
Thursday Series
Russian Heroes
Thursday 16 May 2019 7.30pm

DMITRI KABALEVSKY (1904-1987)
Colas Breugnon: Overture

Kabalevsky was born in St Petersburg and later studied composition and piano at the Moscow Conservatory. He was destined to become a major figure in the Soviet musical scene as a writer, educationalist and composer. His musical voice was broadly in line with Soviet cultural policy in its populism and use of the idioms of folk music. During the Second World War he edited the publication *Soviet Music* having joined the communist party in 1940. Hence he avoided the official censure that contemporaries such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich received (Kabalevsky's music was once described, rather cruelly, as "Prokofiev with water"). His apparent collusion with the Soviet regime could explain why his music is only rarely heard in the West. Rightly or not, there is a notion that Soviet art was only of value if it somehow "kicked against the system".

Colas Breugnon, Kabalevsky's first opera, was premiered in Leningrad (the renamed city of his birth, now once again St Petersburg) in 1938. It was based on a novel by the French author Romain Rolland about a 17th-century Robin Hood figure (the writer, incidentally, hugely admired the operatic adaptation of his tale). The opera contains some spectacular choral scenes in the grand Russian tradition but is now seldom performed. It lives on, however, in the form of this sparkling, superbly scored overture. There are darker undercurrents in its central section, though overall a sense of great heroism prevails.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Sinfonia Concertante, Op.125 for cello and orchestra

Andante / At a walking pace

Allegro / Fast

Andante con moto – allegretto – allegro marcato / At a walking pace, with movement – quite fast – fast and with emphasis

Prokofiev's Sinfonia Concertante is fascinating for various reasons. Not only does it derive from two very distinct phases of its composer's career but it is the product of two of the Soviet Union's finest musical minds.

In 1918 Prokofiev had left the Soviet Union, with the agreement of its authorities, to live and work in the West, mainly in Paris. Here he established himself as a leading avant-garde musical voice. Shortly before leaving Paris to return to his homeland in 1933 Prokofiev had made sketches for a cello concerto. It was not until 1938, however, that he fully realised the composition though its premiere was a flop. "First-rate music, but somehow it doesn't quite come off", wrote fellow composer Nikolai Miaskovsky. The concerto was laid aside.

Subsequently, in 1949 came along the staggeringly talented 22-year-old cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, one of the finest musical performers of the 20th century. Having written a cello sonata for this remarkable talent, Prokofiev was then inspired to further explore the cello's potential as a solo instrument and the pair spent some weeks at Prokofiev's country home during the summer of 1951 where together they rigorously revised the original concerto. Prokofiev continued work on the piece over the next few months and it was eventually completed the following year. Its premiere took place in February 1952. Naturally Rostropovich was the soloist with Sviatoslav Richter on the podium (the only time the great pianist conducted a major public concert).

As a result of this rather complex and drawn out creative process the piece is something of a hybrid between Prokofiev's early, more experimental Western European style and the more populist idiom he adopted on his return to the Soviet Union. The first movement has the sense of a slow march, though it contains shimmering effects too, the considerable presence of the orchestra in its central section justifying the work's title as a 'Symphonic Concerto'. The second movement is simply fiendish in its virtuosity (Rostropovich was definitely up for a challenge) and the third contains a theme celebrated by Prokofiev's biographer's Israel Nestyev as "one of the greatest, broadest and most powerful that Prokofiev ever wrote".

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)
The Age of Gold: Suite

Prelude
Adagio / Slow
Polka
Dance

In 1929 a competition for a new ballet-scenario was organised by the Leningrad State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre. The winner was *Dynamiada* by the writer and film director Alexander Ivanovsky, a story about a Soviet football team who visit a Western European city to play a match at an industrial exhibition. Here the team's heroic sporting and social endeavours are thwarted at every turn by fascists, evil capitalists, corrupt officials and depraved artistes, though inevitably the team is eventually triumphant. Shostakovich was invited to provide the music for this thoroughly up-to-date propaganda ballet which was subsequently retitled *The Age of Gold*, an ironic invocation of the glorious future of capitalism. The work received its premiere on 26 October 1930.

Although apparently unlikely, a ballet on a football theme was wholly in accord with the official Soviet cultural policy of the late 1920s when the image of the wholesome athletic body had come to symbolise all that was supposedly noble, heroic and morally untainted about the Soviet system. Hence sport had a conspicuous presence in all the arts: in poetry; in photography; and in drama and music. It was of course ludicrous to imply – as official Soviet dogma did – that the ancient notion of “a healthy mind in a healthy body” was a peculiarly Soviet ideal. However, in explaining his rationale in writing the music for *The Age of Gold*, Shostakovich dutifully paid lip service to the idea:

[inset] “Throwing into contrast the two cultures [capitalist and Soviet] was my main aim [...] I approached this task in the following way: the west European dances breathe the spirit of depraved eroticism which is characteristic of contemporary bourgeois culture, but I tried to imbue the Soviet dances with the wholesome elements of sport and physical culture.”

And yet it's clear that Shostakovich relished those 'depraved' Western European dances every bit as much as the morally-elevated music he assigned to the Soviet sportsmen. This is deliciously in evidence in the suite he later assembled from the ballet score.

ARAM KHACHATURIAN (1903-1978)

Spartacus: Suite

Variation of Aegina and Bacchanalia

Scene and Dance with Crotalums

Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia

Dance of Gaditanae and Victory of Spartacus

Khachaturian was a highly influential Soviet composer, the writer of nationalistic music that often drew on the influence of the folk songs of his native Armenia. His score for the ballet *Spartacus* won him the Lenin Prize in 1954, its subject matter – a slave

revolt led by Spartacus against the imperialist Romans – was wholly in accord with Stalinist ideology. Nevertheless, despite being an enthusiastic communist himself, along with fellow composers Shostakovich and Prokofiev, Khachaturian was at one time denounced by the fickle Soviet authorities and forced to make a public apology for supposedly being ‘anti-popular’. This now seems absurd.

The ballet remains popular in Russia and elsewhere to this day, but Khachaturian also formed four suites of music from his ballet score that work superbly in their own right as concert pieces. Tonight’s sequence opens with the quite intoxicating ‘Variation of Aegina and Bacchanalia’, referring as it does to the Roman god of wine. Suitably inebriated, it is full of wonderful percussion effects and unpredictable twists and turns in its musical progress. ‘Scene and Dance with Crotalums’ (a crotalum in Ancient Greek being a percussion instrument, a sort of clapper or castanet) begins with a slow introduction dominated by strings and horns. Thereafter Khachaturian’s Armenian dance roots come to the fore in the most ebullient and rhythmically infectious manner, though the movement eventually fades away into silence.

‘Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia’ – famously used as the theme tune for the nautical 1970s TV series *The Onedin Line* – has become one of the most well-liked pieces of classical music ever written. As well as its seafaring associations, the Adagio has featured in films, figure-skating routines, gymnastics, and even became the hit Andy Williams song, ‘Journey’s End’. Certainly this particular piece could hardly be described as anti-popular! Two extended renditions of its gloriously expansive main theme frame a more agitated central section.

The initial slow tread of ‘Dance of Gaditanae’ gives way to a masterfully controlled exercise in gradual musical acceleration. The process culminates in the triumphant ‘Victory of Spartacus’ as the slaves overcome their Roman overlords – music that can barely contain its own uproarious energy.

Programme notes by Anthony Bateman © 2019