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Summer Pops at the Phil  
Beethoven's Seventh  
Thursday 27 June 2019 7.30pm

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CARL MARIA VON WEBER (1786-1826)  
Overture, Der Freischütz

Der Freischütz (variously translated as 'The Marksman', or 'The Free-Shooter') is a major landmark in the development of German opera. With its heady mixture of folklore, the supernatural, and a forest setting by turns homely and sinister, it virtually defined early nineteenth century German Romanticism. It was an irresistible mix that so completely caught the spirit of the time that a runaway success was more or less guaranteed. First staged in 1821, its popularity quickly spread, not only in Germany, but also throughout Europe, eventually reaching such a pitch that Weber grew to detest the work.

The central character, Max, is a forester who needs to win a shooting contest to decide the next Head Forester, since he will then be able to marry his girl-friend Agathe. In despair at being out-classed by his main rival, he is approached by the sinister Kaspar, who tempts him into a diabolical pact to secure the use of six magic bullets; Max is unaware that Kaspar has his own plans, involving bullet No 7.

The overture immediately establishes a sense of mystery, with evocative horn-calls and the shuddering chord which will establish the spooky atmosphere of the Wolf's Glen, where the magic bullets will be cast at the end of Act 2. The main quick section of the overture draws on arias for Max and Agathe,

ending with a blaze of C major over which Agathe's theme soars in triumph.

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)  
Piano Concerto No.21 in C major, K467

Allegro maestoso / Fast, majestic  
Andante / At a walking pace  
Allegro vivace assai / Fast, very lively

Mozart's career is punctuated by occasions on which he composed, one after the other, two contrasting works in the same genre – one dark and stormy and in a minor key, the other its direct opposite, expressively. The two piano concertos, No.20 in D minor, K466 and No.21 in C, K467, form one of these pairs. Mozart wrote them in early 1785 for himself to play during a series of concerts in Vienna.

No.21 appears to breathe an air of radiant serenity, though as we shall see, things are not quite so straightforward. For musicians of Mozart's day, the key of C major went hand-in-glove with the use of trumpets and drums, and a ceremonial air in the music. The opening is clearly some kind of march, but it is a march on tiptoe. There is something almost furtive about the way it steals in, and it is not until a little later that we get the first loud passage for the full orchestra. The whole movement has an intimate quality, rather than the grand manner Mozart's contemporaries would have expected from its key and scoring.

The concerto owes much of its popularity to the remarkably intense atmosphere of the second movement. The violins and violas are muted, giving a kind of veiled radiance to the sound. The gently pulsing triplet rhythm that underpins the whole movement, moving continuously from strings to woodwind to

piano and back, adds to the atmosphere – refined and sensuous but also with a poignant undercurrent.

Something of that poignancy leaves its trace on moments of the finale, but for the most part this movement is full of bright, bustling energy, exactly what is required after the andante's mesmerising dream-world, bringing us back to earth not with a bump but a smile.

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)  
Symphony No.7 in A major, Op.92

Poco sostenuto – vivace / A little sustained – lively  
Allegretto / Quite fast  
Presto / Very fast  
Allegro con brio / Fast, with vigour

Modern music has never been easy to grasp. Beethoven's Seventh Symphony was premiered in Vienna on 8 December 1813. The occasion was a benefit concert for Austrian soldiers wounded in the recent Battle of Hanau, and the impresario, Beethoven's friend (and inventor of the metronome) Johann Mälzel, had assembled an all-star orchestra. The virtuoso violinist Schuppanzigh was the leader, Dragonetti (the father of modern double bass technique) led the basses, and the composers Spohr, Meyerbeer and Romberg sat in the strings. Hummel – composer of that irresistible trumpet concerto – was on drums, and just offstage, cueing the special effects in Beethoven's other contribution to the evening, the so-called 'Battle-Symphony', was living legend Antonio Salieri. But even this lot couldn't cope with the Seventh Symphony. Music that couldn't be played, protested the violinists, shouldn't be written.

Unbelievably, Beethoven kept his cool. Anticipating the words of a thousand amateur orchestra conductors, he "begged the

gentlemen to take their parts home with them” to practice. They did – and the performance was one of the supreme triumphs of Beethoven’s career. The Allegretto was even encored, and a delighted Beethoven wrote to a Viennese newspaper, to thank his “honoured colleagues” for “their zeal in contributing to such a splendid result”. The Seventh Symphony has been a special favourite ever since. 19th-century conductors used to insert its Allegretto into less popular Beethoven symphonies (like the Fifth!) to guarantee applause. And Richard Wagner apparently once performed a one-man dance routine to the entire symphony, in support of his theory that the symphony was “the apotheosis of dance”. Which must have been an interesting half hour...

Mind you, there were dissenters – Weber listened to the first movement and declared that Beethoven was “ripe for the madhouse”. Schumann’s father-in-law, Friedrich Wieck, was convinced that Beethoven must have written it while drunk. And it’s hard to blame them entirely. It’s not just the Symphony’s rough-cut humour (after the poised, massive build-up of energy in the first movement’s introduction, the Vivace launches not with a breaking storm, but a bright country-dance tune on the flute). And it’s not just the way every movement is driven by colossal build-ups of dance rhythm (even the haunting second movement has the rhythm of a pavane).

It’s the sheer, elemental energy with which Beethoven brings it off. Exuberance is written into the Symphony’s very texture. By setting the symphony in A major, Beethoven automatically made life difficult for the brass players – and the sound of the horns, whooping through the climaxes at the very top of their register, means that the symphony even sounds exhilarating, unbridled and wild. Even the quieter, slower music is as compelling – that melancholy Allegretto is both one of the simplest and most sophisticated movements Beethoven ever wrote; the echoing horn calls in the third movement’s central interlude set the tone for a century of Romantic orchestral music. Perhaps Wieck had a point after all. Listen to the torrential gallop of the finale, and then

think of Beethoven's own words: "Music is the spirit that inspires us to new creation; and I am the Bacchus, who presses out this glorious wine to intoxicate all mankind".

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