

Schicksalslied (Song of Destiny), Op. 54

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Brahms composed the *Schicksalslied* for chorus and orchestra in 1871. It is a setting of a poem by Hölderlin and in the form of the increasingly popular secular cantata. Reading the poem and then performing or listening to Brahms' setting of it, immediately shows a tension between the text and the music. Brahms' humanist agnosticism, with its serenity and hope, is shown in music that changes the dark fatalism of the poem.

The work is in three parts. The long prelude in the tranquil key of E^b major, leads to the opening verse of the poem, describing the felicity of the gods on Mount Olympus in a chorus full of sleek legato phrases that are a hallmark of so much of Brahms' writing. Suddenly it changes into a stormy agitated section in C minor in which the choir bewails the helpless state of Man, doomed to wander blindly until being hurled into a dark abyss.

Here the poem ends, but Brahms is not content with a stark contrast and no apparent resolution. The music slides into C major, a key of light, and repeats the celestial prelude in full with sustained chords from the choir that return to a mood of calm – and of hope.

Symphony no. 100 in G major (Military) Te Deum in C major (Marie Therese)

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Both of the works by Haydn come from the last years of his life. The Symphony is part of a set composed in London for the impresario Salomon and was first performed at the Hanover Square Rooms in 1794. By this time, Haydn was famous for his instrumental and orchestral music, but when he returned to Vienna a year later he turned to choral music, writing his great choral works, *The Creation*, *The Seasons*, six Masses and the *Te Deum*.

The Empress Marie Therese, wife of Franz I of Austria, was a great admirer of Haydn's music. She loved singing and they frequently performed together at Hofberg, the Imperial palace in Vienna. Marie Therese asked Haydn several times to compose some church music for her, but his patron Prince Esterhazy II was reluctant for Haydn to compose music for anyone but himself. Eventually, Haydn responded to her demands and the *Te Deum* was composed at some time between 1798 and 1799.

It is scored for a large orchestra, has no soloists and lasts only about ten minutes, but the effect of it is overwhelming. Set in the bright key of C major, it makes much use of trumpets and drums, the instruments of festivity. The opening unison melody is based on Plainsong Tone VIII, which Haydn would have sung frequently as a chorister, and has the same joyful mood as *The heavens are telling* from *The Creation*. Then it moves briefly to the dark C minor and a slower tempo with chromatic harmony for the centre section, *Te ergo quaesumus - We therefore pray thee help thy servants whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood*. It returns to brightness and sheer joy for the description of eternal glory in heaven and the confident final section: *O Lord in thee have I trusted. Let me never be confounded*.

Trumpets and percussion also feature in the 100th Symphony. The title, *Military*, explains itself when in the second movement, a battery of *Turkish percussion* (bass drum, cymbals and triangle) crash in triumphantly. This combination of instruments was very popular at the time: the Turks had been defeated a century earlier and Europeans could view their former enemies in a different light. Haydn also included two clarinets: new instruments that Salomon had acquired during his visit.

The Symphony opens with an exquisite slow introduction followed by a spirited Allegro, beginning with a solo flute and the oboes and leading to a development section with some of his richest and dramatic writing.

The following Allegretto's folk-like theme has a solemn brightness and steady march rhythm, which gives a feeling of ritual, not unlike the Masonic music in Mozart's *Zauberflöte*. The percussion is introduced in a minor episode and the movement ends with a dramatic trumpet signal.

The third movement has no feeling of scherzo, as in Haydn's other late symphonies, but it is a stately minuet of the traditional style. The Presto finale rushes by with huge momentum. In a stroke of genius, Haydn reintroduces the percussion during the movement's closing moments, creating a sense of balance between the finale and the first two movements and bringing it to a thrilling conclusion.

Lobgesang (Hymn of Praise), Op. 52

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Mendelssohn's Symphony no 2 in Bb major is usually known as *Hymn of Praise* in Britain and sung in English without its orchestral movements. This evening, it is being performed in its entirety and in the original German.

Mendelssohn described *Lobgesang* as a 'symphonic cantata', possibly to avoid comparisons with Beethoven's ninth symphony, but more probably because it combines symphonic writing with the elements of a cantata. Like Beethoven's ninth symphony it consists of three orchestral movements with a choral finale, but there the similarity ends. The orchestral writing is not a big symphonic drama leading to a choral climax, but a short three-movement introduction, followed by a large self-contained cantata, for two sopranos, tenor and chorus. It follows J.S. Bach's pattern of setting Biblical texts in recitatives, arias, and choruses, including fugues and chorales in his Passions and cantatas.

Mendelssohn wrote it in 1840, for the Gutenberg Festival in Leipzig to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the invention of movable type by Johannes Gutenberg. He regarded the invention of printing, as bringing knowledge and culture to ordinary people: like a light shining in the darkness of ignorance. He illustrates this in the work's dramatic climax (nos 6-8) when the tenor recitative asks, *Watchman is the night soon over?* followed by the chorus, *The night is passed... let us put aside the works of darkness and take up the weapons of light* in which Mendelssohn depicts the gradual rising from the darkness into light. Then, like prisoners released, comes the hymn of praise, *Now thank we all our God* with the final duet and chorus.

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