

Wednesday 2 & Thursday 3 October 2013 7.30pm

## Beethoven's Best

### **RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)** **Prelude to Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg**

Along with his great tragic drama *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg) dates from the years when Wagner had broken off from the composition of his vast, four-part *Ring Cycle*. Whereas that work required the special construction of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the penniless Wagner decided to write an accessible romantic comedy that could be staged in any theatre (though at around five hours in duration, *Mastersingers* is hardly the most practical proposition for most opera houses). Set in Nuremberg in the middle of the 16th century, it received its first performance in Munich on 21 June 1868.

Although Wagner romanticised his subject matter, his portrayal of the 16th-century Nuremberg musical scene is substantially an accurate one. In a number of German cities, guilds were formed in order to hold regular competitions for singing and song-writing. At the time, the Nuremberg Mastersingers were the most highly respected in the German lands, and one character in the opera, Hans Sachs, is based on the real Hans Sachs (1494-1576), a cobbler and the leading singer-poet of the day. Into the conservative Nuremberg community enters the young nobleman Walther von Stolzing, who soon falls in love with Eva, the daughter of a wealthy goldsmith and Mastersinger called Veit Pogner. Walther discovers that Pogner has promised Eva's hand in marriage to the winner of the forthcoming singing competition and, with the help of the kind-hearted Sachs (who is half in love with Eva himself), resolves to enter the contest. Eventually, after a deal of intrigue and misunderstanding, Walther defeats his rival Beckmesser with his prize-song, and both Eva and the coveted title of Mastersinger are his.

Wagner's Prelude to the opera gives a foretaste of music that becomes increasingly familiar to the audience as the drama unfolds. It opens and closes with the majestic mastersingers' march, the solidity of which suggests the dignity and integrity of the Guild of Mastersingers and its integral place within Nuremberg society. Another march theme is also heard, this one evoking the pageantry of the St John's Day celebrations that feature in the opera. There are also more sinuous and tender passages suggesting Walther's love for Eva, and the ardent melody of Walther's prize-winning song. As well as romance, humour comes in the form of an irreverent, fast-moving parody of the mastersingers' march representing the cheeky young Guild apprentices. Towards the end, Wagner gloriously weaves the two marches and the prize song together to form an intricate musical texture of which Bach would have been proud (the interplay of the different musical lines foreshadowing the opera's various dramatic and thematic conflicts). After such complexity, the final straightforward reprise of the mastersingers' march is somehow doubly effective.

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### **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)** **Piano Concerto No.3 in C minor, Op.37**

*Allegro con brio*  
*Largo*  
*Rondo: allegro*

Beethoven wasn't just a revolutionary. He may have rebelled against his teacher Haydn, but when it came to Mozart, his attitude was more like hero-worship. After listening to a performance of a Mozart piano concerto, he turned to his young pupil Ferdinand Ries and said: "The likes of us will never be able to do anything like that".

But Beethoven was never the type to refuse an artistic challenge – even one of his own. The Mozart concerto in question was No.24 in C minor, and between 1797 and 1800 Beethoven created his own C minor Piano Concerto. Different key signatures had different meanings for Beethoven, and his stormy “C minor mood” is his most personal of all – think of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony! But in Beethoven’s C minor concerto, it’s a very different story. No outbursts of rage here. It’s the last piano concerto in which he kept the three movements, Mozart-like, in proportion with each other. And since Mozart begins his concerto with a low, unison phrase for strings... so does Beethoven. The musically-literate audience that heard him give the first performance at Vienna’s Theater an der Wien on the night of 5 April 1803 would have spotted the resemblance immediately.

And yes, it’s an act of homage. But it’s anything but an imitation. Beethoven’s vision was very different from his hero’s; but it shows itself in quiet poetry rather than barnstorming heroics. Mozart always finished his first movements with the orchestra alone; but Beethoven allows the piano a few last words – to magical effect. The hushed, glowing slow movement is one of the tenderest ten minutes he ever penned. And at the end of the *finale* he switches both key and time signature, to dazzling effect. It’s nothing like Mozart – and that’s the highest compliment Beethoven could have paid him.

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## **GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813-1901)**

### **Overture: The Sicilian Vespers**

Verdi’s longest opera overture was written for *Les vêpres siciliennes*, which was first performed in Paris in 1855. It has rarely been seen there since then and is now far more often heard in an Italian translation as *I vespri siciliani*. Language is no problem in the overture, of course, and it is not necessary to know the details of the complicated plot which, set in French-occupied Sicily in the 13th century, ends with a massacre of the French by the citizens of Palermo.

It is obvious from the funereal rhythms and dark colouring of the opening bars of the slow introduction to the overture that there is no prospect of a happy ending, as a mournful phrase on clarinet and bassoons (taken from a ‘De profundis’ sung by monks in the fourth act) seems to confirm. The following shapely but still ominous melody, introduced by flute, is sung by Héléne, the heroine of the opera, on her first entry. A drum roll signals a change of tempo to *Allegro agitato* and a violent anticipation of the massacre in the last act. A lovely lyrical episode for cellos changes the atmosphere but, although it survives two more violent interventions, it gives way to the inevitable drive towards a dramatic ending.

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## **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**

### **Symphony No.5 in C minor, Op.67**

*Allegro con brio*  
*Andante con moto*  
*Allegro –*  
*Allegro*

Beethoven’s famous Fifth Symphony was written for the most part in the winter of 1807-08. It had its first performance at the extraordinary marathon concert in Vienna in December 1808 which also included the premieres of the Sixth Symphony and the Choral Fantasia, and performances of the recent Fourth Piano Concerto, movements from the Mass in C, and more besides! The concert lasted four hours, in bitter cold, and rehearsals had been scanty: small wonder that one musician in the audience described how “many a failure in the performance vexed our patience in the highest degree”. But Beethoven himself told his publisher that “the public accepted everything enthusiastically”.

The Fifth Symphony is an important milestone in the development of the form. In his symphonies, building on the examples of the later symphonies of Mozart, and those of his teacher Haydn, Beethoven expanded the size of the orchestra, the scale of individual movements, their range of expression, and the variety of keys they visited. Drawing on his experience of the theatre, as well as his

intense personal experience of deafness and isolation, he also increasingly bound the movements together into some kind of overall narrative: sometimes suggested by titles, as in the *Eroica* and *Pastoral* Symphonies, sometimes implicit in the musical expression.

### **First movement**

In the Fifth Symphony, the implicit narrative is present from the start of the first movement. Whether or not Beethoven actually said of the opening motif “Thus Fate knocks on the door”, the dramatic pauses, the astonishingly intensive treatment of that first idea (and especially its rhythm), the vehemence of the development section and even more of the extended coda, all tell a tale of a titanic and unresolved struggle.

### **Second movement**

The slow movement initially seems to offer respite from that struggle: it is a relaxed Andante in the mellow key of A flat major, apparently settling into the form first devised by Haydn of variations on two themes in turn. But when the plan is broken up by digressions into the heroic key of C major (a key untouched in the C minor first movement), with the trumpets blazing as they rarely did in slow movements at the time, and when the ending is assertive rather than quiet, it is clear that the movement has become part of a longer-term strategy.

### **Third movement**

And so it proves when the scherzo reverts to the initial C minor, in dark and sinister mood, but the contrasting trio section (which Beethoven originally intended to come round twice) is in C major, an almost grotesque fugato led off by the cellos and double-basses. Now comes the Symphony’s biggest formal innovation, an integration of movements which was to have a huge influence on later developments in symphonic form. The reprise of the scherzo is not a literal one, as usual, but is hushed throughout; and it is extended to form a bridge leading straight into the finale.

### **Fourth movement**

Here the key turns decisively to C major, and piccolo, contrabassoon and (for the first time in a symphony) trombones reinforce the orchestra in what is clearly a hymn of triumph. But Beethoven’s plan is not quite complete yet: at the end of the development section, the dark scherzo returns at its original tempo and in its original C minor – thus enhancing the final blaze of glory of the recapitulation and coda.

But are we justified in hearing the piece in these terms of struggle and triumph? Many commentators at the time thought so; and so, a century later, did E.M. Forster, in a chapter of his novel *Howards End* which is one of the finest pieces of writing in English about the experience of listening to music. Several of the leading characters, including the two Schlegel sisters and their younger brother, attend a performance of the Fifth at the Queen’s Hall in London, and react to it in different ways. The Schlegels’ aunt is inclined to “tap surreptitiously when the tunes come”; their German cousin sits stiffly “listening to Classical Music”; the boy Tibby Schlegel, full score open on his knee, alerts the company “to look out for the transitional passage on the drum”.

But Forster’s sympathies are clearly with Tibby’s sister Helen, who “can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music’s flood”. For her, unforgettably, the scherzo “started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end”, later joined by other goblins “who merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world”; and “after the interlude of elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation a second time”. Then, when Beethoven has scattered the goblins, there opens up for her a vision of “gods and demi-gods contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance broadcast on the field of battle, magnificent victory, magnificent death!” But the return of the scherzo in this finale prompts a feeling of “panic and emptiness”. And Beethoven’s triumphant conclusion does not obscure the fact that “the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things.”

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