Walton - Symphony No. 1

Born in the town of Oldham in the northwest of England in 1902, William Walton was the son of trained musicians and showed distinct musical aptitude from an early age. However, the family always struggled financially and there was little in William's early upbringing to foretell of the future success, knighthood and celebrity that he would enjoy. Initially he was sent to a local school but, after his father saw an advertisement in a newspaper, was accepted as a probationary chorister at Christ Church Cathedral School in Oxford. This in itself seems to have been a minor miracle as William and his mother had missed their intended train and were late arriving for the entrance examination. Apparently, the father had spent the money at his favourite hostelry and Mrs. Walton had to borrow the train fare from the local greengrocer! Only after pleading his case when they arrived in Oxford was the young boy admitted.

At the age of 16 Walton became one of the youngest ever undergraduates, some claim the youngest since Henry VIII, at Oxford University, and rapidly found himself mixing with the intellectual and social elite of the country. Though his musical studies progressed well, he seems to have neglected his other studies and was sent down without a degree - he failed Greek and algebra - in 1920. However, living up to the age-old adage of "it's not what you know, but who you know", one of Walton's best placed new friends was the writer Sacheverell Sitwell, who invited him to lodge in the family's attic in Chelsea. As Walton later recounted,
"I went for a few weeks and stayed about fifteen years".

By the 1930s Walton had established himself at the forefront of emerging young composers with such works as *Belshazzar's Feast,* the V*iola Concerto* and the "Entertainment", *Facade* with texts by another member of the Sitwell family, Edith. At around this time he caught the attention of the conductor Hamilton Harty who encouraged Walton to embark upon writing his first symphony. But much like Rachmaninoff before him, Walton suffered from writer's block and indeed struggled throughout his life to produce anything rapidly - so much so that when Harty first asked for a symphony he was conductor of the Halle Orchestra in Manchester and, by the time Walton got around to committing something to paper he was conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra!

Work began on the symphony in 1932 and, with slow, gradual progress, the first three movements were completed by the middle of 1933. There it stopped. Were there reasons other than his usual painstaking approach and his lifelong difficulty in accepting that anything he committed to paper was worthy? Perhaps the answer lies in the break-up of his long affair with Baroness Imma von Doernberg, a wealthy and young German widow who also happened to be the dedicatee of the symphony. Whatever the truth, the London Symphony Orchestra was starting to get impatient and, at the end of 1934, Walton was persuaded to allow a performance of the incomplete symphony to take place. Bizarre as the idea of an incomplete rendition sounds to us, it might just have been positive feedback from this, and two other London performances that also took place, that offered Walton the much-needed belief to continue. At long last the Symphony No.1 was finished in August 1935. The premier took place on November 6th with Hamilton Harty conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra. As one review expressed, "The applause at the close was overwhelming, and when Mr. Walton, a slim, shy young man, came onto the platform he was cheered continuously for five minutes".

Rachmaninoff - Piano Concerto No.2

The years 1897 to 1900 were particularly traumatic for the young Rachmaninoff and caused him to seek the help of the renowned practitioner of hypnotherapy, Nikolai Dahl. The writer's block that the composer was suffering at this time had been brought on by the disastrous premier of his Symphony No.1 in St. Petersburg. Rachmaninoff had good cause to be optimistic about this new work. At 24 years of age he had already enjoyed considerable success as well as the valuable and weighty support of Tchaikovsky. However the conductor, famed composer Alexander Glazunov, was more than likely drunk and one of the most significant critical commentaries damned the gifted composer by saying that if he had been instructed to *"write a programme symphony on "The Seven Plagues of Egypt"* he had fulfilled *"his task brilliantly and delighted the inmates of Hell".*

Little wonder then that, for a while, Rachmaninoff concentrated his musical efforts on conducting before three months of treatment with Dahl resulted in the creation of tonight's much loved piano concerto, as well as a dedication to the therapist.

When we speak in musical terms of romantic and Romanticism it is easy to muddle up our emotional response to music with the creative epoch of that name that dominated the European cultural climate of the first half of the nineteenth century. Rachmaninoff's music is of course undoubtedly romantic in that it appeals to our emotions with its strong focus on intense, impassioned lyricism and a rich, saturating harmonic palette. For Rachmaninoff it seems that the idea of satisfying the traditional demands of form and structure - essentials of the Classical era - was simply a method to convey the journey of his musical ideas.

The concerto begins in the most unusual of manners. Rather than any sort of introduction from the orchestra to build up anticipation of the soloist's entrance, Rachmaninoff presents the solo piano completely alone in a series of chromatic, wandering chords. Their increasing intensity seems to almost implore the orchestra to join in and rescue them or, at least, guide them with our first melodic theme. Could this be a reference to the relationship between composer and therapist and the latter's role in guiding the young Rachmaninoff? And throughout this first movement it is noticeable and unusual how the solo is an equal partner to the orchestra, rarely relegating it to the role of accompaniment.

The second movement, *adagio sostenuto*, is led melodically first of all by flute and clarinet before the solo piano takes over the same tunes in the most dreamy of manners. Worth reflecting perhaps on another major source of Rachmaninoff's inspiration, summers spent at Ivanovka, the country residence of his more aristocratic relatives, the Satins: "The smell of the Earth, mowed rows and blossoms. I could work—and work hard. Every Russian feels strong ties to the soil. Perhaps it comes from an instinctive need for solitude."

The finale, *allegro scherzando,* opens with a short orchestral introduction and grows into a highly virtuosic and, ultimately, triumphant conclusion. Little wonder that the reception at the concerto's premier in Moscow on November 9th, 1901 was so tumultuous. In the end, Dahl's mantra, that he repeated frequently to the semi-conscious Rachmaninoff, "You will begin to write your concerto ... You will work with great facility ... The concerto will be of an excellent quality" would bear dramatic fruit.

-Andrew Constantine