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Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

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Sunday Afternoon Classics

Beethoven's Emperor Concerto

Sunday 9 February 2020 2.30pm

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) Piano Concerto No.5 in E-flat major, Op.73 'Emperor'

Adagio un poco mosso / Slow, but moving forward

Allegro / Fast

Rondo: allegro / Rondo: fast

A deal of mystery surrounds the nickname of the so-called 'Emperor Concerto', but it is certain that Beethoven himself did not coin the soubriquet. If, as some sources claim, an awestruck French soldier, on first hearing the work, exclaimed "C'est L'empereur", Beethoven would not have approved. A committed republican, he had angrily removed a dedication to Napoleon on the title page of his *Eroica* Symphony after his one-time hero proclaimed himself emperor of France. More likely is that the composer and piano-maker J.B. Cramer (1771-1858) once described it as "an Emperor among concertos", an opinion with which it remains hard to disagree. Compared to any concerto written hitherto – that is, apart from Beethoven's own violin concerto – it is conceived on a vast scale, makes unprecedented technical demands on the soloist and is outstandingly original in both form and content.

The work's outer movements were composed in the 'martial' style then highly popular with concert audiences, but its military associations run deeper than that. Much of the concerto was written during 1809, as Napoleon's army lay siege to Vienna. Beethoven was often forced to take refuge from the bombardment in a basement, where he would cover his ears with a pillow to block out the terrible noises of war. "The course of events has affected my body and soul," he wrote, "life around me is wild and disturbing, nothing but drums, cannons, soldiers ..." After the French occupation of Vienna, Beethoven was unafraid to vent his spleen at Napoleon and the French. He was once seen in a coffee-house angrily shaking his fist at a French officer, "If I were a general and knew as much about strategy as I know about counterpoint," he bawled, "I'd give you something to think about!"

Beethoven's increasing deafness prevented him from giving the work its first performance – as he had done with his previous four piano concertos – and the pianist to do so was Friedrich Schneider at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in 1811. Vienna first heard it in the following year when it was played by Carl Czerny. It was enthusiastically received by the audience and one reviewer described it as “undoubtedly one of the most original, imaginative, effective but also most difficult of all existing concertos”. ‘The Emperor’ was soon a staple of the piano concerto repertoire.

While the concertos of Haydn and Mozart invariably begin with an orchestral introduction, here Beethoven breaks the classical mould as the piano enters with three audacious flourishes, each punctuated by bold orchestral chords. As the movement proper gets on its martial way, its two main themes are then introduced by the orchestra in the traditional manner. When the piano eventually re-enters it is not merely to restate this material, but to process and elaborate it with both originality and virtuosity (though the virtuosity is always part of the musical argument and never gratuitous). Later, two upward piano flourishes recall the opening and herald an unaccompanied cadenza for the piano, one that, unusually for the composer, was written out note for note.

After the martial splendour of the first movement, the *Adagio un poco mosso* could hardly provide more of a contrast. At the hushed opening, muted strings introduce its noble, hymn-like main theme on which the piano first elaborates and then simplifies into its own exquisite shape.

As the slow movement draws to its close, a soft horn note is heard and the piano, tentatively at first, suggests a fresh idea with increasing confidence, and eventually leaps headlong into the Rondo, a movement that despite its dance-like boisterousness retains a steely strength of intent.

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ANTON BRUCKNER (1824-1896) **Symphony No.4 in E flat major ‘Romantic’**

Bewegt, nicht zu schnell / Lively, not too fast

Andante, quasi allegretto / At a walking pace, as if quite fast

Scherzo: Bewegt – Trio: Nicht zu schnell. Keinesfalls schleppend – Scherzo / Scherzo: Lively – Trio: Not too fast. But not dragging – Scherzo

Finale: Bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell / Finale: Lively, but not too fast

For a long time Bruckner's Fourth was his best-loved symphony – though in recent years it seems to have been overtaken by the Seventh. Of course works with titles do carry an advantage for many listeners over their merely numbered neighbour: Mozart's Piano Concerto No.21 in C major, K467, has experienced a new surge of popularity since it became the ‘Elvira Madigan’ Concerto (after the film in which it was used extensively); and how many people would remember Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C sharp minor, Op.27 No.2, if someone hadn't given it the handy nickname ‘Moonlight’?

However it isn't easy to see why Bruckner singled out this particular symphony ‘Romantic’. All his symphonies are clearly products of the Romantic era, however much they may owe to the church music of Palestrina and Haydn, the keyboard works of Bach, or to the architecture of the medieval and baroque cathedrals in which Bruckner (a brilliant organist and a devout Roman Catholic) worked and prayed. When it first appeared, the Fourth Symphony was issued with a naively descriptive programme (dawn over a medieval town, processions of knights, hunting scenes, etc). It's a relief to discover that Bruckner may have had little – if anything – to do with this; or that if he had, it could be because his arm was twisted by over-zealous young friends, anxious to help the public get to grips with a large, complex and highly original orchestral work. There is nothing wrong with literary programmes in themselves; the trouble is that these simplistic labels can restrict rather than enhance the music's evocative power.

And evocative it is. The opening – solo horn calls sounding above quietly shimmering string tremolandos – is one of the most magical beginnings to a symphony in the repertoire. As the high woodwind take up this theme, in counterpoint with the horn, one may hear echoes of the famous Gounod-Bach *Ave Maria*, composed fifteen years before Bruckner began work on the first version of the symphony in 1874. But what is most impressive about the beginning of the Fourth Symphony is the inevitability with which the ideas follow each other. From the initial horn theme, through the long crescendo to the arrival of the second main theme, fortissimo, on trombones and tuba, the music flows forward like a great river. Never before had

Bruckner shown such confident mastery in starting a symphony. And at no point does this movement let us down. Bruckner may allow himself frequent pauses for breath or reflection – like a mountain-climber pausing occasionally to enjoy a grand vista – but the underlying momentum continues. The horn theme returns twice in its original key: at the start of the recapitulation (embellished by a touchingly simple countermelody on flute), and the very end of the movement, where it sounds out thrillingly on all four horns in unison.

The second movement – in conventional terms the slow movement – is something of a departure from the Brucknerian norm. Instead of profound, songful meditation, it seems to have more of the character of a ghostly funeral march. But although the tempo marking, *Andante, quasi allegretto*, suggests a fairly mobile tempo, the underlying pulse is quite slow. The composer Hugh Wood compared this movement tellingly to a typical Central European forest, in which one is often able to see vast distances through the trunks of high-arching trees. No matter how fast one walks through these shadowy landscapes, the background remains more or less the same – as though one had hardly moved at all. This spacious woodland feeling is enhanced by the second theme: violas singing long, calm phrases through quiet pizzicato string-chords. There are moments of almost mesmerizing stillness, in which solo woodwinds and horns call to each other like birdsong. Eventually this movement rouses itself to a magnificent climax – one of the few passages in the Fourth Symphony which directly recalls Bruckner's idol Wagner. But the splendour soon fades, and we are left with the ghostly funeral tread on timpani, with lamenting phrases on horn, viola and clarinet.

The Scherzo is in complete contrast. For once, the long-forgotten programme makes a kind of sense: the horn and trumpet fanfares do suggest 'hunting' scenes. But there is something cosmic about this music, as though the horses were pounding though the skies rather than over the earth. The central Trio however is a delicious example of the rustic Bruckner: a lazily contented *Ländler* (the country cousin of the waltz) is introduced by oboe and clarinet. In earlier days, Bruckner had supplemented his meagre teacher's income by playing in village dance bands, and the experience left its imprint in almost all his symphonies. This Trio clearly made a deep impact on Mahler, who borrowed its leading motif, and something of its orchestral colouring, in the scherzo third movement of his own 'Resurrection' Symphony. After the Trio, the Scherzo is heard again.

Then begins the longest and most exploratory of the four movements: the Finale. Bruckner told how its main theme came to him in a dream, played by a friend, the conductor Ignaz Dorn, who had encouraged Bruckner in his enthusiasm for Wagner. "Dorn appeared to me ... and said, 'The first three movements of the Romantic (Fourth) Symphony are ready, and we'll soon find the theme for the fourth. Go to the piano and play it for me.' I was so excited I woke up, leapt out of bed and wrote the theme down, just as I'd heard it from him." If by this Bruckner means the elemental unison theme for full orchestra which enters in full at the height of the first crescendo, it's not surprising that he was so excited. Significantly this theme remains unchanged in both the extensive revisions Bruckner made of this movement.

Arriving at the final form of the Finale gave Bruckner a lot of trouble, and there is evidence that he wasn't satisfied even after he'd completed the second revision (1880). Critics have tended to agree with him: no one would deny that there are splendid ideas here, but there are also passages where Bruckner momentarily seems to lose his way. But stick with this movement and the rewards are immense. The final long crescendo is one of Bruckner's most thrilling symphonic summations. It begins in profound minor-key darkness with the first theme sounding quietly through shimmering strings, then rises like a great wave, finally cresting in a blaze of major-key glory.

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