

UNDERSTANDING CLASSICAL MUSIC – Report by Ian Royston

We continued with Simon Russell Beale's History of the Symphony with Episode Two entitled "Beethoven and Beyond" continuing the story of the latter part of Beethoven's life and compared and contrasted his works with those of the French composer Hector Berlioz, mentioning Schubert and Liszt on the way.



Hector Berlioz by Josef Kriehuber [Wikipedia]

In 1808 a four-hour concert in Vienna saw the premiere of two Beethoven symphonies, the 5th and 6th. Both were very different, the second radically so as it broke the conventions by having five named movements and was an early example of seeing the symphony as a story not in words, but in music.

After Napoleon's defeats a new period of optimism swept through Europe and after a gap of 12 years Friedrich Schiller's 'Ode to Joy' provided the inspiration for Beethoven's Ninth, 'Choral' Symphony incorporating ideas which had been gestating for all his adult life. This was the first symphony with a significant part for the human voice and the main theme has been expropriated to provide a backdrop to the Nazis, Ken Russell's Clockwork Orange, The European Union and as a tribute to those who died in the Twin Towers terrorist action.

Hector Berlioz abandoned a promising medical career to pursue music, inspired by Beethoven and is remembered mostly for his Symphony Fantastique, another piece where he attempts to tell a story through music. Berlioz's ideas became more extravagant and he attempted to redesign the orchestra to his own specification of 467 players. Berlioz's fantasies in music also extended to his ultimately tragic pursuit of teenage English actor Harriet Smithson for whom he latterly wrote his Roméo et Juliette symphonie dramatique as it was her debut in that play in Paris that had first brought her to his notice.

Simon Callow started in Madrid, briefly exploring the music of Albéniz, a young, rebellious composer who started with piano pieces in the typically Spanish "zarzuela" style before looking at the better-known works of Manuel de Falla.

Simon then headed east to Serbia to the little-known composer Stevan Mokranjac. Often called the "father of Serbian music," Mokranjac is revered for his choral works and efforts to preserve Serbian folk melodies. He is credited for promoting the ancient singing societies of Serbia which despite Serbia's place in the heart of many European conflicts continue to thrive and promote Serbian culture to today.

We plan to continue with the History of the Symphony "New Nations and New Worlds" looking at the works of Brahms and others and explore other musical cities next month at 10:00 on Friday 24 October at Startforth Community Centre.

The group will move to Enterprise House, Montalbo Road from January. Ideas of how we will run the meeting from our new venue are welcome, as of course are new members.