

TONIGHT'S REPERTOIRE

WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO HEAR

BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Overture, *Coriolan* (1807)

SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)

Cello Concerto No 1 (1959)

Allegretto

Moderato

Cadenza – Attacca

Allegro con moto

LIGETI (1923–2006)

Ramifications (1968)

SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

Symphony No 4 in C minor 'Tragic' (1816)

Adagio molto – Allegro vivace

Andante

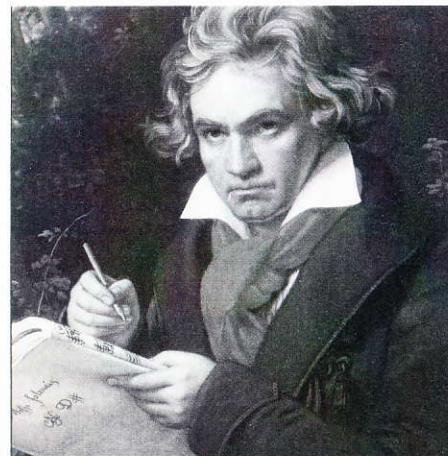
Menuetto: Allegro vivace – Trio

Allegro

Tragedy stalks through tonight's programme like a spectre. Well, that might be overstating things slightly in the case of the most self-descriptively tragic work. Schubert's own naming of his Fourth Symphony was probably just high spirits on the part of the teenage composer. But we'll come back to that.

The most genuinely tragic work tonight is probably the first. Beethoven wrote his *Coriolan* Overture, not as many assume for Shakespeare's great Roman drama *Coriolanus*, but for a lesser-known adaptation of the same story by Austrian dramatist Heinrich Joseph von Collin. This later play was clearly a work Beethoven admired, though we don't know whether that's because he saw it at its successful but brief run in Vienna in 1802, or simply because he'd read the script. Doubtless there was an element of self-identification with the heroism and integrity – and, we should probably admit, obstinacy – of the legendary Roman general who, having defeated the Volsci tribe in battle, becomes so disillusioned with the Roman populace and Senate that he eventually switches sides, joining his erstwhile enemies and leading them in battle towards the Eternal City. Things can only end badly, for Coriolanus at least: his mother and wife persuade him to call off the attack but, having burnt his bridges with both camps, he takes his own life.

The 1802 performances of von Collin's *Coriolan* were given with music adapted from Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*. But, following successful concert performances of Beethoven's new Overture at two subscription concerts sponsored by the composer's patron Prince Franz Joseph



Ludwig van Beethoven

von Lobkowitz, a one-off, full-length performance of the play was organised for 24 April 1807 at Vienna's Imperial Theatre, solely as a vehicle for Beethoven's Overture. (It can't have been a coincidence that Prince Lobkowitz was one of the theatre's directors.)

It's not surprising that Beethoven's *Coriolan* Overture provoked such action, however. It's a masterpiece of musical drama, encapsulating the play's essential ingredients in a mere eight or so minutes. Following an orchestral call to attention, its stormy main theme serves to represent Coriolan's resolve and belligerence, while the tender theme that follows surely represents his mother and wife's pleadings. In the central development section, the Coriolan theme gradually loses its bite as the Roman commander works through his inner struggles, until he seems to simply fade away at the piece's tragic close.

If there's tragedy in Shostakovich's breezy 1959 Cello Concerto No 1, it's in the work's memories of the strictures and persecution



Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich

that the composer had endured earlier in his career. Stalin died six years before Shostakovich wrote the Concerto, and with his passing came something of an easing of cultural restrictions. It was during this period, too, that the great Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich toured extensively with the composer at the piano, playing, among other things, Shostakovich's own Cello Sonata. Rostropovich was dying for a concerto from his friend and colleague, but he knew he couldn't broach the subject directly. Shostakovich's wife Margarita had warned the cellist: "If you want him to write something for you, the only recipe I can give you is this: never ask him or talk to him about it."

Nonetheless, this technique seemed to work, for Rostropovich received a score of the brand new Concerto in the post in the summer of 1959, with no prior warning. He memorised the solo part – one of the most technically challenging in the cello repertoire – in a remarkable four days, then played it through to a delighted Shostakovich at his dacha in Komarovo.

"IF YOU WANT HIM TO WRITE SOMETHING FOR YOU, THE ONLY RECIPE I CAN GIVE YOU IS THIS: NEVER ASK HIM OR TALK TO HIM ABOUT IT." Shostakovich's wife Margarita had warned Rostropovich

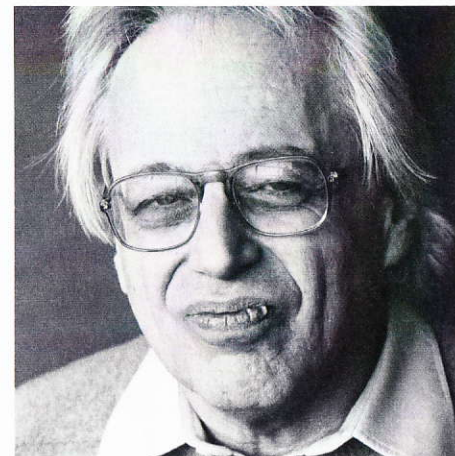
Other than sheer enthusiasm, however, there was a more serious reason for Rostropovich's speedy learning of the piece: he had to prepare for a meeting of the Soviet Composers' Union which would decide whether the new Concerto could be accepted and performed, or whether it was anti-Soviet and possibly even pro-Western. Shostakovich paced at the back of the small room while the panel listened and judged, but the work was approved for national and international audiences. Its official premiere – with Rostropovich as soloist and the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yevgeny Mravinsky, in the Great Hall of the Leningrad Conservatory – followed on 4 October that year.

The Concerto quickly established itself as a modern classic, and also as one of Shostakovich's most personal utterances, written for a slimmed-down orchestra (the smallest of any of his major orchestral works) that allows the cello soloist to shine throughout.

And it's the soloist who leads right from

the work's opening, with a version of Shostakovich's DSCH musical monogram – his own initials transformed into musical notes – that forms the basis for the whole first movement, with a solo horn – the cellist's alter ego within the orchestra – bringing things back in line if they stray too far off the subject. The second movement begins gently, but it builds to a shattering climax before the cello recalls its opening theme with ghostly accompaniment from the celeste. Following the extended solo cadenza of the third movement, Shostakovich's musical monogram re-emerges in the sardonic finale, battling against the Georgian folksong 'Suliko' – notoriously Stalin's favourite tune – in a tense recollection of Shostakovich's earlier battles.

Ramifications, written in 1968 by the Hungarian composer György Ligeti, seems to turn away, not only from any particularly tragic theme, but also from any emotional or storytelling aspect in music at all, to focus instead on the nitty-gritty of sound itself. Ligeti splits his string ensemble into two groups,



György Ligeti

tuned a quarter-tone apart – that's somewhere in the gaps between a piano's keys. The result is intentionally dissonant and out-of-tune-sounding, and Ligeti weaves together minute musical ideas that it's virtually impossible to identify individually, but which intertwine in a constantly shifting cloud of sonorities. If it weren't for the sonic journey that Ligeti charts in his strangely mesmerising piece, you'd be tempted to think it was all about immersing yourself in an alien musical landscape, or simply wallowing in a sea of weirdly exquisite sound.

Tonight's concert closes with the most avowedly 'tragic' of this evening's pieces and, while Schubert's Fourth Symphony is certainly the most serious-minded of the six symphonies he wrote while in his teens and early 20s, its 'Tragic' title feels rather like youthful self-dramatising, perhaps to pique the interest of publishers or impresarios.

Schubert wrote the Symphony while working as an all-purpose teacher at



Franz Peter Schubert

his father's school in Vienna, where he was feeling increasingly over-qualified, and nurturing ambitions to write for larger, more professional ensembles than the small amateur orchestra that had grown out of his family's string quartet. And though it undoubtedly displays ambition, the Symphony also looks back with fondness to the music of Haydn and Mozart, rather more than to the revolutionary works of Beethoven. Indeed, the slow introduction to its first movement seems modelled on the 'Representation of Chaos' from Haydn's *Creation*, even if the lighter, faster main section that follows is pure Schubert. The bittersweet second movement unexpectedly erupts twice into furious music, but it's quickly absorbed back into the lyrical mood. Following the third movement scherzo, the finale plays games with running accompaniment figures, and closes with a return of the Symphony's opening octaves, now signalling a triumphantly happy ending. Perhaps whatever tragedy there was has dissipated after all.

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