

Programme notes for Fen Edge Orchestra Concert at Histon Baptist Church, 7:30 pm, Saturday 9th February 2019

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750) Book 1, No. 1 arr. Evan Turner

Towards the end of 1717, Bach was appointed Kapellmeister (music director) at the court of Leopold, Prince of Anhalt-Köthen, a position he held till 1723.

The prince was Calvinist and did not require ornate church music. Consequently, Bach turned his attention to composing secular instrumental music, notably the suites for orchestra, suites for solo cello, solo violin, the six Brandenburg concerti, and the 24 Preludes and Fugues for Keyboard.

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, as it is now known, may have evolved through the teaching material Bach prepared for his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, as earlier versions of eleven of the preludes can be found in a music book compiled for Wilhelm Friedemann in 1720.

The eventual result was a set of twenty-four preludes and fugues, one each in all of the twelve major and minor keys, starting with C major and rising semitone by semitone until arriving at the final fugue in B minor. On the title page of the M.S., dated 1722, Bach describes the twenty-four as being 'for the profit and use of the studious musical young, and also for the special diversion of those who are already skilful in this study'.

In this version of the first prelude - initially intended as a weekly 'warm up' piece for the orchestra - Bach's chord progression is articulated using block harmonies (chords) rather than the familiar *arpeggios* of the original. Inevitably, the fugue had to be added.

Alexander Borodin (1833 – 1887) In the Steppes of Central Asia & Polovtsian Dances

The Russian composer Alexander Borodin was by profession a research chemist and held a post as Professor of Chemistry at the Imperial Medical Academy in St. Petersburg. He was also a gifted musician, a keen cellist and a composer with a great ear for a memorable tune, as testified in both the *Steppes* and the *Polovtsian Dances*.

The *Steppes of Central Asia* is a single movement evocation of a trading caravan, accompanied by military escort, as it makes its slow way across the vastness of the Asian steppes. Two melodies - one Russian in character, the other Oriental - mingle and intertwine over a repetitive and no doubt intentionally monotonous *ostinato* portraying the onward tramp of man and beast.

The *Polovtsian Dances* feature in Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*, which he left unfinished at the time of his death. Two of his colleagues and friends, composers Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov, completed and put together a performance version, first produced in 1890. In the opera, the *Dances* are part of a lavish entertainment at the Polovtsian court, providing a rousing, crowd pleasing finale to Act II. However, this colourful music soon found its enduring way onto the concert platform.

Gustav Holst (1874 - 1934) Three Folksong Transcriptions *arr. Evan Turner*

I love my love - I sowed the seeds of love - The Song of the Blacksmith

From the second half of the 19th century onwards, many European composers took inspiration from the folk music of their native countries. In the British Isles, this trend found expression in a revival of interest in the folk song tradition, and musicians went out and about collecting folksongs and tunes. One such was Scottish born George Barnet Gardiner (1852-1910), who collected songs from across the south of England, some of which were published in 1909 by the then recently-formed Folk-Song Society.

Along with his lifelong friend Ralph Vaughan Williams, Holst shared an interest in this musical legacy. He composed, arranged and conducted choral music throughout his career, developing a clarity of style that harks back through Purcell to the Elizabethan madrigal composers, all of whom he greatly admired.

Among these compositions are the Six Choral Folksongs, arranged from tunes collected by Gardiner, and set for four-part mixed voices. They date from 1916, at a time when Holst was living in Thaxted and involved with the town's summer festival. The three here transcribed for the Fen Edge Orchestra are numbers five, one and four respectively, and this is their first public appearance.

George Bizet (1838 - 1875) Symphony in C

Allegro vivo - Andante - Allegro vivace - Finale; Allegro vivace

George Bizet wrote his Symphony in C in 1855 aged seventeen; it was first performed in 1935, sixty years after his death. Thereby hangs a tale.

Bizet was born in Paris into a musical household; his father, Adolphe, was a singing teacher and his mother, Aimée, a pianist. He showed such musical aptitude that, with a bit of parental nudging, he became enrolled into the Paris Conservatoire in October 1848, two weeks before his tenth birthday. He studied there for nine years, excelling in piano playing and composition, during which time he met and became friends with the future famous composer and pianist Camille Saint-Saëns.

Bizet's teacher, mentor and great influence at the Conservatoire was the composer Charles Gounod. In 1855, Gounod had recently completed his Symphony in D to popular acclaim, and Bizet was tasked, as was common practice, with preparing a version for four hands. Possibly in admiration, Bizet, once he had fulfilled this commission, felt inspired to write his own Symphony, finishing it some four weeks later.

The result is an impressive success. Bizet, however, may have had his reservations; it was written, as it were, in homage, and the symphony relies heavily on his teacher's model, both structurally and also to some extent thematically. For whatever reason, Bizet neither mentioned it in any of his correspondence nor made any attempt to get it performed during his lifetime.

Years after Bizet's death, his widow Geneviève Halévy gave the manuscript to the French song-writer and socialite Reynaldo Hahn, who passed it into the care of the Conservatoire library. In 1933, its existence was mentioned in an article by the Conservatoire's musicologist, one Jean Chantavoine. News got back to Englishman and Bizet biographer, Douglas Charles Parker, who showed the manuscript to the renowned conductor Felix Weingartner, who took it to Basle, Switzerland, where it received its first performance on 26 February 1935. General rejoicing!