

Oxford Chamber Music Society

London Mozart Players String Ensemble

8th October 2017

Richard STRAUSS 1869-1949
***Capriccio*, opus 86. Prelude (sextet)**

By the time the septuagenarian Strauss came to compose his fifteenth (and last) opera in 1942, his disillusionment with the Nazis was total (the feeling was mutual!). *Capriccio* is set in eighteenth century Paris, and is an Enlightenment 'conversation piece' about the primacy of words or music in opera. This subtle, beautiful, ingenious, rapturous homage to European civilisation can be seen as pure escapism from the nightmare of war, or an act of defiance. The prelude is in three sections, the first two in theatrical performance played in the orchestra pit, the last, a recapitulation of the first, behind the scenes and accompanied by conversation, for it is being listened to and commented upon by characters on the stage. Strauss offered the Nazi Vienna *Gauleiter* and *Kultur* connoisseur Baldur von Schirach the first performance of this prelude in his house in exchange for his Jewish daughter-in-law's safety. The effortless contrapuntal writing looks forward to the elegiac *Metamorphosen* three years later.

Arnold SCHOENBERG 1874-1951
***Verklärte Nacht* / *Transfigured Night*, opus 4**

Schoenberg wrote *Verklärte Nacht* in three weeks (such explosive bursts of energy became nothing unusual) in September 1899, while holidaying from Vienna at the Lower Austrian village of Payerbach, near the present skiing resort of Semmering. He was accompanied by two Zemlinskys: Alexander, an inseparable composer friend, three years his senior, and his sister Mathilde (read on!). Some revision was undertaken back in Vienna, and the completed score dated 1st December. The work was quickly and enterprisingly published in Berlin, along with three sets of songs, some of them causing a Viennese to-do: *And since then the scandal has never stopped!* was the composer's rueful comment decades later. After suffering an early rejection for a blasphemous dissonance *Verklärte Nacht* had to wait until 18th March 1902 for its first performance, in the Small Hall of the Musikverein in Vienna, by the augmented Rosé Quartet. The simple printing of the piece's poetic source in the programme, as we do today, was prevented on grounds of indecency. The reception, let us say, was very mixed, but by then the composer had decamped to Berlin to be music director of the *Überbrettl* cabaret.

... a symphonic poem for string sextet

From the age of sixteen when he lost his shoemaker father, Schoenberg survived through his passion for music, learning unaided the violin and a three gulden cello; and, defying credulity – with the aid of a part-work manual from the newsagent – composition.

Zemlinsky bestowed the advantage of his conservatoire training where it helped, but the degree of knowledge Schoenberg acquired through his own effort is probably without parallel in music. Even the severe critic Eduard Hanslick (never mention him to the Perfect Wagnerite or you might be slain by an air *Nothing*) was apparently in awe when he heard a performance of his D major String Quartet, the only large-scale work he finished before *Verklärte Nacht*; published in 1966, we can now hear a most attractive brew of Brahms with Dvořák spicing, thickened just a little by prophetic counterpoint. He played his cello where and when he could, and became a proficient choir conductor, but paid his way – it happened that Schoenberg's miserable failure as a bank clerk was in step with that of the bank – by exploiting the growing operetta craze among the Viennese. The composers of these lucrative confections could make up tunes well enough, but needed help with orchestration and feeding the insatiable hunger for arrangements of the 'hits', engorged as much by the homely piano as by the Stadtpark bandstand; so enter Schoenberg, and Zemlinsky too. For example: an early reaction to *Transfigured Night* was to the effect that *someone had smeared the score of Tristan while it was still wet*; this from Richard Heuberger, composer of the 1898 rage-of-the-day *The Opera Ball*, which, as it happened, was orchestrated with the assistance of Zemlinsky, who also actually wrote the *potpourri* Overture for him. Schoenberg himself is reckoned to have produced several thousand pages of the stuff, but thanks to all this experience he was within a year or two of showing a mastery of the orchestra in *Gurrelieder* (not to mention the work's solo vocal and choral writing) and then in *Pelleas und Melisande*, to equal Mahler and Strauss. However, before these extraordinary works, of epic proportions, came *Verklärte Nacht*, a symphonic poem for string sextet – itself unheard of. But we need again to return to the beginning...

... *Eros and Thanatos*

... And the real beginning was an invasion of Eros into Schoenberg's life and music – now Sigmund Freud, it seemed, was turning morality upside down back in Vienna and everywhere else, what else could one call it? At Payerbach the presence of Mathilde Zemlinsky, four years younger than Schoenberg (and on the rebound from a collapsed affair), stirred him enough to think of the supreme music of longing and desire, *Tristan und Isolde*, to look at a rather notorious erotic poet, Richard Dehmel, and to write a work which plugged into the high voltage sexual charge crackling around intellectual Vienna, and indeed most of the coffee houses of Europe, with a deafening counterpoint of ideas and names (one of the focal coffee-houses in Vienna was aptly nicknamed 'Café Megalomania'). Berlin-based Dehmel, now largely forgotten beyond this Schoenberg association, was one the two most loved and loathed German language bards of the hour – the other was Stefan George, the leader of the national aesthetic movement (not quite forgotten, again because of Schoenberg who used his poetry in the Second String Quartet and *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*; and his 'reincarnation' was mercilessly pilloried in R W Fassbinder's 1976 film *Satan's Brew* – not good family viewing, by the way). *Verklärte Nacht* comes from an 1896 sequence called *Weib und Welt / Woman and World*, of which copies were ordered to be burned as obscene. This allows us to sense the degree of conservatism in the 1890s, accompanied as it was by proto-fascist groups and raging anti-Semitism. Dehmel openly attacked middle-class sexual morality, and precisely at the time

Schoenberg was composing his sextet was touring Europe with a married woman (significantly for the 'plot' of *Transfigured Night* originally meeting her when she was pregnant, but by her husband), having abandoned his own wife – albeit after an experimental 'threesome'. He did divorce and remarry, Ida Dehmel having a career of her own as a writer, ending in suicide as an elderly widow to forestall her deportation to a Nazi extermination camp. I will add that Schoenberg married Mathilde in 1901 when she was already carrying their first child. In 1908 he began painting lessons with the twenty-four year old self-taught expressionist artist Richard Gerstl, an extraordinary talent (as it happens, his portrait of the composer is superb, his laughing self-portrait terrifying); Mathilde fell in love and eloped with Gerstl. When, under considerable duress, she finally abandoned her lover, he stripped and hanged himself in front of the unyielding gaze of a mirror. The impact on Schoenberg was devastating. Eros and Thanatos, Love and Death.

... the transfiguring power of love

Verklärte Nacht, certainly in the context of German music, can be seen as a perfect end-of-century piece, as it brings together seamlessly the two dominating, and often warring, strands of several decades: the abstract, structural approach of Brahms, and the alliance between literature and music advocated by Liszt, Wagner and Richard Strauss. From *Don Juan* in 1888 to *Don Quixote* in 1897 Strauss had taken the Lisztian symphonic poem and had transformed orchestral music with his story-telling series; add Mahler (and then Schoenberg!) and nothing could ever be the same again. Perhaps in 1899 still uncertain of his ability with anything large-scale, Schoenberg chose instead the strikingly rich tones of the sextet as conjured by Brahms and Dvořák. But harmonically it was the unstable chromaticism of Wagner which suited his purpose – the evocation of the transfiguring power of love: a concept not unknown to Bayreuth pilgrims.

... fearful tremolos and a darkly agitated viola

Transfigured Night is in five linked sections, one half-hour movement. Schoenberg carried on with refining the notion of diversity within unity in *Pelleas und Melisande* (1902/3), the First, D minor, String Quartet (1904/5) and the First Chamber Symphony (1906), in which we are altogether in a different musical realm. The five sections helpfully correspond to the five stanzas of the poem, so for the 'action' you need to have the text by you. The whole is generated by (someone counted twelve) Wagner-style *leitmotifs* which are both intricately woven and developed in the time-honoured manner of Brahms. Even at a first hearing the working of these motifs will be clearly evident. The whole piece is a struggle between D minor and an ultimately 'transfiguring' D major (Thanatos and Eros, if you like), and the composer's task was to create a work which can be experienced as such, and as something somehow transcendental even if the listener is ignorant of the poem. The first section, then, sets the scene in the park. The couple walk in deep melancholy, the second viola and cello trudging heavily along in a series of gloomy Ds, with a slow descending scalar motif from the two other low strings. The darkness is relieved by a hint of glistening violin moonlight above the opaque trees. The music becomes agitated, and we turn from the landscape to the inner turmoil of the woman, with fearful tremolos and a darkly agitated

viola theme tensing to a painful climax. She nervously continues, settling to a narration of Wagnerian length, woven of motifs and their development. In a striking passage of tremolos and pizzicatos, Schoenberg gazes into his own future as a composer. The woman confesses that she has become intentionally pregnant by a stranger, and is now distraught as she is walking with a man she can love, and as the final outburst dies down the anguish is palpable: I find this astonishing music. The short third section is a development of the first – the heavy tread, the moonlight, now a glowing E major, and a sense of expectation sinking, in dread, to E flat minor. In a calm cello cantilena D major the man offers his love, and goes on to tell the woman that it will transfigure all, even the child within her, which will become his. The poem is dated, the sentiments maudlin, but, no doubt with more than half an eye on the movements of Mathilde, Schoenberg writes love music saturated with sensuality, passion and tender beauty, the centre of gravity having moved from the lower to the upper instruments so as to evoke the *glow around everything*. In a particularly striking passage the muted F sharp minor harmonics wrapped with rapid semiquavers *express the beauty of the moonlight* (Schoenberg). The music moves seamlessly to the fifth section, which mirrors the first – the *lofty bright night* gently bringing the piece to a close. Schoenberg might have been miffed that his first major effort would bring in royalties exceeding anything else he had written, but that did not stop him adding to them handsomely by making an arrangement for string orchestra in 1917, and revising it in 1943. Those who love the work tend to insist that the original sextet version is the one to listen to.

INTERVAL

Piotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY 1840-1893

Souvenir de Florence, opus 70

1. *Allegro con spirito*
2. *Adagio cantabile con moto*
3. *Allegretto moderato*
4. *Allegro vivace*

There is a certain piquancy in that *Souvenir de Florence* is usually played by string orchestra, although Tchaikovsky only sanctioned it through his private frustration: *I constantly feel as though... I am in fact writing for the orchestra and just rearranging it for six string instruments*, he wrote to the pianist Alexander Ziloti. But, although he grumbled in similar vein to brother Modest, work went very quickly, taking less than a month during June/July 1890. It was revised before its publication in 1892, and given its first performance in St Petersburg in December that year with an ensemble led by the great Leopold Auer. Why a sextet? Not sure of this, although Tchaikovsky would certainly have known the sextets of Brahms and Dvořák. The only previous string sextet I know of by a Russian was from Alexander Borodin, which was unpublished (indeed only the first two movements survive – recommended listening). A commission from the St Petersburg Chamber Society had been on the table for a year or two, and composing it when he did was prompted by the illness of his patron, Nadezhda von Meck (whom he was mysteriously forbidden to meet): *I know you love chamber music and I am glad you will be able to hear my sextet ... I wrote it with the*

greatest enthusiasm and with the least exertion [a little white lie – and she had her own music salon]. And what about Florence? *Souvenir de Florence* was originally the work's subtitle, and maybe a 'come-on' by the publisher. For three months earlier in 1890 Tchaikovsky had indeed been in Florence, one of his favourite cities, mainly working on the Pushkin opera *The Queen of Spades*. Some sketches were also made for the sextet during that stay (though some of the ideas for the first movement go back to 1887). On the completion of the opera back in Petersburg, he wrote to his cousin: *Now I am terribly, indescribably tired!!!, and what do I need to get me back to normal? To enjoy myself, to go on the binge? Not at all! I am going to start straight away on a large new work, but of a completely different kind; a string sextet*. This enthusiasm, as you will hear, remained undiminished in the creation of a happy and exhilarating work, even 'over the top', whatever it might have to do with Florence.

... a climax of symphonic expansiveness

The energetic D minor theme which opens the work bounds along with unfettered confidence, to be countered by the first of the sextet's two 'serenades' (dare I say Italianate?), with their always attendant pizzicato plucking. Although there is a loosely binding sonata structure, these two themes seem to be in constant development, bounding and feeding off each other, even with some fugal writing thrown into the mix. The second subject begins the coda, which – well, wait for it! The *Andante cantabile* movement opens with a short introduction to our second serenade, a most beguiling duet of violin and cello with plucked accompaniment – perhaps this was a real *Souvenir de Florence*. The music slowly rises to a throbbing climax before dying away (pure Tchaikovsky – and what a melodist). The music halts – but it isn't over. There is now a strange interlude of shimmering music, played with the tips of the bows. The serenade resumes on the cello, again all moving towards a climax of symphonic expansiveness, then fading into the distance. The outer sections of the 'scherzo' have an earthly vigour which borders on the downright dramatic; they encase a short anticipation of *The Nutcracker*. If you don't know this piece, hold on to your hats for the finale. It is a rondo with two alternating – and contrasting – themes, very folksy (and, I would say, very Russian). You don't need my hoary pedantry, not for this – but just watch those hats...

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