

Barber - Essay No. 1 for Orchestra

Written in 1937, when the composer was 27, this Essay for Orchestra came about at the behest of conductor Arturo Toscanini who led the premiere on November 5th, 1938 along with the famous *Adagio for Strings*. Toscanini, alongside - surprisingly - Ralph Vaughan Williams, was a strong advocate for the young composer. This loyal advocacy was instrumental in bringing about a rapid rise to Barber's career. It was, however, not without an odd twist along the way. Barber sent scores for both the Essay and Adagio to Toscanini but had them returned without further comment. In the summer of 1938 when his partner Gian Carlo Menotti was visiting Toscanini at his summer home, Barber refused to travel with him. This elicited the response from the maestro, "He's just angry with me, but he has no reason to be – I'm going to do both of his pieces."

The concept of an 'essay' for orchestra seems to have been Barber's own and it gave him the capacity to create a short, dramatic piece that was neither overture nor tone poem but which was written with exacting logic from a single melody.

We begin with a gentle statement of this melody from the violas and cellos. Gradually more of the string section and then full orchestra join in. The opening mood of tranquility becomes increasingly animated and even frenzied at times. Rather than aim towards a grand and powerful climax, Barber lets the work conclude in an unsettled and, ultimately, unresolved manner.

Vaughan Williams - Concerto for Oboe and Strings

This delicate masterpiece was very much a product of the Second World War and shares many of the characteristics of the Symphony No. 5 which Vaughan Williams was working on at the time. In fact some of the initial ideas for the scherzo of the symphony made their way later on into the concerto. Unhurried lyricism, a yearning for tranquility and a reflective, nostalgic air pervade both compositions.

The composer had hoped that the premier of the concerto would take place at the London Proms of 1944. But several factors stood in the way of this happening not least the composer himself who wrote to Sir Henry Wood, the conductor and founder of this famous festival of music, 'I am so sorry for the delay, which is due to the fact that when I had, as I thought, finished it, I began to re-write it.' In the end matters were taken out of either of their hands when the Luftwaffe's renewed attacks on London with their V-1 flying bombs caused the remainder of the season to be cancelled.

The concerto has three movements; the opening *Rondo pastorale* begins with a rising pentatonic figuration in the strings over which the soloist weaves a melody of ethereal magic. The second movement is a brief *Minuet and Musette* whose outward simplicity belies a hidden depth whilst the last movement, *Finale (Scherzo)*, the longest and most complex of the three, is for the main part energised but includes a Largo section which the composer's biographer Michael Kennedy described as, 'one of the rare times when Vaughan Williams exposed his inner personal feelings quite so brazenly'.

Beethoven - Symphony No.7

In the late eighteenth century and first few decades of the nineteenth, the orchestral symphony was deemed to be the highest point not only of musical creativity but of cultural sophistication in general. That Beethoven and his contribution to the genre were seen as the pinnacle of the art form was an undisputed fact. As a contemporary critic noted: "Beethoven's works made intellectual demands on musicians and audience alike". For most of the middle part of the nineteenth century Europe saw far fewer symphonies published than in previous decades largely due to the overpowering examples of Beethoven's legacy.

Between the years 1800, when the Symphony No.1 appeared, and 1824 with the completion of the Symphony No.9, Beethoven's development of 'the symphony' was dramatic and with a creative trajectory which left his contemporaries floundering. The symphonies 1 and 2, impish and modelled on the classical style of Haydn and Mozart seemed almost old-fashioned when in 1804 Beethoven unleashed his 'Eroica Symphony' on the world. Immediately groundbreaking in terms of length, harmonic daring and social commentary we now are entering the Romantic era soon to be epitomized by the iconic 'Fifth Symphony', the programmatic communing with nature of the 'Pastoral Symphony' and the universal, humanitarian appeal of the 'Choral Symphony'.

So where does the Symphony No.7 of 1812 fit into this amazing catalogue? Well, to many it is quite simply the most invigorating, moving and uplifting of the symphonies and contains all that we love most about Beethoven. The creativity of the first movement is amazing; the introduction, harking back to the classical era, seems to be become almost lost after its opening grandeur when all we seem to be getting is a repetition, no less than 61 times, of the note E. But from this springs forth the most inventive and joyful of *Allegro* movements where Beethoven demonstrates his ability to create substantial musical essays from the shortest, slightest bits of material. The following movement is marked *Allegretto*, which if not quite a brisk tempo at least demands a lively feeling of momentum. But, the 'grime of time' has so often reduced this most beautiful of nostalgia riddled strolls to the most moribund of funereal dirges in the hands of many conductors. For much of the time the strings lead the way in the key of A minor before a central section in A major is enriched by the colour of woodwinds, particular the clarinet. The *Scherzo* third movement is an incredibly vibrant, merry romp before taking a diversion into a contrasting section which is said to employ an Austrian Pilgrim's Hymn - that might well be the case, but you'd be forgiven if you felt that, on this occasion, the Pilgrims have arrived at the tavern on their journey. The finale, *Allegro con brio*, feels like an irrepressible race to the finish line and, as has been noted by many commentators, is infused with "Bacchic fury"!

Beethoven himself conducted the first performance and one contemporary account, actually by the concertmaster Louis Spohr, gives a vivid account of his efforts: "as a *sforzando* occurred, he tore his arms with a great vehemence asunder ... at the entrance of a *forte* he jumped in the air".