of Science* episode. So Nature has the last word – not quite Nietzsche's ending but musically a logical conclusion.

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