

UNDERSTANDING CLASSICAL MUSIC – Report by Ian Royston

In our best-attended session for some time we immersed ourselves in the penultimate part of Simon Russell Beale's History of the Symphony entitled "New Nations and New Worlds" where we encountered symphonies of no less than six composers, many of them nationalistic after circumnavigating one composer, Wagner who believed the artform was dead.

Richard Wagner saw himself as a successor to Beethoven, not in being a composer of symphonies but in a master of grand works such as *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a four-part musical drama of around 15 hours spread over 4 nights. In the same year that this was first heard in Vienna, 1876, a devotee of Beethoven who envisaged the continuation of the symphony in a much more conventional way saw Johannes Brahms's 1st Symphony premiered after a gestation of many years. Brahms saw his work aimed at a much more modest audience than that demanded by Wagner and his first symphony, particularly the last movement, which itself echoed some themes of Beethoven was a great success.

Anton Bruckner was a devotee of Wagner and perhaps in imitation attempted to bring a style of enormity of expression to his symphonies but the local boy took a long time to make any impression on Vienna.

With the Habsburg Empire losing influence, Dvorak capitalised on populist Bohemian sentiments and was prominent in promoting Prague as an alternative to Vienna, bringing music to an even wider public. Though his Slavonic Dances remain popular it was a move to the USA, where he wrote Symphony No. 9 "From the New World" that firmly established him on the international circuit. Incorporating American and Negro Spiritual themes this was first heard in the new Carnegie Hall in 1893 and helped establish New York as a cultural centre too.

Further nationalistic composers followed: Sibelius, a proud Finn who raged against Russian oppression in the *Karelia Suite* and the tone poem *Finlandia*, works which made him a national hero. Mahler, a German, who like Wagner believed that loud, big and long were the ways to go. Finally, Tchaikovsky who redefined the symphony in what he saw as a style which embraced both traditional Russian and more progressive western elements.

In the second part of our meeting we discussed how we wanted to continue with the group into 2026 and beyond. Many new ideas came forward, including a popular opinion that we find time to discuss what we have just heard or that members could introduce musical topics for discussion.

The next meeting concludes our year with the final part of History of the Symphony: "Revolution and Rebirth" at 10:00 on Friday 24 October at Startforth Community Centre.