

September 2008 Podcast Transcript

Karen Stephenson - cello:

Welcome back to the Philharmonia Orchestra's new season of podcasts. September is a month of new beginnings for the Philharmonia Orchestra. We begin our first season with Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor Esa-Pekka Salonen, we're launching our own CD label and the orchestra's new look *Sound Exchange* website goes live.

It's also my first month in the cello section of the Philharmonia, and it's straight in at the deep end as we start with a performance of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*.

Actor Simon Russell Beale takes the role of narrator for the performance so we sent him to meet Stravinsky expert Jonathan Cross.

Simon Russell Beale:

Jonathan, can we start by putting Stravinsky in a European context, as a Russian composer?

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

Well, the piece was composed in Nice which was where he was living 1926/27 which was the period of composition. Stravinsky wore so many different masks throughout his life. How do we tell who the real Stravinsky was? How important were his Russian roots to him? Progressively he turned his back on that Russianness particularly once it was clear that he was never going to return and as it were reinvented himself as a Western, European composer.

Simon Russell Beale:

Paris could lay claim to be possibly the most exciting city, at least culturally, in Europe and, what with Diaghilev being there. Stravinsky had done some stuff already with him. So how did *Oedipus Rex* fit into that particular line of work?

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

It was put on as part of the twentieth anniversary season of the Ballet Russes and in fact its first performance was sandwiched between two ballets. Stravinsky gives this as one of the reasons why perhaps the audience was rather nonplussed by the piece at its first performance. They were used to the excitement, the drama, the exoticism of the ballet and they got this rather dour classical piece.

Simon Russell Beale:

Can you explain a little bit about the relationship between Stravinsky and Cocteau and what precisely they wanted to do with this rather extraordinary piece and something about their creative relationship?

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

Well, Stravinsky's original idea and he'd had this idea for quite some time before he approached Cocteau to write the text for the piece, was that he wanted something very formal, very monumental. Those are the two words that keep cropping up

time and time again, a monumental work. In a way you can say it was an explicitly anti-Romantic work. It wasn't concerned with the overt presentation or expression of emotions and character but rather, with this distancing; it is ironic in the best sense of the word.

Simon Russell Beale:

I find it emotionally engaging, despite all the theoretical stuff. I was emotionally engaged by the characters, especially by Jocasta and that enormous aria she does. I find that completely emotionally compelling.

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

I think that's right and these individual moments do but I think in this work the context is crucial as well and I think that's true of Brecht as well. One may get momentarily caught up in the emotions in Brecht but there's a change that's constantly pushing your emotions in different directions. It's not Puccini!

Simon Russell Beale:

So Oedipus is a very confident and very bullish character and I noticed when I last did it that he seems to be very high up in his range; that the tessitura is very, very high. It's a high part so you get that sort of excessive 'Verdianism'; that high tension.

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

But there's also a decorative aspect to his music which I find intriguing. The work begins with this monumental music for the chorus; very block-like. And then we get the first entry of Oedipus and it's a much more decorated line. It seems to come from somewhere else and I think there's a very striking contrast between this monumental music and this more decorative music. All the other characters, as you say, we only see them or hear them once and then they're gone; they're like cardboard cut-outs. But Oedipus changes and we have to build Oedipus up as this character in the first place to make his fall seem all the greater later on; in the way that it did of course in the Sophocles original.

Simon Russell Beale:

So, moving on to the orchestra and the instrumentation. How big is this?

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

We've still got a big orchestra but it's used in a very, very different way. He's aiming again for a kind of clarity so you get blocks of sound, you get layers of sound. I think what's extraordinary about this is the way that it's orchestrated. You never lose sound or sight of the voices.

Simon Russell Beale:

Could you define the impact it's had on future composers?

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

In the way it suggests a new possibility for a new kind of musical theatre. The music is built up by a lot of ostinatos, repeating patterns that sound familiar but they simply repeat; they don't go anywhere. Models that Stravinsky was looking to – Handel – there was a very clear forward directedness to that music which is never

there in Stravinsky. You get something that's much more block-like, much more like a mosaic.

Simon Russell Beale:

This is probably an unfair question but is there a single piece or a couple of pieces that you could definitely say this is a son or daughter of *Oedipus*?

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

Direct, maybe not but I think there's definitely something of that there. This tradition in the twentieth century of music theatre that is neither concert work nor opera but is something else.

Simon Russell Beale:

And nor entirely narrative either.

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

Not narrative, stylised, multiple kinds of theatre. And I think it's those aspects and the role that music plays in creating a very vibrant kind of direct, non-narrative stylised theatre that's been the greatest impact of this piece on later composers.

Simon Russell Beale:

It's extremely listenable too, that's the other thing. It's actually a good listen.

Prof. Jonathan Cross:

It's a good listen, it's a very engaging piece, musically varied yet consistent, it's familiar enough for anybody without any real knowledge of Stravinsky's musical language to find a way in but is challenging in all sorts of interesting ways. I'm not a great fan of that word 'accessible' but it is a kind of accessible modernism.

Simon Russell Beale:

Shall I really irritate you and say it's an accessible masterpiece? No, I won't! That would be unfair. It's extremely accessible. Thank you Jonathan, that was great, thank you very much.

Karen Stephenson:

Maestro Salonen can be seen performing Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* in his opening concert of the season at the Royal Festival Hall on 23rd September. Professor Jonathan Cross will be giving a free pre-concert talk in the Royal Festival Hall before the concert, beginning at 6.00pm.

Esa-Pekka Salonen will also be performing Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in Leeds and in London. The piece is one of the most significant works of art in the Nineteenth century with the circumstances of the composition reflecting the composer's life. Here's Sam Burstin.

Sam Burstin:

In 1827, the 23-year-old Hector Berlioz fell in love with the gorgeous Irish actress Harriet Smithson. Berlioz was completely obsessed with this woman – After seeing Smithson's Juliet in the arms of Romeo, Berlioz is said to have rushed from the

theatre screaming. But Berlioz' advances were not welcome – Harriet is quoted as saying, *“do not leave me alone with that man should he come back.”*

Despite the fact Berlioz was completely infatuated they took 5 years to actually meet. *Symphonie Fantastique* is the product of this infatuation and desire; and although Berlioz doesn't explicitly make the piece autobiographical his programme notes don't do little to persuade us otherwise...

'A young musician of extraordinary sensitivity and abundant imagination, in the depths of despair over a hopeless love, poisons himself with opium. The drug, too feeble to kill him, plunges him into a heavy sleep, accompanied by weird visions, during which his sensations, emotions and memories are transformed in his affected mind into musical images and ideas. The woman he loves becomes for him a melody, like an idée fixe which he finds and hears everywhere.'

The first three movements of the piece show the early stages of the infatuation, together with the musicians' jealous rages, melancholy and delirious sufferings. The piece opens with *'that weariness of spirits, that surge of emotion, those fits of melancholy, those objectless joys Berlioz experienced before meeting the one he loves.'* The music fails to settle and we are introduced to fragments of aching beautiful melodies. Only after five minutes of music are we introduced to the idée fixe, this is a single melody representing his beloved, which reappears in different guises throughout the piece. We first hear it played over a pulsing bass accompaniment by the flute and violins.

In the second movement we hear it as a waltz as Berlioz finds his beloved again at a ball in the midst of a noisy and brilliant gathering.

The third movement begins one summer evening in the country as we hear two herdsmen call to one another across the fields. Towards the end of the movement one herdsman takes up his simple tune again, the other no longer answers. As the sun sets the only reply is the distant rumble of thunder...

By the fourth movement paranoia has taken a hold and the 'musician' dreams that he has killed his beloved.

'He is condemned to death and led to the scaffold. The procession moves forward to the sounds of a March that is sometimes somber and wild, sometimes brilliant and solemn, in which the dull thud of heavy steps follow the noisiest of outbursts. At the end the idée fixe reappears for a moment like a last thought of love cut off by the fatal blow.'

In the final movement Berlioz takes the audience to a world of pure romanticism, a million miles from that of Beethoven, who died only three years before this piece was premiered.

'He sees himself at a witches' Sabbath, in the midst of a ghastly crowd of shadowy figures, sorcerers and monsters of every kind, gathered together for his funeral. Unearthly noises, groans, shrieks of laughter, distant cries which other cries seem to answer. The beloved-melody appears again; but it has lost its character of nobility and timidity; it is nothing more than a dance-tune, ignoble, trivial and grotesque; it is she who comes to the Sabbath... Shouts of joy at her arrival... She joins the diabolical

orgy . . . *The funeral knell, a burlesque parody of the Dies Irae. Dance of the witches. Dance of the witches and Dies Irae combined.*'

Symphonie Fantastique is a snapshot of one period of the life of Hector Berlioz, one period that was to affect everything. The dizzying and all-consuming infatuation that took hold of the composer drove him to create his masterpiece. This masterpiece though dark, mysterious and bleak is a joy to perform the music much like the infatuation is all consuming. Berlioz's infatuation becomes ours and the spirit of the obsession lives on.

Karen Stephenson:

The Philharmonia will perform two concerts of *Symphonie fantastique* with Maestro Salonen in Leeds and London on the 27th and 28th of September. The orchestra will also be joined for these concerts by pianist H el ene Grimaud for a performance of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto.

The *Sound Exchange*, our education website has been revamped for the new season. The new website contains fascinating interviews with conductors, composers and musicians, all the orchestra's monthly video podcasts, educational resources and a library of sound samples. Visit www.thesoundexchange.co.uk to take a look and please, do let us know what you think.

The Philharmonia have launched their very own CD label. Along with the orchestra's MP3 downloads, these CDs will be available through the Philharmonia online shop and in stores. The first two releases feature Christoph von Dohn anyi conducting Brahms' Second and Fourth Symphonies and Sir Charles Mackerras in a performance of Schubert's Symphony No. 9, the 'Great' C Major. Both performances are live recordings and capture the exciting atmosphere of Philharmonia concerts.

Other concerts in September include two performances as part of the Windsor Festival. Christopher Robinson conducts a concert of Ralph Vaughan Williams' best loved music including *The Lark Ascending* and *Five Mystical Songs*. Leif Segerstam conducts the other concert as part of the Windsor Festival with a program including the Sibelius Violin Concerto with Jenifer Pike and Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony.

Maestro Segerstam also travels to Leicester and Bedford with the orchestra for performances of Wagner, Brahms and Tchaikovsky with soloists Boris Giltburg and Boris Berezovsky.

As part of the *Sound Exchange* relaunch we'll be following Esa-Pekka Salonen for his first rehearsals as Principal Conductor and we'll be releasing a podcast special on September 23rd, so be sure to subscribe. Thanks for watching.