

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
Programme Notes Online

Sunday 18 May 2014 2.30pm

Petrenko's Prokofiev

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897) **Piano Concerto No.2 in B flat, Op.83**

Allegro non troppo
Allegro appassionato
Andante
Allegretto grazioso

Brahms began sketching his Second Piano Concerto in 1878, then put it to one side while he finished work on his Violin Concerto. He eventually completed it in July 1881 and, after a semi-private run-through with the orchestra at the ducal court at Meiningen (about 80 miles north-east of Frankfurt), he gave the first public performance with the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra in November.

Not for the first time, he announced the completion of a new work in apparently misleading terms. He wrote to his friend Elisabeth von Herzogenberg telling her he had produced "a quite little piano concerto with a quite pleasant little scherzo." To another friend, Theodore Billroth, he sent a copy of the score with the words "I am sending you a few small piano pieces." This is, in fact, the longest of Brahms's four concertos, a huge work of symphonic scope and imposing dimensions. But it is also contains passages which have an intimate quality often compared to chamber music, and ends with the most relaxed and light-hearted of his finales. It is a work as full of contradictions as the man himself.

First movement

That feeling of intimacy is established right at the start, in a dialogue between the piano and a solo horn. But the piano soon introduces a more strenuous tone, in an energetic solo passage which is the nearest thing in the concerto to a formally distinct solo cadenza. It leads to the first big orchestral entry, where the opening theme takes on an unexpectedly heroic dimension. In a few moments and with a minimum of fuss Brahms has set out the concerto's two emotional poles.

Second movement

Between the first movement and the *andante*, he instinctively felt, an additional movement was needed to introduce an element of dramatic tension which, for all the first movement's big-boned rhetoric, the concerto would otherwise have lacked. Hence the addition of the 'quite pleasant little scherzo' to the usual three-movement concerto design. Again, Brahms's words are intended to lead us up the garden path. Reworking material from a movement originally sketched for the Violin Concerto, this is as tense and stormy as anything he wrote, propelled by an urgent rhythmic drive. In this context the chiming celebration of the central section's new theme takes on a quality amounting to something like defiance.

Third movement

Now the concerto has earned the third movement's tranquillity. A solo cello has a role even more prominent than that of the solo horn in the first movement, leading off with the serene song-like opening melody. The piano never has this theme in its original form. Instead it weaves delicate figuration around it, often playing an accompanying role to the orchestra. A more animated central passage subsides as quickly as it arises, and the movement ends in a mood of radiant tenderness.

Fourth movement

The last movement is Brahms at his most easy-going and, as usual when he wanted to end a work in a relaxed, light-hearted frame of mind, it evokes the Hungarian gypsy style he so much enjoyed. Though here it is rather more sublimated than in other similar movements, it is not far below the surface, animating this engagingly fresh and sparkling piece.

The score of the Second Piano Concerto is dedicated to Eduard Marxsen (1806-87), a pianist and composer with whom Brahms studied in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Brahms was, by now, an established figure in his late forties. But he was always ruthlessly self-critical, and there is something touching in the thought that only now does he feel that he has produced something he can honourably dedicate to his former teacher.

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SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953) **Symphony No.6 in E-flat minor, Op.111**

Allegro moderato

Largo

Vivace

The triumphant premiere of Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony in January 1945 was one of its composer's greatest successes. For both the Soviet public and the authorities the work successfully captured the indomitable spirit of patriotic defiance that was by then well on the way to defeating the Nazi menace. Just a few days after its first performance, however, Prokofiev blacked out, fell down a flight of stairs and suffered concussion, the apparent cause being undiagnosed high blood pressure.

After four months recovering in a sanatorium outside Moscow, Prokofiev was released by his doctors, though for a while work proved beyond him. During the second half of 1945, however, just as the war was ending, he returned to sketches he had made the year before for a symphony in E-flat minor. Eventually, in the following spring at the village of Nikolina Gora, west of Moscow, he completed his Sixth Symphony, a work he had fully orchestrated by early 1947.

Whereas Prokofiev had described his Fifth Symphony as a "hymn to free and happy Man, to his mighty powers, his pure and noble spirit", the Sixth was an altogether more complex and emotionally nuanced matter. With the war now over, it was as if the work was intended to address the untold emotional and psychological damage that had been inflicted during that terrible conflict. As Prokofiev told his biographer

Israel Nestyev, “Now we are rejoicing in our great victory, but each of us has wounds which cannot be healed. One man’s loved ones have perished, another has lost his health. This must not be forgotten.”

The symphony was first performed by the conductor Eugene Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic on October 11, 1947, and when the work was repeated that December in Moscow, *Pravda* reported that the audience there was “very appreciative”. However, two months later, Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s philistine artistic apparatchik, singled out the Sixth Symphony for particular censure when its creator, along with Shostakovich, Khachaturian and other Soviet composers, were denounced for their alleged “formalist perversions and un-democratic tendencies” during the infamous ‘Zhdanov Decree’. According to Zhdanov, Prokofiev still believes in ‘innovation for innovation’s sake.’ He has an artistic snobbishness, a false fear of being commonplace and ordinary. It is curious to observe the struggle of the two Prokofievs in a work like his Sixth Symphony. Here the melodious, harmonious Prokofiev is often attacked, without provocation, by the other, storming Prokofiev.

Such ‘musical crimes’ meant the work was not heard again in the Soviet Union for many years. Nevertheless, it is now rightly understood, alongside Prokofiev’s own Fifth Symphony and Shostakovich’s Seventh and Eighth as one of the greatest and most profound of Soviet ‘war symphonies’.

First movement

Prokofiev himself described the opening movement as “agitated in character, lyrical at times, austere at others.” It opens with a series of gruff chords in the brass that are almost spat out contemptuously. A swaying melody then emerges on muted violins and violas but as it passes from section to section of the orchestra it remains strangely unsettled and directionless. Eventually a second theme (marked in the score ‘smoothly and dreamily’ and rather plaintive in character) is introduced by the oboes, though the relative calm of this section is soon shattered by a strange little clarinet trill and a great upward rush of sound in the violins. The first theme makes a brief reappearance, though bassoons and piano soon instigate an insistently repeated rhythm which forms the basis of an increasingly strident march. The march eventually reaches a grim, Mahlerian climax with grotesque swells of sound left behind in its tracks. A French horn solo based on the second theme heralds a brief oasis of peace, but the march returns and again builds to a climax before the music winds down to a state of uneasy calm.

Second movement

The extensive central slow movement begins with dissonant, shrill outburst of sound, though this eventually yields to a lyrical, sweeping theme given by trumpet and first violins (in fact, the theme would not sound out of place in Prokofiev’s popular ballet score *Romeo and Juliet*). Another lyrical theme (marked ‘molto espressivo’ – very expressive) is then introduced by the cellos. The sounds of war do impinge upon the scene but tranquillity is restored in the form of a glowing French horn serenade. Lyricism thereafter largely holds sway until a return of the shrill opening outburst brings a sobering reality check to proceedings (here, we must assume, is an example of Zhdanov’s “melodious, harmonious Prokofiev” seemingly being assaulted by “the other, storming Prokofiev”). The movement ends quietly, if ambiguously.

Third movement

On the surface at least, the finale (a “rollicking, athletically vigorous Vivace”, as Prokofiev’s biographer Nestyev described it) evinces just the mood of triumph and optimism of which Zhdanov would have approved. Its cheerful rondo theme is heard several times, interspersed by a number of no less jovial episodes. However, a pounding rhythm, first heard low in the bass instruments and timpani, increasingly makes its presence felt (Prokofiev explicitly related the rhythm to the forces of evil). Eventually, in a quite astonishing coda, Prokofiev surely evokes those war-induced “wounds which cannot be healed”. Here the plaintive oboe theme from the first movement returns before (even more unexpectedly) a series of gratingly dissonant chords scream out as if in terror. The symphony having apparently imploded, the pounding rhythm reappears, its malevolent nature now fully revealed, and the work ends on a single chord of E-flat major – the traditionally heroic key promised by the finale’s opening, but one by now strangely incongruous. All this is certainly not “commonplace and ordinary” as Zhdanov would rather it had been, but it is all the more emotionally compelling for it.

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