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CHERUBINI 1760-1842

Overture *Médée* (1797)

There are works which have enjoyed the private esteem of musicians but which have never really captured the interest of a larger public. Even a great work like Mozart's *Idomeneo* is perilously near to falling into this category. The whole of Cherubini's output lies within it. The operas he wrote for Paris during the last decade of the eighteenth century – *Lodoïska*, *Médée*, and *Les deux journées* – evoked high praise from his contemporaries that was to be echoed by later composers. Beethoven, who attended the performances of them in Vienna in 1802-3, valued them highly as he did Cherubini's masses; Mendelssohn found the first three bars of *Les deux journées* to be worth 'more than our entire repertoire' – an exaggeration, but not without point; and Brahms, writing of *Médée*, referred to it as the opera 'which we musicians regard among ourselves as the summit of dramatic music'. Yet the history of performances of these works has been a checkered one, and it is only such events as the 1953 revival of *Médée* with Callas in the title role which have enabled Cherubini's music to be seen today as something of more than mere historical interest.

Inevitably the listener who approaches the overture to *Médée* from a knowledge of Beethoven's overtures will hardly escape the impression that in it he hears many pre-echoes of *Egmont*. The overtures share the same key, and are imbued with a similar dignity and pathos. Cherubini's orchestral sound inhabits the same world as Beethoven's; indeed, the passage leading to the first restatement of the opening idea, with its fine build up of tension liberated in a crescendo confined to the last four bars, would not seem at all out of place in a work of Beethoven's. The descending phrase played by violas and bassoons which follows the opening *tutti* paragraph must surely have been in Beethoven's mind when he wrote the opening of the Allegro in *Egmont*, and the scale motive of the transition has a similar parallel; the over-emphatic reiteration of the tonic chord at the close also has echoes in Beethoven's works – both the device itself and the overemphasis.

But we should not listen to Cherubini merely because he reminds us of a greater composer though we shall understand Beethoven better if we trouble to listen to Cherubini at all. There are faults in *Médée*: one is a tendency to repetition without development which almost creates a feeling of great activity undertaken merely to stay in the same place. If the irrepensible forward urge is lacking, however, that marks the greatest

achievements in symphonic writing of the period there is still much to admire, and if in a Cherubini overture the whole may be no greater than the parts, the parts have qualities sufficient to justify their performance from time to time.

ALBINONI 1671-1750

Oboe Concerto in B flat, opus 7 no.3 (c.1710)

Allegro Adagio Allegro

STRAVINSKY 1882-1971

Dumbarton Oaks (1937-8)

Tempo giusto Allegretto Con moto

'A little concerto in the style of the Brandenburg Concertos' was Stravinsky's own description of *Dumbarton Oaks*. The orchestral requirements of the work, three each of violins and violas, pairs of cellos, basses, and horns, with a flute, a clarinet, and a bassoon, remind us immediately of the model as does the way in which the violins or violas are treated, sometimes with the groups divided for solo purposes and sometimes bringing them together in unison for *tutti* effects as Bach does in the 3rd Brandenburg. Stravinsky's musical language, as in many works of his neo-classical phase, owes much to Bach but to describe the theme given to the violas in the first bar as an 'insolent borrowing' as Leibowitz did when the concerto was first performed is absurd. If composers were to have their borrowings restricted even to the extent of Stravinsky's in this work, the art of music would not have progressed very far, for music is an organism which grows by feeding upon itself.

The motive B flat – D – E flat is all-pervasive. Adherents of Reti's principle of thematically derived tonal organisation will find significance in the choice of D major for the theme on the two horns which affords an important contrasting element in the movement, though it too grows from the germinal motive. A contrast of a different kind is provided by a fugue (the subject, first appearing in the violas, again motivically derived) whose exposition is allotted to strings only. Four entries of the subject are followed by an episode and a stretto in which the wind instruments re-enter. A closing section of 42 bars in which not a single note lies outside the diatonic key of E flat, whilst further developing the material, functions as a concluding ritornello.

A linking passage (used again before the finale) leads straight into the ternary slow movement. After the rhythmic complexities

of the *Tempo giusto* its regularly maintained 3/8 time looks straightforward. But the effect is not, for the theme, which could equally well be written in 2/8 time, is teasingly at cross purposes with the metre, continually trying to find the main beat but never succeeding. The middle section, with its richly divided strings over a characteristic ostinato bass, affords a complete contrast of texture, but the flute is inclined to irresponsible gambolling in both, a course it pursues irrepensibly throughout the whole of the return of the main section.

The finale, a sort of gruff march with a stamping bass, strident chords, and an irregular metre, seems to move on to the world of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, but a central episode looks back again to the eighteenth century, though now it is Pergolesi-Pulcinella rather than Bach who seems to be looking over the composer's shoulder.

INTERVAL

TOVEY 1875-1940

Canon for Twelve Violins

BERWALD 1796-1868

Sinfonie Singulière (1845)

Allegro fuocosio Adagio-Scherzo (Allegro assai)-Adagio Finale (Presto)

Though far more talented than many musicians of his day the Swedish composer Franz Berwald was more highly rewarded by his contemporaries as the successful manager of a glass factory and director of a fashionable orthopaedic institute than for his compositions. Perhaps Sweden was unready for a symphonic composer in the first half of the nineteenth century: it was certainly unready for one of his originality. The comparatively recent commencement of a complete edition of his music, which includes symphonic, chamber, and operatic works, should make possible a fairer estimate of his work than was ever accorded him during his lifetime.

The *Sinfonie Singulière* was written in 1845 though it was not performed until 1905. Three of Berwald's symphonies have French titles, a fact which hints at his musical sympathies. He had a high regard for the music of Berlioz and undoubtedly the treatment of thematic relationships between movements in the *Symphonie Fantastique* influenced him.

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Berwald's harmonic, tonal, and formal audacities aroused the ire of his critics and had the *Singulière* been performed in his day it would doubtless have been subjected to similar comment. The treatment of dissonances at the beginning of the first movement is unusual though the chords themselves are not. Today it merely strikes us as fresh and inventive and curiously anticipatory of later Scandinavian music. The first *fortissimo* in the movement is striking too, not because the pedal point is unusually treated (there are far more unusual things in Beethoven) but because of the bold insistence on the pedal note in the brass which emphasises its dissonant relationship to the chord progressions. It is the return of this *tutti* in the subdominant that forms the culminating point of the development and communicates the sense of recapitulation: the quiet opening of the symphony does not return until the end of the movement. There are precedents for subdominant recapitulations in Schubert, Beethoven, and Mozart and the complete or partial reversal of material in this section was common enough from the work of the Mannheim school onwards. It is more difficult to find a precedent that Berwald might have followed in the second movement where the scherzo is enclosed within the slow movement. (He had already done this in the Septet of 1828 and was to repeat the device in works such as the E flat Quartet of 1849.) The Adagio introduces several ideas the last of which, a *pianissimo* melody over a pedal point, breathes the very essence of Romanticism. The opening phrase of this returns in the woodwind in the course of the scherzo, a movement which has earned Berwald the title of 'the Swedish Berlioz', though compared with 'Queen Mab' its effect is rather earthbound. Tonally the design is unusual: the opening section moves from G major not to its dominant, but to its supertonic, A major. The recapitulation begins in F major so that with little modification it closes in G, ready for the return of the Adagio which is truncated and reverses the order of themes.

The finale begins in the tonic minor with a stormy and agitated theme which calls certain passages of Weber to mind. The mood is emphasised by a long section in the subdominant minor after which the main idea returns and leads to a contrasting group of themes in E flat, the first quiet and canonic beginning in the strings, the second beginning even more quietly in the woodwind but destined to assume heroic proportions. It is this theme (an embarrassment to the squeamish) which eventually brings the work to a close in C major, but before this the movement finds room for a return of the most expressive moment of the Adagio. M.T.