

HELIX Ensemble
Musical Director Roger Coull

Cope Auditorium, University of Loughborough
Saturday 23 November 2002 7.30pm

Serenade in E

ANTONIN DVORAK

Antonin Dvorak was one of the most versatile and talented composers of the nineteenth century. He was born into comparative poverty in the lowlands of Bohemia and was the son of a local innkeeper and butcher. He had a few rudimentary music lessons, and by the age of eight he was playing in his father's village band. He later went on to study in Prague and played in Smetana's Czech National Theatre Orchestra, where received only a small salary. As a result, he lived in relative poverty until, on the recommendation of Johannes Brahms, he received a state allowance. Brahms described Dvorak as "Undoubtedly a very talented man. Besides, he is poor." The allowance had a tremendous creative effect and one of the first fruits was the charming Serenade (1878) for nine wind instruments with cello and double bass.

Dvorak was an instinctive composer whose approach to life was, in the main, optimistic and sunny and this attitude is mirrored in his compositions. As so often with this composer, the comparatively simple layout is allied to a work of great melodic invention and charm. Yet there are subtleties, for instance the principal themes of all the movements use the interval of a rising fourth to give the whole work a sense of balance and unity. The music also reflects the nationalistic inspiration which lies behind much of the composer's work.

The scoring of this work ensured that the Serenade bore a very close resemblance to the type of work that would be performed on the street on a summer evening. Another traditional feature found in such works was the inclusion of an entrance and exit march.

The first movement is a quasi-ceremonial march with a very memorable theme. The second movement is actually based on a sousesdka, which was a dance for the elderly folk. The trio section is a lively presto which is reminiscent of the furiant, another faster folk-dance. Dvorak excelled himself in the expressive third movement with its graceful melody providing a moment of repose before the high spirits of the finale. Towards the end, the March theme from the first movement is recalled and the work ends with a lively coda.

Arias

HANDEL

These four Handel Arias for countertenor and strings represent a transition in this concert programme between Dvorak's pretty but uncomplicated view of love and Schoenberg's near stifling, intense examination of extremes.

All four arias come from Handel's Dramatic Oratorios, which were designed to be performed on stage in Lent, when theatre was banned. (Handel, as ever, spotted a market opportunity). These Oratorios, many based upon non-biblical themes, allowed Handel greater licence to explore the complexities of human relationships. Doubtless the ambiguity of using castrati for the heroic parts adds to this.

In Kind Heaven and Sweet Rose and Lily from Theodora (first performed in 1750), the central character Didymus is a Roman converted by Theodora to Christianity, but now caught between his attraction to the now-imprisoned women and his need to sublimate his baser instincts into love for the divine.

After the interval, Yet can I hear that dulcet lay from The Choice of Hercules, (first performed 1751), reflects Hercules musing on his choice between two women, Virtue and Pleasure, the first offering cerebral rewards and the second decidedly more immediate in promise. Although the choice is never in doubt (or at least it would not have been for Handel's audience) in this aria our hero is regretting he cannot have his cake and eat it.

In the final aria from Saul (first performed in 1738) Such Haughty Beauties, David is drawing conclusions about King Saul's two daughters (inventions of Charles Jennens, the librettist, who also produced the Messiah). Although previously betrothed to the younger sister, David is somewhat put out by Saul's attack on his life and the reassignment of the daughter to someone else. The aria, as in the three previous ones, reflects an array of ambiguous emotions.

Verklarte Nacht

SCHOENBERG

Arnold Schoenberg was born in Vienna in 1874. He began to take violin lessons at the age of eight and almost immediately started composing. The only formal compositional training he received was from Alexander Zemlinsky.

In his early years he was very much under the influence of Brahms and Wagner, pushing conventional tonality to the limits. On realizing that further development of tonality was impossible, he started to explore a musical style devoid of any tonal centre. This eventually led to him inventing a twelve tone compositional technique. These musical developments were to have a lasting impact on music of the twentieth century.

Verklarte Nacht was one of Schoenberg's early compositions written during his late Romantic period. It can be seen as chamber music written in the style of a symphonic poem, rather than a piece arising from a classical form, such as sonata form. The inspiration for the composition was a poem by Richard Dehmel. The poem describes the conversation between a man and a woman who has just conceived an illegitimate child. Both music and poem have two main sections representing the woman and the man speaking. Linking these two sections are a prelude, interlude and postlude. The poem generally moves from dark to light. This happens in the music as well, with it starting in the minor, moving towards and concluding in the major.

The voice of the woman is also represented by the violins, and that of the man by the cellos. The harmonies are clearly inspired by Wagner

and Richard Strauss, yet Schoenberg experiments with harmonies previously considered forbidden. The thin scoring also turns away from Wagnerian grandeur, pre-empting the anti Romanticism of the decades to come.

Transfigured Night

Two people are walking through the bare cold grove; the moon accompanies them, they gaze at it. The moon courses above the high oaks; not a cloud obscures the light of heaven, into which the black treetops reach

A woman's voice speaks:

I am carrying a child and not of yours; I walk in sin beside you. I have deeply transgressed against myself. I no longer believe in happiness

and yet had a great yearning

for purposeful life, for the happiness

and responsibility of motherhood; so I dared

and shuddering, let my body be embraced by a strange man and have become pregnant from it.

Now life has taken its revenge, now that I have met you.

She walks with awkward step

She looks up: the moon accompanies them. Her dark glance is inundated with light

A man's voice speaks:

Let the child you have conceived be no burden to your soul

O see, how brightly the universe gleams! There is radiance on everything

You drift with me on a cold sea,

but a special warmth flickers

from you to me, from me to you

This will transfigure the other's child

you will bear it for me, from me:

you have brought radiance on me,

you have made me a child myself.

He clasps her around her strong hips their breath mingles in the breeze.

Two people go through the tall, clear night.

Richard Dehmel, from *Weib und Welt*

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