

UNDERSTANDING CLASSICAL MUSIC – Report by Ian Royston

Another month, another episode of Howard Goodall's Story of Music, this time entitled "The Age of Rebellion" where he looked at music in the at the turn of the 19th century.

Almost in rebellion against the pervasive grandiloquence of Wagner came music from France in the shape of Fauré. Debussy and Ravel who provided a much simpler style of music but it was Satie who best epitomises the start of a golden age of French music, his Gymnopédies coinciding with the formative International Exposition, remembered of course by its iconic monument, the Eiffel Tower.

The same Exposition Universelle brought Russian music, that had been little-known outside its own country to a much wider audience. Initially and perhaps as a reaction to the Italian art



Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake

of opera, Tchaikovsky became globally applauded as the master of ballet and his trio: The Nutcracker, Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty remain popular today. A wider appreciation of Russian music paved the way for Stravinsky and Mussorgsky, the latter, who being entirely self-taught developed a style of piano-playing hitherto unheard. It's not generally appreciated that his 'Pictures at an Exhibition' was 'composed' for piano and only later orchestrated by Ravel. The German riposte to Wagner initially came from the more lyrical Mahler but darkened again with Richard Strauss, whose first opera Salomé remains controversial even now.

Having by now thrown out (almost) all of the rules which had governed European Music for 300 years, Goodall looked at other composers who embraced folk tunes and those from much deeper heritage such as 'call and response' chants which were codified into what were known as Negro Spirituals. Many of these forms use the pentatonic scale, common in Eastern music but unknown in the West. This rebellion, particularly outside a Europe long-dominated by German ideas gave rise to The Blues, the syncopated rhythms of Ragtime and Jazz.

In the second part of the meeting Simon Callow embarked on Part 1 of a two-part tour of a very small part of Eastern Germany where J S Bach grew up and flourished to become probably the most dominant force in classical music of all time. This month we concentrated on Weimar but hope to progress to Leipzig next.

We plan to continue with the final Howard Goodall and learn more about Bach and his sons next month at 10:00 on 25 July at Startforth Community Centre.