

Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856)

Overture to *Manfred* op.115

*The stars are forth, the moon above the tops
Of the snow-shining mountains.—Beautiful!
I linger yet with Nature, for the night
Hath been to me a more familiar face
Than that of man; and in her starry shade
Of dim and solitary loveliness,
I learn'd the language of another world.*

Lord Byron, *Manfred* (1817)

Byron wrote *Manfred* after the very public separation from his wife, Annabella, and his escape to Switzerland following accusations of an involvement in an incestuous relationship with his half-sister, Augusta. It is probable that the poem is autobiographical: Manfred, a Bernese nobleman, is depicted as tormented by guilt surrounding a mysterious (unnamed), past transgression which resulted in the death of his beloved, Astarte. High in the Swiss mountains, Manfred casts spells to summon seven spirits from whom he seeks forgetfulness, but they are unable to grant his wish. Only death can relieve his suffering, but he is prevented from escaping his guilt through suicide. Finally, Manfred dies, defying any religious temptation of redemption from sin. The poem's theme is indebted to Goethe's *Faust*, a drama of human striving for the divine and salvation through grace, but Byron also began it shortly after staying with the Shelleys in the Swiss Alps, where the eighteen-year-old Mary Shelley was hard at work on *Frankenstein*, with its themes of loss, guilt, and the consequences of defying nature.

In both *Manfred* and *Childe Harold*, Byron's psychological insights and the beauty of his descriptions of nature made a great impact on Schumann; indeed Schumann's intense empathy with the figure of Manfred, a "restless, wandering, distracted man, tormented by fearful thoughts", was immediate. The 18-year old Schumann's diary entry for March 26th 1829 reads "Agitated state of mind – bedtime reading: Byron's Manfred – terrible night." Three days later the entry reads "Childe Harold in bed – terrible night disturbed by dreams about death."

It was nearly 20 years later (1848) that Schumann felt ready to turn Byron's "theatre of the mind" into "a dramatic poem with music", composing an overture and 15 numbers, including songs, choruses of spirits and accompaniments to Byron's spoken dialogue. Schumann wrote the incidental music with staged performances in mind: "I never devoted myself to any composition with such lavish love and power...". When reading Byron's poem aloud to his wife, Clara, "[Robert's] voice suddenly faltered, tears poured down his face and he was so overcome that he could read no farther." Did he, on some level, suspect by then that his recurring illness was connected to a syphilitic infection from the early 1830s?

Largely because Byron's epic poem seems impossibly overwrought to modern ears, it is now only Schumann's Overture that is frequently performed. It shows, in microcosm, a profound understanding of the poem: no-one but Schumann could have represented the conflicting, disorientating and disjointed facets of Manfred's character whilst maintaining the composition's structural integrity as 'absolute' music. The result is one of the most original and powerful pieces of the entire orchestral repertoire and perhaps the most sombre, despairing, brooding yet agitated portrait of a tormented soul ever portrayed. [Of the numerous Byron settings by composers in the Romantic period, only two others are still regularly performed: Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* and Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony*.]

Schumann himself conducted a concert performance of the Overture in Leipzig in March 1852. Franz Liszt directed a complete version of *Manfred*, with sets, costumes, choreography, and all of Schumann's incidental music, in Weimar later that same year, and Brahms organised a concert performance in 1855.

Schumann undoubtedly identified on a deeply personal level with Manfred's inescapable torments and eventual descent into madness. Suffering from the psychotic effects of tertiary syphilis, on 27 February

1854 Schumann attempted suicide by throwing himself into the River Rhine. Rescued and brought home by fishermen, he was taken to an asylum for the insane where he died on 29 July 1856, aged just 46.



Manfred on the Jungfrau by John Martin (1837)

*"...And you, ye crags upon whose extreme edge
I stand, and on the torrent's brink beneath
Behold the tall pines dwindled as to shrubs
In dizziness of distance, when a leap,
A stir, a motion, even a breath, would bring
My breast upon its rocky bosom's bed
To rest for ever..."*

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

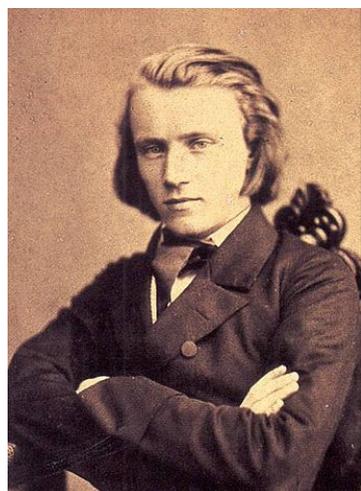
Symphony No. 2 in D major op.73

I. Allegro non troppo

II. Adagio non troppo

III. Allegretto grazioso

IV. Allegro con spirito



Brahms was so fascinated by Schumann's *Manfred* that he not only organised the concert performance in 1855, but also incorporated the motif depicting Astarte's love and, specifically, her speaking Manfred's name, as the second subject of his own First Symphony. Brahms was also fascinated by and, indeed, infatuated with Schumann's wife, Clara (14 years his senior). That Symphony has long been regarded as inspired by the intense oedipal drama involving Robert, Clara and the young Brahms – depicted here in a portrait from 1853 – in the years of Robert Schumann's insanity and death (1854 – 1856). Although Brahms and Clara remained deep friends after Robert's death, their relationship did not go further and, apparently, was never consummated. Clara outlived Robert by 40 years, dying, at the age of 76, in 1896. Brahms survived her by just one year.

To what extent was Brahms, in turn, impressed by the parallels between the character of Manfred and his own situation in the 1850s? He was certainly devoted to prostitutes, and the nearest he came to marriage was a brief affair with Agathe von Siebold in 1858 which he terminated abruptly. Perhaps he was unable to express emotion other than musically?

In any case, in purely musico-psychological terms, it took Brahms a very long time to escape from Beethoven's shadow as a writer of symphonies. Brahms had famously told the conductor Hermann Levi: "I will never compose a symphony! You have no notion how dispiriting it is for the likes of us when we constantly hear the tramp of such a giant [Beethoven] marching behind us." Yet, in marked contrast to the virtually 20 years gestation of his First Symphony (1876), Brahms composed his Second Symphony (1877) in just over two months.

This seemingly spontaneous surge of creativity once his First Symphony was successfully premiered undoubtedly resulted from a complex brew of psychological factors. Informally thought of as his 'Pastoral' (in reference to Beethoven's Sixth Symphony), Brahms's Second Symphony exudes a quality of

contentment, serenity and tranquillity that additionally relates, perhaps, to its composition during Brahms's summer holiday in the town of Pörschach on the Wörthersee, in the Austrian alps.

J. A. Fuller Maitland, an early (1911) biographer of Brahms, whilst admitting the Second Symphony's "points of beauty that are easily understood", writes of "the slight quality" of its material "that can be appreciated to some extent by uncultivated listeners." In fact, it is the very 'slightness' of the material that lends the Symphony its impressive cohesion. Although the longest of Brahms's four symphonies, it was written in the shortest time, and shows all the hallmarks of having been conceived whole, with a powerful unity incorporating wide-ranging contrasts. As Alan Walker notes of the first three bars: "A step-wise curve, a falling fourth, a rising third: from these primitive elements Brahms builds one of his mightiest structures...in one form or another, this basic idea pervades the entire work...express(ing) the background drive against which some of the work's extreme contrasts unfold." As the composer and Brahms biographer Jan Swafford observes: "The chaos of emotion shackled and subdued by a relentless sense of form and discipline: that is Brahms's art in a nutshell." No 'descent into madness' for Brahms.

The overall mood of the Symphony's first movement has been summarised as 'warm contentment', although it is not lacking in vigour at times. The second movement is solemn and tranquil, disturbed only briefly by a passing 'storm'. The *grazioso* third movement, an intermezzo rather than scherzo, has an irresistibly animated middle section, and the finale is joyfully exuberant, ending triumphantly.

However, is there more to it than 'bucolic pastoralism'? Certainly it is full of rhythmic complexity and not without drama and troubled, even tragic, moments. Describing the work before its premiere, Brahms himself said that he should wear a black armband "in deference to the solemn and mournful nature of my latest child." Reinhold Brinkmann draws attention to the fact that the landscape depicted is not just an idealised, idyllic 'nature' but, rather a bittersweet, even melancholic, "broken pastoralism". As evidence, he cites the insertion, into the Second Symphony's first movement coda, of a quotation of the song '*Es liebt sich so lieblich im Lenz*', op.71/1, composed by Brahms in the same year. In the minor key coda that echoes that of the song, it expresses, in an otherwise sunny D major symphonic movement, and just as in the song, a "desire for fulfilment, and a missed opportunity with the ensuing deep disappointment." Clara again?

Hans Richter gave the first performance with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on December 30th 1877.

Programme notes by Chris Kelnar

Andrew Lees is a former member of both the Hallé and BBC Philharmonic Orchestras playing viola. Since returning to Edinburgh he has taken up the violin and concentrated on solo playing, arranging, teaching and conducting. He is a member of the Roxburgh String Quartet. As well as the Open Orchestra, he has conducted many other Edinburgh-based groups including Edinburgh Grand Opera, Edinburgh Musical Theatre and Edinburgh University Savoy Opera Group. He also directs the Leader Ensemble. However perhaps his most significant achievement to date is an arrangement of Rossini's William Tell Overture for 40 violas and triangle.

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