

Orchestra dell'Arte

Stories, Sagas and Folk Tales

Tung Auditorium 22 February 2025 at 7.30pm

For many years, classical composers have drawn upon folk melodies, from their own countries and from others, to add to their works. Those prominent in this are Liszt, Grieg, Vaughan-Williams, Delius and Bartok.

What we think of as folk music usually has one of two origins, one is simply music and song with no known composer – the well-known song *Greensleeves* was once thought to have been composed by Henry VIII, but this has now been brought into doubt, as that style of song, originating in Italy, didn't become popular in this country until after the King's death. The other accepted definition of the term is that the song or music has been passed down solely by the oral tradition, by friends and family members performing these songs for their own entertainment.

There must be many thousands of such songs that have been lost forever, but we are fortunate that there have been visionaries such as Cecil Sharp, Vaughan-Williams and Frederick Delius, all of them musicians who felt it an important task to travel widely and to collect songs from the oral tradition before they were lost to memory.

At the turn of the 20th century, Ralph Vaughan-Williams, having recently come out of Cambridge with suitable musical qualifications, but with no fixed course of employment ahead of him, embarked on a similar career to Cecil Sharp, and travelled widely, also collecting oral-tradition folk music. This period was enormously valuable to him and it provided a sound palette that would frame his later series of nine wonderful symphonies and other works, still widely performed worldwide.

Norwegian Dances – Edvard Grieg:

Grieg was the Scandinavian composer of note in the years leading up to the start of the twentieth century. Well-known mainly for his splendid piano concerto, Grieg was prolific, writing many works for piano, voice and orchestra. His *Symphony No 1 in C* is a romping festival of gaiety and lightness.

The *Norwegian Dances* were published in 1881, and is a suite of four contrasting folk dances. All of the dances have the same three-section construction, with either a fast-slow-fast layout, or the reverse. All four dances radiate a wonderful contrast in styles, from the march, to the slow and pleading and to frenzied outbursts.

Violin Concerto – Peter Erasmus Lange-Müller:

One other name on the programme list might not be so well-known, but will certainly be a very welcome addition to the concert. The splendidly-named *Peter Erasmus Lange-Müller* was a Danish composer and pianist who turned out a gigantic quantity of music around the turn of the 20th century. He wrote two symphonies, many pieces for piano, songs and also this wonderful violin concerto.

This three-movement concerto, composed in 1902, is a sumptuous example of Romantic music at its very best. With sweeping melodies and heroic writing for the soloist, this performance is set to be the great triumph that it was when the same performers gave this concerto its UK premiere a number of years ago in St George's Hall, Liverpool.

Once again, it will be a pleasure to welcome back the same soloist that played it previously with the Dellarte players. *Ofer Falk* is the ex-leader of the Allegri Quartet, and is well-known as a soloist.

Slavonic Dance No 9 – Antonin Dvorak:

The Slavonic Dances are in two sets, each of eight dances, the first set from 1878 and the second set, from which this piece is drawn, from 1886.

The first series (op. 46) was one of the works that propelled Dvorak to world-wide fame. All eight are unashamedly drawn from the turbulent and lilting Czech folk music that was so much part of Dvorak's upbringing. None of the dances actually use original melodies, but the styles are precisely copied from traditional rhythmic patterns and structures.

The set of dances were originally written for two pianos, but Dvorak was later persuaded to orchestrate them by his publisher, Simrock.

The second set (Op. 72) was written following a request from Simrock for more of the same, following the reception given by the public to the original set of eight.

We will play the first dance from Set 2, sometimes numbered as number 9 or as Set 2, number 1. In B major, it is a fast and lively *Odzemek* dance. Dvorak has certainly given the orchestra a challenge, as instead of writing some of the music in a more accessible A flat minor, he has stayed in the sharps range, and the players are given a real test of mental agility by having to play in the unusual key of G sharp minor.

Romanian Dances – Bela Bartok:

This set of dances were set by Bartok in a number of different versions – solo piano, violin and piano, string orchestra and this version for small orchestra, written in 1917.

They are all based on melodies he heard in the Transylvanian countryside. There are six movements, most of the quite short and some are directed to be played *attaca*, ie going from one to the next without a pause.

Suite from Háry János – Zoltán Kodály:

Taken from a folk opera based on a comic tale about an army veteran who is known for telling tall tales of his former exploits, this orchestral suite of six items is one of great contrast and features atmospheric and surprisingly modern-sounding writing for the orchestra.

Kodály has written the most vividly bright and cheerful music and has given us all the chance to hear a very rare musical instrument. The *Cimbalom* is part of this score, and is in the form of a large wooden box with many metal strings that are struck with wooden hammers. The effect is mesmerising, giving a real Central European sound. This was used to great effect by John Barry in his iconic score to the film *The Ipcress File*.

The suite begins with an amazing orchestral *musical sneeze*. It is a Hungarian tradition that to sneeze after hearing a story, however far-fetched, confirms that the story must be true.