

Total performance time: approximately 125 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Aurora Orchestra: Strauss and Beethoven

Aurora Orchestra

Annemarie Federle horn

Nicholas Collon conductor

Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

Horn Concerto No.1 in E flat, Op.11 (1882–3) 22'

- i. Allegro –*
- ii. Andante –*
- iii. Allegro*

Metamorphosen (1945) 26'

INTERVAL

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Symphony No.3 in E flat, Op.55, 'Eroica' (1805) 55'

- i. Allegro con brio*
- ii. Marcia funebre: Adagio assai*
- iii. Scherzo: Allegro vivace*
- iv. Finale: Allegro molto – Poco andante – Presto*

Both title and subtitle sound forbiddingly abstract. In fact, **Metamorphosen** is the most urgently personal thing Richard Strauss ever created. It was composed quickly during March and April, 1945, a month after an Allied air raid destroyed the old Saxon capital, Dresden. Nearly two years earlier, after the bombing of the Munich National Theatre – a building with long, proud associations for Strauss – he'd jotted down a sketch for an elegiac theme. Now, with Dresden in ruins, some kind of creative response was desperately needed: 'I am in a mood of despair! The Goethehaus, the world's greatest sanctuary, destroyed! My beautiful Dresden – Weimar – Munich, all gone!'

Whatever one thinks about the rights and wrongs of the Allied bombing campaign, or about Strauss's priorities as to whom or what to mourn, for anyone who revered German High Culture (as Strauss did), the sense of devastation would have been overwhelming. Strauss now was clear about where the blame really lay: '12 years of the rule of bestiality, ignorance and illiteracy under the greatest criminals, who brought about the destruction of 2000 years of German civilisation and, through a criminal rabble of soldiers, razed irreplaceable buildings and monuments to art.'

Strauss poured out his feelings of horror and irreparable loss in *Metamorphosen* – the title a term coined by Goethe to describe the spiritual development of an individual, but here used by Strauss in a tragic sense to chart the aspiration and eventual abysmal collapse of German culture itself. At first all is magnificently contained: slow, noble, with gorgeous languishing harmonies for cellos and basses. Soon afterwards two violas introduce a repeated-note theme with a sobbing falling figure. After this, landmarks in the seamless musical argument are difficult to pick out, but eventually the entire ensemble explodes in a rapturous, tumultuous C major at breakneck speed. Soon afterwards comes tragic reversal, as we are plunged back into the original lament. Then, at the last moment, the violas' theme – and particularly its sobbing descending figure – is revealed as something truly iconic in German culture: the Funeral March from Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony. Its theme sounds finally on basses, marked 'IN MEMORIAM!' in the score. There is nothing more to be said.

How very different all this is from Strauss's first masterpiece, the **First Horn Concerto**, composed in 1883, when Strauss was 19 and still a student at Munich University. 'Happy days of my youth', he later recalled, 'when I was still able to work to order' – a strange remark, given that Strauss never lost his formidable fluency, even in old age. The First Horn Concerto is very much the kind of work one would expect a happy, confident young man to write. It is full of life, the flow of good tunes is unstoppable, and while influences can be heard (principally Brahms and Schumann), it clearly has a strong voice of its own.

The choice of the horn as soloist is a portent of things to come. Strauss's horn writing is one of the most thrilling elements in his mature orchestral style. Although Strauss wasn't a horn-player, his father, Franz Strauss, was principal horn of the Munich Court Orchestra. The sound of his father practising was therefore part of Strauss's musical home life throughout his childhood, and he must have picked up a lot about the capabilities of the instrument

from what he heard. In later years he would often work his orchestral horn sections hard, but his writing is never unidiomatic.

The concerto is laid out broadly on a three-movement plan. Both outer movements are cloudless, exuberant creations, while in the central Andante the horn shows its more lyrical, melancholic side. But the movements are so skilfully dovetailed, and the material so craftily interwoven, that it feels more like a continuous unfolding (something else Strauss clearly learned from Schumann). The moods may be strongly contrasted, but they're clearly different facets of the same rich personality.

The First Horn Concerto had its first performance at Meiningen on 4 March 1885, with the horn player Gustav Leinhos as soloist and the conductor Hans von Bülow. Bülow had initially been unimpressed with Strauss, calling him 'unripe and precocious... I miss the spirit of youthful invention'. But the Horn Concerto changed his view completely. 'Stick with him' he advised Strauss's then doubtful publisher, 'In five years he will make you money'. It turned out to be a remarkably accurate prophecy.

And so to the **Beethoven** – and that 'iconic' German symphony. Actually, the original inspiration seems to have come from outside the German-speaking lands. At some stage Beethoven made the decision to dedicate his 'Heroic' Third Symphony to the French Revolution's self-made *generalissimo* and world leader. Then, in 1804, he learned that Napoleon had proclaimed himself Emperor, and tore out the dedication in fury. When the Symphony appeared in print two years later, the title was simply, 'Sinfonia eroica, composed in memory of a great man'. That 'in memory' is telling: in 1806 Napoleon was still very much alive.

All the same, Beethoven's belief in heroism and in the possibility of human beings transforming their political destiny proved more robust. It is that belief that remains relevant to the *Eroica* Symphony. The first movement is one of Beethoven's most truly heroic creations, brilliantly conveying the effect of epic conflict and of striving towards a goal. It appears to end in triumph – or at least the promise of triumph; which only makes the contrast with the sombre Funeral March that follows all the more extreme. This movement's emotional range – from dignified mourning, to frenzied hope, to depictions of grief in which the music almost literally 'breaks down' – is remarkable; and yet the formal control is as impressive as the power of the feelings expressed.

The Scherzo that follows is one of Beethoven's most exhilarating symphonic dance movements, with some dazzling writing for the horns in the central Trio. Then, after a bracing orchestral flourish, a skeletal *pizzicato* figure for strings launches the finale. Gradually the textures fill out, until the skeletal figure turns out to be the bass for a joyous theme on high woodwind, then strings. This audacious movement blends elements of Classical variation, sonata form and fugue into a new kind of dynamic super-structure which, at the same time, completes the 'story' presented in the first movement. Years later, when Beethoven was asked which was his favourite amongst his symphonies, he replied without hesitation, 'The Eroica'.