



# USA MUSIC APPRECIATION GROUP



12<sup>th</sup> NEWSLETTER – September/October 2009

## **Romantic Piano Concertos**

Keith began the session by reviewing lists of the most popular romantic piano concertos, which are: Rachmaninov 2 and 3, Beethoven 5, Tchaikovsky 1, Chopin 1 and 2, Shostakovich 2, Grieg and Brahms 2. However, there is an abundance of fine music for piano and orchestra that is rarely heard. One example is Tchaikovsky's 2<sup>nd</sup> Piano Concerto, which was first performed in 1881. Keith played extracts from the first movement, and then the whole of the second and third movements. The second movement is remarkable for the contributions of solo violin and solo cello: the violin even has a cadenza of its own!

Brian then continued with a short biography of Rachmaninov and the emotional background to the composition of his Second Piano Concerto which has become one of the most popular Piano Concertos of all time. It was brought to the attention of the public generally when it was used as a background the Noel Coward's film *Brief Encounter*. This concerto was at the top of the Classic FM Hall of Fame list for a few years, before being displaced by Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending*.



## **The Land Without Music?**

*Das Land ohne Musik* is the title of a book by a scholar called Oskar Adolf Hermann Schmitz, first published in Germany in 1904. His basic argument was that "The English are the only cultured nation without its own music (except street music)".

Boris Johnson sprang to the defence of our composers in an article in the *Daily Telegraph*. "Parry, Holst and Elgar to you Schmitz" was the headline! "How have we reacted to these teutonic assaults, my friends? I am afraid we have responded with more or less complete acquiescence. We cough. We shuffle and we hang our heads."

Boris knows a thing or two about English music, having been the President of the English Music Festival prior to taking on Mr Livingstone. He chose his headline wisely. Even before Schmitz issued his insult, Elgar had achieved two major successes in Germany. About 20 years before that, Parry had become the first major English voice in classical music since Purcell. And several pupils of Parry, including Holst and Vaughan Williams, continued the English musical renaissance. As Boris put it "My proposition is that England overtook Germany, in music, at almost the moment that Schmitz was composing his insult!" Find out more about Sir Hubert Parry at our forthcoming session in November.



## **Music Basics**

At our September session, we had a brief discussion on whether members would like to have occasional sessions on music basics (tempo, keys etc). There did not seem to be a demand for dedicated sessions, so we will try to cover such topics as and when they crop up in the music that we play, and in occasional items in this newsletter (the first of which is below).

We also asked how many of our members can read music, and hence can benefit from the extracts from musical scores that we put on the screen. If anyone would like an introduction on how to read a musical score, please let us know. We would be happy to arrange a couple of separate get-togethers to cover this topic.

### ***Allegro ma non con Hydragas***

At our first session, Keith remarked about the widely varying tempos (speeds) that different conductors have used for *Nimrod (Enigma Variations)*, and wondered what Elgar would have thought about the extremely slow and rather fast versions.

Most classical music works have instructions at the top about the tempo that the composer intended. There are two ways to indicate tempo:

1. by metronome marks (e.g.  $\theta = 70$ , meaning 70 crotchet beats per minute); and,
2. less precisely, by verbal instructions, conventionally (but not exclusively) in Italian. The main terms used are:

- *adagio* - slow. Also *adagietto* - not quite as slow as *adagio* (e.g. 4<sup>th</sup> movement of Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony)
- *andante* - quite slow. Also *andantino* – slightly quicker than *andante*.
- *allegro* – nothing to do with a certain Austin of the 1970s! This means fast. Perhaps they should have called it the Austin *Allegretto* - moderately fast.
- *presto* - very fast.

If there is no metronome mark, the exact speed is open to interpretation. Even if there is a metronome mark, conductors might consider external factors: for example the size and acoustics of a hall (a large or reverberant hall may require a slower tempo to ensure clarity).

Some conductors just ignore metronome marks. When conducting the *Marcia funebre* of the 'Eroica' Symphony, Toscanini took about half as long and Beecham about a third as long again as Beethoven's metronome mark indicates. Wagner complained in his essay on conducting of the wildly incorrect tempos at which some conductors took his Tannhäuser overture.

Nobody should be in doubt about what Elgar intended. We have Elgar's own recordings of the work as guidance as well as his precise instructions *Adagio*  $\theta = 52$ .

## Future Sessions

Please note that due to an operation in late October when Brian hopes to have a “new” right knee, we have had to reschedule the next two sessions (i.e. swap them around).

Date	Provisional Programme
15 October	♪ Military and Civil Brass Band music, presented by two musicians who were previously in the Royal Horse Guards Mounted Band, one of whom was a ceremonial State Trumpeter, and the other a fine musician, who is still playing a number of brass instruments (coordinated by Brian)
19 November	♪ Sir Hubert Parry – his life and music part 1 (Keith) ♪ “Diverse Selections” including music by Arban, Mozart, Oscar Peterson and Ladysmith Black Mambazo (Wendy, Angela, Colin, Liz)
17 December	♪ Sibelius (Jay) ♪ Christmas music
21 Jan 2010	♪ Max Bruch (Keith) ♪ The Clarinet from Baroque to modern music, including Jazz (Brian)
18 Feb	♪ Schubert (Wendy) ♪ other topic(s) to be advised in due course

Please note the above dates in your diary. We look forward to seeing you all at (or soon after) 9.45am on 15 October.

## Concerts

Local concerts in the next few weeks include:

- ♪ Tasmin Little (violin) at Beaconsfield, 7.45 on 24<sup>th</sup> October: Bach, Bartok, Patterson, Ysaye
- ♪ Amersham Festival. (1) 8pm on 30<sup>th</sup> October: Bach and Mozart. (2) 3pm on 31<sup>st</sup> October: Purcell, Schumann, Faure, Poulenc, Tosti, Gershwin. (3) 8pm on 27<sup>th</sup> November: Purcell, Bach, Handel
- ♪ Misbourne Symphony Orchestra at Amersham, 7.45 on 14<sup>th</sup> November: Vaughan Williams, Beethoven, film scores by Alfred Newman and John Williams
- ♪ London Bridge Ensemble at Beaconsfield, 7.45 on 28<sup>th</sup> November: Bridge, Vaughan Williams, Brahms

Contact the Theatre Group if you would like to attend the Valentine’s Day concert by the Philharmonia Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall (Sun 14 Feb 2010 at 3pm). This includes music by Tchaikovsky, Bruch, Khachaturian, Dvorak and Bizet.

Happy listening!

Brian (484099) and Keith (891507)

P.S. Don’t forget that you can view what we have done at previous sessions at our web site:  
<http://www.marlowu3a.org.uk/id12.html>