

Programme Notes

Storms on the South China Sea (World Premiere)

Yip Wai-hong (b.1930)

Storms in the South China Sea is a short symphonic piece with a romantic touch. It is the composer's reaction to the mercurial political changes and his innate patriotic feelings that come forward as a result of this. The music opens with an idyllic scene of the life of fishing folks on the South China Sea. Their happy singing rises above the lapping waves. But soon the peace is shattered by the fracas of the neighbouring countries. First we hear the din of quarrel from Vietnam, followed by the fray of power struggle in the Philippines. The beautiful southern waters have lost their calm..... The trumpet which is China's declaration of its territorial rights as well as her solemn wish that the storms would go away soon, to make the region free from political strife. As the theme in the opening section reappears, once again peace and quiet are restored and the fishing folks can return to the calm and happy life they once enjoyed.

*Chinese Programme Notes provided by the composer
English translation provided by KCL Language Consultancy Ltd*

Liszt and Brahms

These two pianists and composers first met in 1853, when Liszt was 42 and Brahms was 20. Liszt was at Weimar, and the atmosphere that surrounded him there was one of hero worship. He was the undisputed champion of the piano, and was a man with enormous charisma. Brahms was a North German with a distinctly Puritanical approach. At the first meeting Brahms was asked to play his music for Liszt, but was too abashed by the air of sycophancy which surrounded Liszt. Liszt himself then played Brahms' *Scherzo, Op. 4* and parts of his *Piano Sonata, Op. 1* at sight. Some time later at a Leipzig Gewandhaus Chamber Concert Brahms played his own music, with Liszt and Berlioz in the audience.

In 1857 the Lower-Rhine Music Festival had Liszt in charge, and Brahms did not go, having taken a dislike to such works of Liszt's as the "Festklänge" and the *E-flat Piano Concerto*. He felt the latter to be too showily attractive, a complaint which many had against the music of Liszt in those days. Despite the fact that Liszt was aware of the younger composer's attitude towards his music he attended, in 1882, an all-Brahms programme played by Hans von Bulow, and was enthusiastic about the music, and asked Brahms for two copies of his latest Piano Concerto (this would be the second one.)

The musical world was split in two in those days, with Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner on one side – the new music – and Brahms and others on the side of tradition. To us nowadays this seems absurd, but there were many passionate arguments about it at the time. There is no doubt that behind the fevered atmosphere surrounding Liszt there was to be found a highly sincere and dedicated musician, and behind the somewhat stern and gruff exterior which Brahms presented to the world lay a composer of great passion. It is a pity that the two could never become real friends.

Piano Concerto No.1 in E-flat

Franz Liszt (1811 - 1886)

Allegro maestoso

Quasi adagio

Allegro vivace

Allegro marziale animato

The Grand Duke Carl Alexander had long wanted to entice Liszt to Weimar, where he had visions of creating a wonderful centre for musical culture and the arts generally. In 1848 Liszt finally agreed to make his home there. He shared the Duke's ideas, and looked to create what he called an "Athens of the North" in Weimar. He stayed until 1861, and during this time he wrote many of his Tone Poems – a new genre invented by himself. In 1855 on the 17th of February the first performance of his new *Piano Concerto in E-flat* was given, with Liszt at the piano and Berlioz conducting.

One wonders how Liszt found the time for all his musical activities, as the house where he stayed on the outskirts of Weimar, Altenburg, was constantly hosting such visitors as Berlioz, Wagner, and Anton Rubinstein. The English writer George Eliot visited in 1854, and it seems certain that the character Klesmer in *Daniela Daronda* is based on Liszt. "Klesmer's" views on talent, genius, musicality, consecration to work and so forth seem to have been taken down in dictation during the writer's visit.

The *E-flat Piano Concerto* proceeds without a break, and in typical fashion the whole work is based on material heard at the beginning, and in particular the opening unison declamation from the strings. With the pianist's cadenzas and musings the first movement almost sounds like an improvisation – something of the sort which prompted Mendelssohn to remark that Liszt's music was "unpremeditated". The second subject, a lyrical theme, begins in C minor, but it is soon back in the major. More declamatory music follows, and the *Quasi adagio* follows, making use of earlier material for its main theme in a long passage for the piano alone. A dramatic recitative breaks in and leads to more meditation from the pianist. The movement's coda takes place under a long trill from the piano, and then the triangle cheekily starts off the next, scherzo-like, movement. The atmosphere is rather impish. These imps almost get serious at times, leading the pianist to meditate on the opening motif, leading to a stern climax, and a piano cadenza which brings back happier music. The piano leads into the final movement, which starts out as a high-stepping march. Stern reminders from the brass of serious matters cannot prevent joyous feelings breaking out, and the work ends in great good spirits. There's no doubt that the work is a crowd pleaser, which is why Brahms had mixed feelings about it, but there's also no doubting the sincerity of the music.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Maestoso

Adagio

Rondo: Allegro non troppo

The whole of Liszt's first concerto takes about 18 or 19 minutes to perform, while the first movement alone of Brahms's first concerto takes about 22. The sheer scale of Brahms' work is challenging, for there are still two movements to come, one about 13 minutes long and the other a good 11. Brahms had difficulty in his earlier years over anything of an orchestral nature, and it took him a long time to work towards his *First Symphony*. The *D minor Piano Concerto* also took a lot of time and trouble. The first performance took place in Hanover, with Brahms playing the piano, and his friend Joachim conducting. The reaction was, to say the least, muted. The performance was surely a good one, but people were not yet prepared for such a piece. The nearest to it would be Mozart's C minor, or Beethoven's in the same key. But these, nor the

Mendelssohn and Schumann concertos, scarcely prepare the ear for the massive structure and thunderous nature of a good deal of the work. Five days later it was played in Leipzig, and was hissed. Brahms was of course disappointed, and the work only very gradually began to claim admirers. Later in his life Brahms was to play both his piano concertos in an evening, and to conduct others playing both, to great acclaim.

The concerto opens in highly dramatic manner as in the middle of a thunderstorm, and, during the course of the opening tutti about five themes emerge before the soloist finally enters – with yet another theme. Despite the sheer length of the movement it is not at all difficult for the listener, as Brahms welds the ideas into a kind of rolling stream that carries all with it. Towards the end there's plenty of pianistic virtuosity, but hardly in the crowd-pleasing manner of a Liszt.

The opening phrase of the slow movement has the words "*Benedictus qui venit in Nomine Domine*", which means, "Blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Father". This is music that could have come straight out of Brahms' own *Requiem*. The chorale-like phrases prompt the pianist into what sound rather like improvisations on them. The whole movement makes a consoling effect, especially welcome after the trials and tribulations of the first movement. The last movement begins with an upward-leaping theme, still stern and in the minor, but clearly much more carefree than the first movement. The *Rondo* is in A B A C A B A form, with the C beginning as what sounds like an academic fugue, but which soon becomes more entertaining. This movement has great energy and fine purpose, and it brings this fine work to a fittingly splendid conclusion.

Programme Notes by David Gwilt