

Understanding Classical Music Group

At the June meeting the group took a break from reviewing the works of various composers and instead reviewed two musical instruments – firstly the horn and secondly the human voice.

To study the use of the horn in classical music the group listened to a BBC programme entitled 'The horn in Romantic Music'. The programme began by introducing the horn, relating its history and issues when being played. The modern instrument developed from the simple hunting horn. Eventually valves were added to improve the range of the instrument but this still left some upper harmonics out of tune; it is thus necessary for the horn player to modify the note by placing his hand within the bell of the instrument. These points were illustrated by one of the players from the orchestra. The effect of the horn in a number of romantic pieces was then considered. In the nocturne from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* the velvety tone of the horn is used to suggest night and peaceful rest in a woodland glade. In Weber's overture to *Der Freischutz* the horns call to one another suggesting a vastness of space. Similarly, in Brahms' first symphony (last movement) the horns seem to evoke a call across space, perhaps an Alpine valley. All of the examples cited were fully illustrated by the orchestra.

In the second part of the meeting the group studied the use of the unaccompanied human voice to produce music. 'A Capella' is the term used to describe this genre of music. The term translates as 'in the manner of the chapel' and was introduced in the Baroque era to differentiate between the Baroque trend to add instrumental accompaniment to religious music and the earlier form of religious music using unaccompanied human voices. Monophonic plainsong (eg Gregorian chant) is the earliest form of western A Capella music. Monophonic plainsong developed into polyphonic form by the 1600s (eg Allegri 'Miserere'). In the Renaissance period Monteverdi extended polyphonic form to secular music (eg the Madrigals). The Eastern Orthodox Church developed its own form of plainsong which is still prevalent today. Good examples of Russian Orthodox A Capella music are the late 19th century/early 20th century pieces composed by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov for the Russian Orthodox Liturgy. A Capella pieces continue to be composed; eg. Barber, 'Agnus Dei' (1967); Tavener, 'Song for Athene' (1993); Morten Laridsen, 'O Magnum Mysterium' (1994).

Our next meeting will be on **Friday 26th July** 10.00am at **STARTFORTH SCHOOL** when the subject will be the composer Johannes Brahms and his music.

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