PRECIS

BEETHOVEN'S FOURTH

Thursday 26 August, 7.30pm
Federation Concert Hall, Hobart

Eivind Aadland conductor
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

RAVEL Pavane pour une infante défunte (6')
BEETHOVEN Symphony No 4 in B-flat, Op 60 (34')
Adagio – Allegro vivace
Adagio
Allegro molto e vivace
Allegro ma non troppo

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) was the leading French composer of his generation. Although his output is small, he made significant contributions to ballet (Daphnis et Chloé), the piano concerto (Piano Concerto in G and Concerto for the Left Hand), music for solo piano (Miroirs and Gaspard de la nuit), solo violin (Tzigane) and chamber music (String Quartet and Piano Trio). He had a special gift for orchestration (as revealed in Bolero and his widely admired orchestration of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition) and orchestrated a number of works written in the first instance for piano, such as the work in this concert, the Pavane pour une infante défunte (Pavane for a Dead Princess). A man of slight build and small stature, Ravel was rejected from military service in World War I but was allowed to enlist as an army driver and carried out duties near Verdun. He was offered the Légion d'Honneur in 1920 but refused. The piano version of the Pavane was composed in 1899 and premièred by Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes in 1902. Ravel orchestrated it in 1910. Don't read too much into the title – Ravel was attracted to the sound qualities of 'infante' and 'défunte' in close proximity rather than a desire to conjure up pictures or scenes. Listen out for the French horn at the start – it introduces the principal melody before it's passed around the orchestra, picking up different tone colours along the way: flute, clarinet, oboe, and finally, when it returns towards the end, in a truly magical moment, the violins.

Three years after he finished his monumental Symphony No 3, 'Eroica', Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) composed the Fourth Symphony. That was in 1806. In the meantime, Beethoven started to sketch the most famous of his symphonies, the Fifth, but put that work aside to press ahead with the Fourth, which was composed rather quickly. The symphony begins with a slow and somewhat mercurial introduction. It meanders through a number of key areas (including rarely encountered B-flat minor) before bursting forth – with great jubilation – in the key of B-flat major at the start of the Allegro vivace. The slow movement, Adagio, is admired for its mix of moods, with dramatic outbursts occasionally upsetting the prevailing serenity. A dotted accompanying pattern (long-short, long-short) is introduced right at the start, over which the first violins spin a long, cantabile melody. As the movement unfolds, take note of the unusually prominent role given to the timpani and some beautiful brief episodes for the clarinet. Beethoven plays around with accent and metre in the energetic third movement: we've got three beats in a bar, but Beethoven keeps on displacing the accents, so it often sounds as though there are two. This tension between duple and triple brings a wonderfully propulsive energy to the movement. Finally, the symphony closes with a sparkling finale, Allegro ma non troppo, where, among other things, you'll hear breakout moments for bassoon and clarinet.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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