

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Zigeunerleben, Op.29 No.3

Schumann had originally hoped to become a concert pianist, but these hopes were dashed in his early twenties when he permanently injured his hand, so he redirected his energies to composing and music criticism. From childhood he had loved literature and music almost equally, and he combined these two loves even in some of his purely instrumental music by using poetry and drama as a starting point and inspiration for his compositions.

In the mid-19th century, an idealised fantasy of gypsy life was very much in vogue; we need only think of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (1853), Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl* (1843) Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) and Brahms' *Zigeunerlieder* (1887).

Schumann's fascination with gypsies grew out of his encounter with the "gypsy poems" of Emanuel Geibel (1815-1884). The *Drei Gedichte (Three Poems)*, Op. 29, set words written especially for Schumann by Geibel and date from 1840, Schumann's "Year of Song" which also saw the creation of *Dichterliebe* (which was performed as part of an RCS concert last March), *Frauenliebe und -leben*, and the two *Liederkreis*. The three pieces of Op.29 were written originally for solo voices or small ensemble. The first, *Ländliches Lied*, is a lively folk-like song for soprano duet; the second, *Lied In meinem Garten die Nelken* is a sad, slow lyrical soprano trio. By far the best-known is the third, tonight's piece, *Zigeunerleben*. Schumann portrays in music Geibel's colourful description of a gypsy campfire. The piece begins with the mysterious quiet of woods filled with shadows and whispering branches, and then rising vocal lines depict the flames as they flare up to illumine the trees. The close of the piece captures the nomadic romanticism of gypsy life with the final line, "The figures depart - who is to say where to?"

CHARLES VILLIERS STANFORD (1852-1924)

The Bluebird, Op.119 No.3

Like Saint-Saëns, Stanford was something of a child prodigy, composing his first song at the age of four and giving a full-length piano recital at 9. He was born and educated in Dublin, but in 1870 entered Queen's College, Cambridge as a choral scholar. He continued his studies in Germany and wrote his first symphony aged 23 in 1875. On his return to England, his reputation continued to increase, and when the Royal College of Music was opened in 1883 he became its first professor of composition. He wrote a large amount of music (including seven symphonies and ten operas) much of which was very popular in the late 19th century, but only his church music has really survived to the present time. His greatest importance is perhaps as a teacher. Among many others, he taught Vaughan Williams, Holst, Ireland, Bridge, Bliss, Howells and Moeran.

Tonight's piece is a comparatively late work, from *Eight Partsongs Op.119* for unaccompanied chorus to words by Mary E. Coleridge, written in 1910. *The Blue Bird* is one of the loveliest partsongs in the English repertoire. The altos, tenors and basses convey the stillness of the water and the shimmering effects of light whilst the sopranos' ecstatic line soars above it like the flight of the bluebird, separate but at one with its surroundings. The final chord hovers in the air as the bluebird passes out of sight.

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Le carnaval des animaux (The Carnival of the Animals)

It is one of the oddities of music that during his lifetime Saint-Saëns forbade performances of what is now his most popular work. He was worried that so frivolous a piece would damage his reputation as a serious composer, and would not allow its publication or public performance until after his death, 35 years after its composition. Saint-Saëns was one of the most remarkable of all musical prodigies, composing his first piano piece at the age of four, and giving his first concert as a pianist, accompanying a Beethoven violin sonata, aged five. He made his formal debut as a pianist at the Salle Pleyel in Paris aged 10, playing piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. As an encore he offered to play any of the Beethoven sonatas from memory. The centre of his interest soon became composition, however, and he had written three symphonies by the age of 18. The decade from the mid 1870s to the mid 1880s saw him at his peak as a composer, composing the 3rd "Organ" Symphony, the opera *Samson et Dalila* and tonight's work, composed whilst he was on holiday in Austria in 1886.

The Carnival of the Animals consists of 14 short movements:

I - *Introduction et marche royale du lion* (Introduction and Royal March of the Lion)

An expectant introduction leads to a very formal, regal march, befitting the King of the Jungle.

II - *Poules et coqs* (Hens and Cocks)

The music mimics the scratching hens pecking at the ground, with a hint of the crowing of the cock half way through.

III - *Hémiones (animaux véloces)* (Wild Asses; quick animals)

Contrary to English expectations, these wild asses are far from stubborn, dull creatures. These are Tibetan asses, noted for their speed and agility - qualities required also from the pianists at this point!

IV - *Tortues* (Tortoises)

One of the many delightful musical jokes which abound in this piece is to be found here. After a series of throbbing triplets, we hear a smooth, slow-motion performance of the "Galop infernal" from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, often called the Can-can.

V - *L'éléphant* (The Elephant)

This perfect caricature of the elephant, marked *allegro pomposo*, contains more of Saint-Saëns' sly musical references. Here he quotes the "Dance of the Sylphs" from Berlioz' *Damnation of Faust* and a snatch of the scherzo from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* music, both of which depict fairies.

VI - *Kangourous* (Kangaroos)

The staccato fifths with their grace notes represent the hopping of these animals.

VII - *Aquarium*

Here Saint-Saëns moves away from the simply jokey to give us an exquisite little tone poem depicting the delicate movement of the fish in the dimly-lit waters of the aquarium.

VIII - *Personnages à longues oreilles* (Characters with Long Ears)

As the music makes clear, the "personnages" here are donkeys. It may well be that Saint-Saëns is having a little dig at music critics; certainly this braying music recurs right at the end of the last movement.

IX - *Le coucou au fond des bois* (The cuckoo in the depths of the woods)

In this atmospheric movement, the quiet, sonorous chords paint the shady

wood, while the cuckoo's calls seem almost to be on another plane.

X - *Volière* (Aviary)

There follows a picture of very different birds, who trill joyously against a rustling background.

XI - *Pianistes* (Pianists)

It is not an unreasonable question to ask how pianists count as animals, but here we have beginners practising their scales in parallel and contrary motion and trills in thirds, and many a piano teacher must view this as akin to animal training. Perhaps the peremptory chords between the repetitions represent the bored and irritable teacher.

XII - *Fossiles* (Fossils)

This is a movement showing Saint-Saëns at his jokey best. Not only does the staccato, xylophone sound of the bones prefigure by 45 years the sort of musical onomatopoeia we find in "Tom and Jerry", but Saint-Saëns includes quotations from out-of-date musical fossils: "Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman" (known in Britain as "Twinkle, twinkle, little star") "Au clair de la lune" and "Una voce poco fà" from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. Saint-Saëns evidently felt these aged tunes were so well-known that they had become museum fossils, worthy only of a place among dinosaur bones and stuffed animals.

XIII - *Le cygne* (The Swan)

This, the most famous of the movements, is three minutes of simple perfection. The rippling arpeggios which begin it bring before our eyes the gentle flow of the river, and the inspired melody is as fine a piece of characterisation in music as one could find. This *is* a swan transmuted into sound. The composer obviously knew he had written something special, as this was the only movement he allowed to be published in his lifetime.

XIV - *Finale*

The style of this rip-roaring movement is very like that of the "Galop infernal" which Saint-Saëns subverted so comically in the "Tortoises" movement. Its reminiscences of earlier movements bring the whole piece to a riotous close - and don't miss the hee-haws of the donkeys (or should that be critics?) just before the very end, where the composer obliterates them with the final C major chords.

CARL ORFF (1895-1982)

Carmina Burana

Millions of people who have never heard of Carl Orff know the opening chorus, "O fortuna", of *Carmina Burana*. Countless uses in adverts and horror films have made this chorus second only to the *Hallelujah Chorus* in popular recognition. The title, which means "Songs of Benediktbeuern", came from a collection gleaned from medieval manuscripts in low Latin and low German put together at the monastery of that name in southern Bavaria during the 13th century which was published in 1847. Although compiled at a monastery, the 200 or so poems and songs could hardly be described as conventionally religious, many dealing with what one could call the pleasures of the flesh, as well as showing a distinctly un-Christian belief in the power of the goddess of Fortune.

Carl Orff, who was born in 1895 in Munich, only a few kilometres from Benediktbeuern, came across the 1847 publication in 1935 and conceived the idea of using texts from it for a dramatic cantata. Orff, possibly influenced by Wagner's theory of the "gesamtkunstwerk" (total art work), was fascinated by the concept of

“total theatre” where words, music, movement and setting would combine to create an overwhelming effect. *Carmina Burana* was intended for theatrical performance, with mimed scenes interpolated between the musical numbers, and it was first staged in this way in Frankfurt in 1937, gaining tremendous popularity almost immediately. Given this date, it is perhaps not surprising that its first performance outside Germany was in Italy, at La Scala in 1942. Orff’s relationship with the Nazi party is highly controversial. His behaviour at the time would seem to indicate that he was at the very least a fellow traveller, but his testimony after the war was convincing enough to gain him a swift de-Nazification. Whatever Orff’s intentions, *Carmina Burana* has become almost exclusively a concert work, and, despite a large number of compositions which include two companion cantatas (*Catulli Carmina* and *Il Trionfo di Afrodite*) and six operas, it is difficult not to see Orff now as a “one work composer”, albeit one of the most widely-loved works in the whole repertoire. The music of the German world in the inter-war period was essentially dominated by the opposing camps of the last-ditch romantics (as exemplified by Richard Strauss, Pfitzner, and Zemlinsky) and the Second Viennese School of Schönberg, Berg and Webern. Orff, however, wanted to communicate directly with his audience, and so had no use for the extreme complexity of either of these schools. His music is closer in style to the neo-classic works of Stravinsky, such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Les Noces*, though without the ironic detachment of the Russian. In *Carmina Burana* he attempted neither post-tonal modernity, nor to recreate a medieval sound world, but to conjure a feeling of the immediacy of the period by the most direct means of simple melody (often based on folksong and plainsong) and harmony and driving rhythm, but used with considerable sophistication.

The opening chorus provides a sort of prologue and epilogue, then the cantata is divided into three sections: part one is entitled “In Spring” (numbers 3-5) and “In the Meadow” (4-10), part two is “In the Tavern” (11-14) and part three is “The Court of Love” (15-24). There is no “story” to the cantata, which is a series of vivid pieces of characterisation: the awesome weight of heartless fortune; the uncomplicated joy of spring; the roistering sleaziness of the varied inhabitants of the tavern and the unhappiness they can cause; the ecstatic excitement of love. All these are caught in intensely memorable music.

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