



UNIVERSITY OF
THE THIRD AGE

Benalla & District Inc.



Programme Notes

8th May, 2020



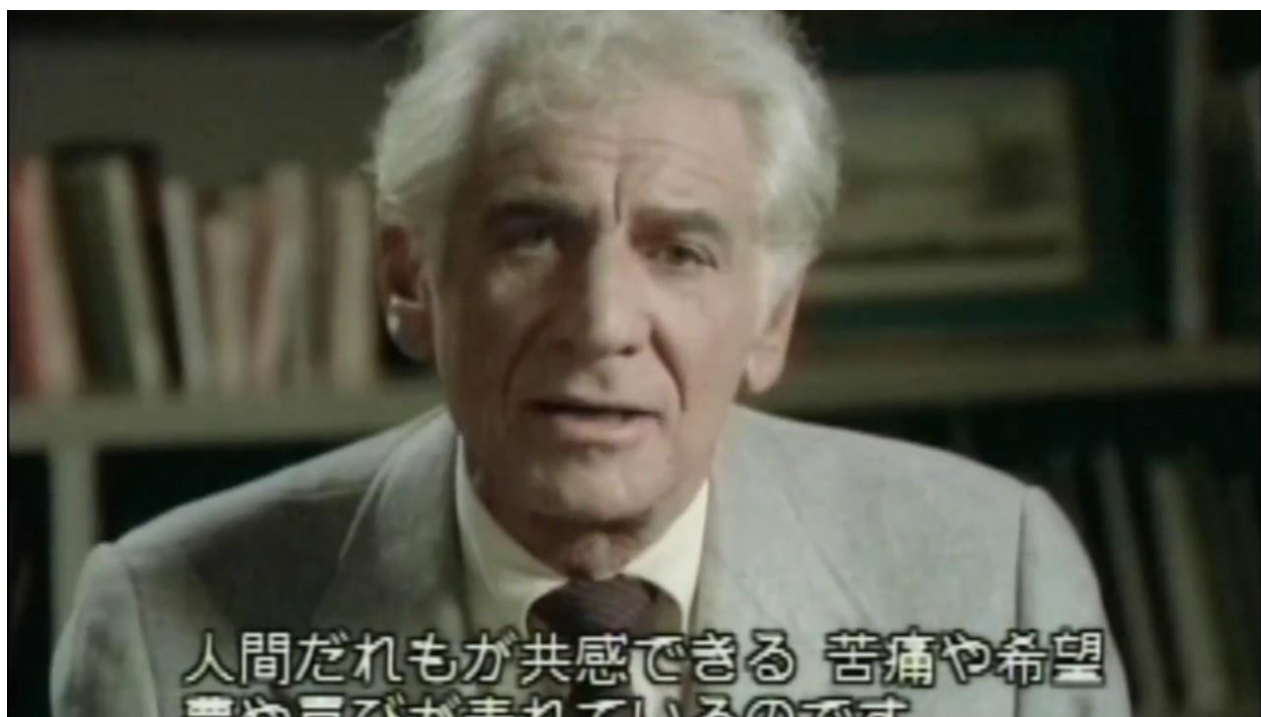
Johannes Brahms



Gustav Holst

BTHVN
2020

About Today's Music Selections



Not being constrained necessarily by time (no, you don't have to listen to the whole programme at one sitting), I have taken the liberty of running a little "overtime" in terms of the length of the music recorded. Mainly this is so as to be able to fit in an informative commentary by Leonard Bernstein (he's a great teacher as well as musician) on the final movement of Brahms's 4th Symphony prior to watching / listening to him conduct the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in performance right back in 1981. The commentary occupies a little less than 10 minutes and the fourth movement some 12 minutes. (The photo above is taken from his commentary presentation, which in spite of the Japanese subtitles, is in English).

That being said what is presented is part of an hour long recording which includes a couple of minutes of interesting preamble about Brahms as well as the complete symphony. I have edited out the first three movements only because some of our group who don't have access to a computer receive the music on a DVD and there is a limit to how much can be contained on a single disc without affecting the quality of the recording. Those who have a computer and wish to view the complete recording will be able to do so via the YouTube link supplied later on in the notes; and I encourage you to do that – of course.

For the month of May the MSO had planned a substantial concert programme and for our two "sessions" this month we are drawing on those offerings for our selections, although not necessarily played by MSO musicians. Having said that, although there is much to choose from, today's choice involves only four pieces of music – A Beethoven piano concerto and his Quintet for piano and wind Instruments both of which will be played in their entirety, plus a smaller composition by Gustav Holst – his St Paul's Suite. And, of course, the abovementioned Brahms.

So, sit back, read, relax and enjoy. And thanks once again to Terry for his technical assistance in bringing this programme to you.

Bill.

Beethoven: Quintet for Piano and Winds in E flat major Opus 16

Beethoven was the first to say “Take five”. Writing on his website, “Slipped Disc”, author and broadcaster Norman Lebrecht said “Stop ten people in a Vienna street and ask them for Beethoven’s greatest innovations. Bet you three Karl Böhm LPs to a Mozart Kugel that not one of them will mention the string quintet. Yet his insertion of a second viola into Haydn’s format of 2 violins, viola and cello was a breakthrough moment of Beethoven’s earliest years, a way of deepening the quartet sound into almost a chamber orchestra”.

Strangely, Lebrecht was referring to a quintet composed in 1801 – Beethoven’s Opus 29. The quintet we hear today is Beethoven’s Opus 16, composed some five years earlier. And even that wasn’t his earliest venture into quintet composition. A year earlier again Beethoven had transcribed his Octet into quintet form known as his Opus 4.



It can be a bit confusing even more: Beethoven published two works simultaneously as Opus 16 – the piano quintet which he then later arranged as a piano quartet. The reason he did this, it seems, is that peoples’ musical ears of the day were more attuned to quartets and therefore as a quartet the work was likely to sell more readily. (‘money makes the world go round’ as Liza Minelli famously sang). Just to add a little more interest, the work is said to have been modelled on Mozart’s piano quintet, K 452.

There are two interesting anecdotes relating to early performances of the piano part. In 1798, the quintet was performed in a concert organized by Salieri and given in the presence of the Emperor. Beethoven (who was the pianist) greatly annoyed the wind players by improvising extensively in the last movement. In 1816, the quintet was included in the farewell concert of violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who had organized the first performance of the work in 1797. On this occasion, the pianist was Czerny, who added his own embellishments to the part, greatly annoying Beethoven.

The introductory section of the quintet is sombrely majestic, almost symphonic in nature, with dramatically contrasting dynamics. At its conclusion, the three main themes of the main, allegro, part of the movement are introduced by the piano and, indeed, what follows is dominated and driven by the piano. The movement is concluded by an extended coda.

In contrast, the slow movement, based on a beautiful, Mozart-like, theme, brings a mood of relaxation. The theme returns a number of times, more embellished on each occasion. Between these statements of the main theme, you will hear episodes in the minor key; the first is introduced by the oboe and the second by the horn.

The rondo Finale is introduced by a hunting theme. In the words of Canadian pianist Anton Kuerti, the movement is “exuberant and witty” and has “substance and virtuosity”.

While the first movement takes about as long to play as the other two movements combined, this in no way diminishes the importance of the rest of the quintet.

Our recording is by Klára Würtz & The Netherlands Wind Soloists. The YouTube link is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKs4ldkOKIA&t=406s>

Gustav Holst: St. Paul's Suite

A Homage to the English Folk Song.

*Copied from an article published by Alex Burns on 6th September 2019
(classicalalexburns.com)*

Context



In the earlier days of his career, Gustav Holst (1874-1934) struggled to earn a living as a full-time composer. In 1904, after holding an array of different teaching positions, he was appointed as Musical Director at St Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith (pictured above). This became his biggest and longest teaching commitment he held in his lifetime. Luckily for Holst, in 1912 the new music wing of St Paul's was open for teaching, and the composer spent extra hours in there composing and using his creativity within music.

(Another source states that when the music wing was added on to the St. Paul's Girls' School, a sound-proof teaching room was built for Holst. For the nearly twenty years of his remaining lifetime, this was where he wrote nearly all of his music. The St. Paul's Suite for the school orchestra is the first composition he wrote there).

As the first work to be composed in the room, the name naturally pays homage to the building that Holst spent a large amount of time in. Arranged for string orchestra, Holst also wrote extra parts in if a full orchestra was necessary at the school. Comprised of four short movements the work is simple, straightforward and pleasing to the ear. Holst, like many of his British contemporaries, took inspiration from British folk songs, with each movement reflecting a different dance, genre or style.



*Blue plaque at St Paul's
Girls' School, London*

The Music

I. Jig (Vivace)

Opening with a classic Jig that fluctuates between 6/8 and 9/8 time, Holst introduces a contrasting theme that develops into an exciting musical conversation between the two melodies. Holst's orchestration for this suite is one of the highlights, with his keen technique in subtly blending melodies being a particular strength. The two themes unite and this bubbly jig comes to a quick close.

II. Ostinato (Presto)

The fast pace of this movement follows on naturally from the first, with the second violins playing the opening theme. This segment of the melody is then passed around the orchestra until a solo viola interrupts the theme. As the title suggests, the ostinato pattern comes from the second violins, who chug through a busy four-note pattern. The first violins try to penetrate this ostinato throughout and only succeed when the second violins abruptly quit four bars before the end of the movement.

III. Intermezzo (Andante con moto)

The musically rich third movement sees a quartet of soloists step to the forefront, with a solo violin and viola starting the movement. The duet between these two instruments sits on top of pizzicato chords from the orchestra. The music in this movement highlights Holst's experimental techniques, which juxtaposes a mystical style led by the violin, and the energetic interludes that come between.

Holst lulls the listener into a false sense of security during this movement, as it is initially set up as a typical slow movement of a suite. However, Holst writes a vivacious fast section that promptly gets the music going. The increasing energy is presented through the growth of dynamics, mood and musicianship between the various parts.

IV. Finale (The Dargason – Allegro)

If you think you might recognise this movement then it may be because it is an almost note-for-note transcription of the fourth movement of Holst's *Second Suite in F*. The opening Dargason theme opens the work and acts as the ostinato. The theme is passed around the whole orchestra, with each instrument getting a fair share of ownership over the melody. Dargason is a type of English country dance, with one of its main qualities being its relentless nature.



Holst counterbalances this later on with a beautiful arrangement of Greensleeves, which the lower strings lead. The two melodies unite and are played together to formally end the suite.

The *St. Paul's Suite* has become one of his most well-known works. His compositional techniques were still being explored at this point, and were evidently leading up to his most famous suite – *The Planets*.

It is played here by the Euphonico String Orchestra in Zduńska Wola, Poland; conducted by Rafał Nicze. The recording is part of the 3rd Polish Nationwide Schools' Symphonic Competition in May 2015.

The YouTube link is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBjkb9bBTU4>

Johannes Brahms *Symphony No. 4 in E minor Opus 98*

Acknowledgement: Programme Notes, Seattle Symphony Orchestra – seattlesymphony.org)



Johannes Brahms' four symphonies have been cornerstones of the orchestral repertory for well over a century, and with good reason. More than any composer, Brahms succeeded in combining the qualities of taut subliminal drama and imposing sonic architecture that Beethoven had made the hallmarks of his symphonic music. His Fourth Symphony, a singular masterpiece, melds poetic invention with the most thoughtful treatment of musical ideas and formal design.

Brahms composed this work during the summers of 1884 and 1885, which he spent at the small town of Mürzzuschlag in the Austrian countryside. This would be the composer's final essay as a symphonist and his penultimate work for orchestra. Although a dozen years remained to Brahms, only the Double Concerto, Op. 102, followed this symphony in the line of his orchestral compositions.

The Fourth also proved the most difficult of Brahms' symphonies for his contemporaries to apprehend. The inner circle of the composer's Viennese friends, who heard a preview performance on two pianos in September, 1885, generally found it troubling. Eduard Hanslick, an influential music critic, found it like "two very clever people arguing," and Max Kalbeck, who would become Brahms' biographer, went to the composer the following day to plead for revision of the work. Even Theodore Billroth, an intelligent physician whose musical perceptiveness Brahms greatly respected, found it at first "too massive, too tremendous, too full," though he discovered that with closer acquaintance the music became "more and more magnificent."

While Brahms undoubtedly felt disappointed at the failure of his closest friends to embrace the new symphony, he probably expected as much. He was well aware that the character of the work was more rigorous than genial, its effect bracing rather than beguiling. Nevertheless, he refused to alter the score apart from minor details of instrumentation, which he revised following an initial orchestral reading in October, 1885.

Brahms may have been surprised, but surely was gratified, that the symphony was received enthusiastically on this and subsequent occasions. The Fourth is the only one of Brahms' symphonies to launch directly into the principal theme of its first movement without so much as a note of introduction. This abrupt beginning disturbed a number of early listeners, including the great violinist Joseph Joachim, who urged Brahms to add a few measures of preparation. The movement's two main subjects are well defined and strongly contrasted, and Brahms develops both ideas with his customary skill.

Many commentators have remarked on the modal contour of the melody that forms the basis of the second movement, and Brahms uses its tonal ambiguity to fashion uncommonly beautiful harmonies and melodic variations. By contrast, the scherzo is perhaps the most boisterous music the composer ever produced.



But Brahms has saved his trump card for the finale. This is constructed as a passacaglia, a set of ongoing variations over a repeating eight-note theme presented at the outset by the winds. Passacaglia form is an old one and was favoured by composers of the Baroque period. It also is daunting in its strictness. Yet its severity is to a large extent the source of its strength. Brahms responds to the constraints of the passacaglia procedure with music of tremendous power and expressiveness, the rigid framework of eight-measure phrases serving as a foil for his creativity. The whole movement is carefully shaped, subsiding from an imperious opening sequence to a tranquil central group of variations before building inexorably to a final climax. In its inspired discourse and formal perfection, Brahms's last utterance as a symphonist must be counted among his greatest achievements.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:

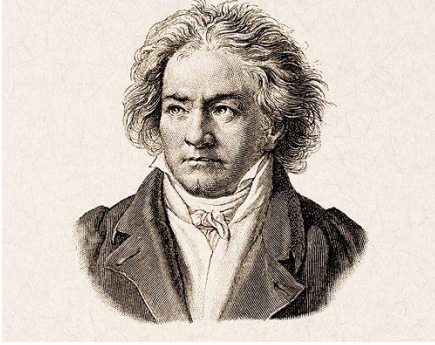
The first theme of the symphony's initial movement is a marvel of economy, its constituent two-note figures merging and expanding to form a long, expressive melody. Leonard Bernstein once described the contrasting second subject as a kind of strange tango, and if this does not do justice to its character, it does serve to identify it. Brahms approaches the reprise of the opening material through a hushed passage conveying a wonderful sense of pregnancy, and the initial theme returns quietly, at first, and in elongated rhythms in the woodwinds.

A robust horn call heralds the main theme of the second movement, which suggests an Austrian pilgrims' hymn. Brahms' continual variations of this subject are ingenious and at times moving in their eloquence, nowhere more so than in the soaring violin melody that follows the initial presentation of the theme by clarinets and bassoons. The ensuing scherzo fits Brahms' description, in a letter to a friend, as "fairly noisy, with three timpani, triangle and piccolo."

The finale's generative idea is the austere theme presented at the outset by the winds. This theme, or at least its attendant harmonic sequence, repeats continually over the course of the movement. With each recurrence, Brahms varies its rhythms or instrumentation, adds counter-melodies and otherwise transforms the initially spare idea. The music builds to an initial climax, then subsides to a mournful flute solo. This brings on a more placid central section; but a return of the passacaglia theme in the stern form that opened the movement plunges us back into a more dramatic vein, and the music rises powerfully to its conclusion.

The YouTube link to the Bernstein / Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra recording (1981) is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM2ndQGbUBQ&t=138s>



After completing this concerto in 1806, the composer struggled to find anyone to perform it. So the work sat on a shelf, gathering dust, until its public premiere on 22 December 1808.

Just imagine that you are the most famous composer in the world. Your public adores you. You've had huge success already with all sorts of works. And now, you've written your fourth piano concerto. Deciding who should play the solo piano part could surely be considered an afterthought. Every pianist in Europe would jump at the chance – wouldn't they?

Apparently not. At least, not in the case of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4. The eventual soloist? One Ludwig van Beethoven. The man clearly had astonishing stamina. In the same concert, he conducted the premiere performances of his Symphony No. 5 and No. 6! The same concert (at the Theater an der Wien) also included the concert aria *Ah! perfido*, movements from the Mass in C, and the Choral Fantasy.

But never mind the stamina (and maybe the determination) of the composer; think about the stamina of the audience: the weather was bitterly cold, and the audience sat for four hours in discomfort, listening to a long series of new and difficult compositions, during which there was more than one musical catastrophe.

Johann Friedrich Reichardt, a well-known musical traveller, writer, and former music director to the King of Prussia, happened to be in the theatre that night, as a guest of one of Beethoven's patrons. Reichardt was no musical conservative – he helped cultivate the German art song, paving the way for Schubert – but even he had trouble listening to four hours of Beethoven's new music. "I accepted the kind offer of Prince Lobkowitz to let me sit in his box with hearty thanks," Reichardt remembered. "There we continued, in the bitterest cold, too, from half past six to half past ten, and experienced the truth that one can easily have too much of a good thing – and still more of a loud."



Reichardt

Though the audience generally applauded in the end, the event left hard feelings. During the rehearsals the orchestra refused to play if Beethoven was in the same room. He needed to listen as best he could from the foyer of the hall and transmit his wishes to the concertmaster, who would in turn transmit them to the players. His increasing deafness made his active participation in the performance continually more difficult. Indeed, the evening of the concerto's public premiere was the last time that Beethoven ever appeared before the public as a piano soloist.

But that was the first public performance. The concerto had already had a couple of private airings nearly two years earlier at the home of one of Beethoven's supporters: a certain Prince Lobkowitz a famous patron of the arts in Vienna and who maintained a private orchestra at his palace. It is claimed that his sister-in-law said of him : "This Prince was as kind-hearted as a child and the most foolish music enthusiast. He played music from dusk to dawn and spent a fortune on musicians. Innumerable musicians gathered in his house, whom he treated regally."



Joseph Franz Maximilian von Lobkowitz

Beethoven has Felix Mendelssohn to thank for the continued popularity of his Piano Concerto No. 4. The piece was in danger of being eclipsed by the many other great works being composed by Beethoven at the time – not least, those two symphonies. Some twenty-five years after its composition, though, Mendelssohn championed it in concert halls across Europe, performing it in England in 1847. In many ways, it remains eclipsed today, primarily by the Emperor Piano Concerto that was to follow it. But Beethoven has only himself to blame for that.



The Theatre an der Wien as it appeared in 1812. The theatre still exists and thrives today as a major venue for opera

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 emerges with unexpected gentleness. In 1807, when this music was first heard, any reasonably informed member of a Viennese audience would have known that a concerto should begin with a long introduction during which the orchestra presents some of the first movement's principal themes. In the case of a piano concerto, the soloist might play along, underpinning the orchestral texture; but the featured instrument would not move into the spotlight until the introduction had come to a resolute conclusion. Beethoven had at least respected that aspect of the Classical mould in his first three piano concertos.

Imagine, then, the astonishment with which listeners, conditioned in this way, must have heard Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto when it was new. Rather than the authoritarian sounds of a full orchestra, the first notes they heard were played softly on the piano, the gentle murmuring of a theme based on repeated notes and simple harmonies.

And then – just as surprising – following its five-measure presentation of the thematic germ of this movement, the piano simply withdraws, not to be heard from again for another 69 measures.

One might say that the silent piano is unusually "present" during the measures of orchestral introduction, precisely because it made its mark so indelibly at the outset.



The Beethoven memorial now displayed on the exterior wall of the Theatre an der Wien. The text reads, "Ludwig van Beethoven lived in the Theatre an der Wien in 1803 and 1804. Parts of his opera, the Third Symphony, and the Kreutzer Sonata were written here. Fidelio and other works received their first performance in this house."

Apart from the unorthodox decision to begin with the solo piano, the musical material itself is a bombshell. The piano's opening chords are in G major, but the orchestra's response is in B-major, a key only distantly related to the harmonic region marked by the piano's theme. The relationship of key regions spaced a third apart — such as G and B — would become an obsession of composers as the 19th century progressed. As usual, Beethoven was at the forefront.

The second movement, too, is extraordinary, even apart from its uncharacteristic brevity (lasting as it does only about five minutes). One music theorist has suggested that this slow movement bore some relationship to Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* — specifically, to how Orpheus used music to tame wild beasts. Another musicologist has suggested that the whole concerto, not just the slow movement — seems to follow point by point a popular version of the Orpheus legend that was presented as street theatre in the Vienna of Beethoven's day.

An aggressive third movement begins without pause from the second. Strings burst with a flourish, declaiming an energetic tune. The soloist quickly joins in the merrymaking with instant rapport. Trumpets and drums add accent and colour. A lyrical second theme emerges, but the consistent mood is propulsive. A long coda brings the concerto to a close.



Listen now to the complete concerto. The soloist is Krystian Zimmern accompanied by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under the Baton, once again, of Leonard Bernstein — in a remastered recording from a concert given in 1989. Note the excellent camera work for the soloist.

For those reading these notes not having the recording, the YouTube Link to it is:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1ph_jLOawE&t=446s