

## UNDERSTANDING CLASSICAL MUSIC – Report by Ian Royston

This month we progressed to the fourth part of Howard Goodall's Story of classical music entitled "The Age of Tragedy" where we looked at music in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This was an age when art was dominated by themes of Death Immortality and Fate; Goodall contends that almost classical music after 1850 had its roots in tragedy and destiny. Key amongst this was Hector Berlioz's 'Symphonie Fantastique', inspired by the Faust legend and full of dark themes. Against this the period was the heyday of Italian opera with Giuseppe Verdi alone producing 28 operas in 54 years but though much of his repertoire produced hummable tunes, his output became increasingly deeper, perhaps culminating in La Traviata, an opera based on the tragic tale of Alexandre Dumas's La Dame aux Camellias. Such sombre, foreboding themes remain with us today, reflected in the film tunes of the superhero genre.

Liszt provided many innovations of the era as well as incredible, virtually unplayable piano music and became probably classical music's first international star. Liszt's playing was said to be so frantic that it led to the development of the stronger, iron-framed piano.

The biggest and undoubtedly the loudest noise of the period however was Richard Wagner. Grand, heavy music based on classical historic themes of ancient gods and superheroes on an earlier age, played to large audiences and provided by imposing operatic stars.

In the second part of this month's meeting we joined Simon Callow exploring more recent music of England, focusing first on Elgar who found inspiration in Worcester and the Malvern Hills before moving on to the more challenging music of Benjamin Britten who was most at home with Peter Pears on the Suffolk Coast at Aldeburgh. For both, their landscape was an essential backdrop.

We plan to continue with Howard Goodall and discover another musical destination next month at 10:00 on 27 June at Startforth Community Centre.