

TIDBITS NOTES

23/02/2008

Brahms Violin Concerto

1. Brahms loved Beethoven's music. And some people have suggested similarities between the two composers' violin concertos. I'm going to suggest a difference. So let's play 'Spot the musical difference'. Here's a clue: the difference is in the tune. Here's the main tune of Beethoven's first movement.

Play Beethoven vln concerto tune.

And here's the main tune of Brahms' first movement.

The difference? Beethoven uses more scales in his tune, and Brahms uses arpeggios. Think of Beethoven's tune like going up and down stairs one at a time. Brahms is like going up and down two or three at a time. Listen out for how much Brahms does this.

2. When Albert Einstein wrote the delightfully simple equation $e = mc^2$ at the bottom of the blackboard you can bet that there was a whole lot of other much more complicated looking stuff above it! That's real genius – going through large amounts of complexity and coming up with something simple. Things which seem simple often require a lot of work behind the scenes. This is true of the tune in the second movement of the Brahms concerto. The great violinist Pablo de Sarasate refused to play the concerto and said of the 2nd movement that he didn't want to: "stand on the rostrum, violin in hand and listen to the oboe playing the only tune in the adagio". What you're not aware of is that Brahms spent a long time working out this tune, changing bits here and there, altering the accompaniment, until he had a perfectly formed gem of a tune. Was it inspiration or was it perspiration?

Despite appearing like everyone's favourite uncle, Brahms could actually be extremely difficult and rude. On one occasion the composer Max Bruch came to see him. Bruch was only 5 years younger than Brahms, but was still very eager to show the great Brahms the Violin Concerto that he had just composed. He presented Brahms with the score. Brahms leafed through it silently and when he got to the last page, looked up at the eagerly awaiting Bruch and said: "My dear Max, where do you get such lovely music paper?"

Sibelius Valse Triste

Sibelius wrote this music as part of a suite to accompany a play called 'Death'. The original programme notes are below - as you hear the music try to imagine which part of the story we've got to.

It is night. The son, who has been watching beside the bedside of his sick mother, has fallen asleep from sheer weariness. Gradually a ruddy light is diffused through the room: there is a sound of distant music: the glow and the music steal nearer until the strains of a valse melody float distantly to our ears. The sleeping mother awakens, rises from her bed and, in her long white garment, which takes the semblance of a ball dress, begins to move silently and slowly to and fro. She waves her hands and beckons in time to the music, as though she were summoning a crowd of invisible guests. And now they appear, these strange visionary couples, turning and gliding to an unearthly valse rhythm. The dying woman mingles with the dancers; she strives to make them look into her eyes, but the shadowy guests one and all avoid her glance. Then she seems to sink exhausted on her bed and the music breaks off. Presently she gathers all her strength and invokes the dance once more, with more energetic gestures than before. Back come the shadowy dancers, gyrating in a wild, mad rhythm. The weird gaiety reaches a climax; there is a knock at the door, which flies wide open; the mother utters a despairing cry; the spectral guests vanish; the music dies away. Death stands on the threshold.

Peter Fender Speechless

On Thursday mornings when I was about 14 or 15 school started with an hour of English. And we often had to do essay writing practice. One Thursday morning our teacher asked to write an essay - "OK, off you go, write an essay." "Excuse me sir, an essay about what?" "Oh, just an essay." It was impossible! Writing music can be a bit like that. "Off you go, write a piece of music". So for all you budding composers, a word of advice. Find a framework for your composition. My son Andrew helped a little while ago to write some music to accompany a group of dancers at a Holocaust memorial event. Sibelius wrote incidental music to a play. Strong frameworks. In the following piece the framework is the poems that my mother wrote. Without such a framework I'm not sure I'd have ever completed a piece!

Beethoven Symphony No 1

Whilst Brahms offended people with words, Beethoven offend managed to offend people with his music. Sometimes it's hard to understand this today, but let me point out for you two things in this symphony which caused problems when it was first played just over 200 years ago.

Firstly, the beginning.

One review said "Such a beginning is not suitable for the opening of a grand concert!" What did he mean? The key of the piece is C, and Beethoven starts on a C7 chord, which, by its very nature implies that the music is in F. Listen to a chord of C ... Perfectly happy on its own. And now a chord of C7 ... Can you hear how we need something after that? And for several bars Beethoven toys with his audience before letting on that the music is, after all, in C.

And secondly we have the Minuet. Now the minuet is a dance, in 3 time.

Play the minuet slowly

Beethoven wrote down how fast he wanted it to go, and it was much too fast to dance to! No big deal you might think, but in Vienna 200 years ago dancing was a BIG DEAL. And people thought Beethoven was poking fun at this very serious matter. I rather like Beethoven for that! By the way, it's what in later symphonies he called a Scherzo (a joke).