

'Rosamunde' Overture

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

This shouldn't really be the 'Rosamunde' Overture at all. It is a fill-in, pulled together at the last minute after time constraints forced a change of plan. Even Schubert – who composed so many operas, symphonies, sonatas, and quartets, not to mention over 600 songs, before his death at 31 – *even Schubert* sometimes struggled with deadlines. He was engaged to write music for a play called *Rosamunde* in 1823, and, having run out of time to compose an overture, he looked into his back catalogue...

In 1820, Schubert had written (in just two weeks) an opera called *Die Zauberharfe* ('The Magic Harp'), which had been a failure – like all his operas. He was quite proud of its overture, though. It began with seven loud chords, followed by a slowly lilting *Andante*, before a lively violin melody sent it bounding away at *Allegro vivace* pace. He had based it on even earlier work, an 1817 overture 'in the Italian style', and its Rossini-like bubbly character had been quite a hit with his friends, even if nobody else seemed to take much notice. Maybe this could fill in as the overture to *Rosamunde*; then more people would get to hear it...

But no, Schubert decided to use another overture instead, from his opera *Alfonso und Estrella*. Then he intended to write a new overture for *Alfonso und Estrella*. Then he never got around to it. Then a publisher, for some unknown reason, published the *Die Zauberharfe* overture as the *Rosamunde* overture. And then Schubert was dead, and nobody was sure what his intentions had actually been. So, if you are not feeling too confused by now, feel free to enjoy this overture simply as *music* – no doubt Schubert would be thrilled to know that today it is performed for its own sake, an Overture to Anything.

Concertino for Clarinet and Orchestra Op.26 **Carl Maria von Weber** (1786–1826)

Rosamunde, incidentally, was a complete flop, lasting just two performances. This probably wasn't because of Schubert's music (whichever overture he used); the fault lay largely with the plot and the words. These were written by Helmina von Chézy, who had, the previous year, been in Munich, writing another poor libretto for an opera called *Euryanthe* by Carl Maria von Weber.

Weber had considerably more success in opera than Schubert; *Der Freischütz* in particular caught the German Romantic imagination and was popular all through the 19th Century. One of the innovations of this opera (and its overture) was its evocative clarinet writing. With its vocal sound quality and its extremes of range and character (rich and dark in its lower register, brilliantly clear up high), the clarinet became a favourite instrument of Romantic composers seeking utmost expressiveness.

Weber arrived in Munich in March 1811, and within three weeks he was giving a sold-out concert in the presence of the King of Bavaria. Somehow this had been enough time for him to compose and rehearse a Concertino for Clarinet and Orchestra. The soloist was Heinrich Bärmann (whom Weber had met a few months earlier in Mannheim) and despite the limited rehearsal time, the performance was a spectacular success – the King immediately ordered two full-scale clarinet concertos

from Weber, which followed in due course and are, along with this Concertino, well-established in the repertoire today.

The Concertino is less than ten minutes long and quite rhapsodic in form. The full orchestra begins dramatically in C minor, but is pacified by a reflective, thoughtful clarinet. Once all has died away (except a lingering note from the horns), the clarinet begins its own lyrical *Andante* theme in cheery E-flat major. Then follows a sequence of variations – first a couple that get progressively quicker and showier, then a very soft, hazy one, before the music picks up again in a skittering *Allegro*. The storms of the beginning threaten to return, until a couple of short blasts from the horns put us firmly into E-flat major and enable to clarinet, giggling and gurgling as only clarinets can, to lead the orchestra in a speedy, satisfying wrap-up.

Symphony No.1

Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)

1. Langsam. Schleppend. – Immer sehr gemächlich.
2. Kräftig bewegt.
3. Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen.
4. Stürmisch bewegt.

Carl Maria von Weber left one opera, *Die drei Pintos*, unfinished at his death in 1826. But his family preserved the manuscript, and in 1887 Weber's grandson, Carl, approached the young Gustav Mahler (who was working in Leipzig as an assistant conductor) to see if he would be interested in deciphering the sketches and completing the work. Initially reluctant to touch the work of one of his favourite composers, Mahler eventually agreed, and spent several months editing Weber's music and filling in the gaps with music of his own in an appropriate style. He would call in at the Webers' house daily to play them the music as it progressed... and he found himself falling in love with Marion von Weber, Carl's wife.

It was while rehearsing *Die drei Pintos* for its premiere performance in January 1888 that Mahler began working on his First Symphony. It was completed by the end of May and was first performed 18 months later, in Budapest. Early audiences were totally bewildered, not just at the unusual scale of the work (large in both duration and orchestral forces) but also at the music itself: a bizarre combination of naïve folk-like melodies with sophisticated harmonies and orchestration; tender one moment, violent the next; so stirring, expressive and confronting... too much, for some, who dismissed it as rough and unrefined. "Sometimes it sends shivers down my spine," Mahler wrote later. "Damn it all, where do people keep their ears and hearts if they can't hear that!"

The first movement begins with a shimmering 'A' from all the strings. Some hear this as the eternal hum of the universe, others as the invigorating buzz of life sensed in the clear, fresh air of a spring morning. Through this we begin to hear other fragments - snatches of fanfares and lyrical songs from a faraway town, and bursts of birdsong all around. Most prominent of all is the cuckoo – and those falling phrases we hear at the very beginning are simply a slowed-down cuckoo call, two simple notes that will make themselves felt throughout the symphony.

Eventually the cellos get up and, beginning with the two cuckoo notes, stride away in an ambling, carefree melody. This tune comes from a song Mahler had written some

years earlier, ‘I walked across the fields this morning’. The music takes us strolling through rich, green countryside, rests again under that wide-open sky of harmonic ‘A’s, and continues. A storm threatens near the end of the movement, but then comes one of Mahler’s characteristic ‘breakthrough’ moments – blazing brass, a thrilling acceleration, a mighty crash of the cymbals. With home in sight, the country walk turns into a downhill run.

The second movement, originally subtitled ‘In full sail’, continues in a similar spirit: a vigorous country dance with yodeling figures in the melody and rough stomping in the accompaniment. And in the middle of the movement, separated from the rest by the call of a solo horn, is a much gentler waltz-like section, elegant and refined.

After all this, the third movement is jarring: a funeral march. But there is something not quite right about this processional. A double bass begins it – a minor-key version of the nursery-rhyme round *Frère Jacques*. The plodding dirge is histrionically sad, like some kind of sick joke. Mahler had in mind a woodcut by Moritz von Schwind which depicts a host of animals in mourning as they carry the coffin of a hunter through the forest. The irony of the music gets even sharper as it breaks into a kind of barefoot-peasant klezmer dance, with honking oboes and clarinets and boom-tish percussion.

But then, in the heart of this movement, some unexpected tenderness: over a rippling harp figure, violins sing from another of Mahler’s songs, telling of a rejected lover finding sleep (ie, death) under a linden tree: “And all was well again... love and sorrow and world and dream!” And the sickly funeral processional passes once more, this time even more weirdly, cackling with grim laughter before fading into darkness (... but notice how it’s built on those two ‘cuckoo’ notes?).

A flash of lightning ignites the final movement, which begins as a raging storm. Mahler throws in the full force of his orchestra: seven horns, four trumpets and two sets of timpani dominate the *melée*. There is no more irony here; the heart of the symphony is laid bare in all its struggle and turmoil. After the first wave passes, the strings sing a long, winding melody that begins calmly and reaches an almost unbearable intensity. Then, inevitably, the storm returns.

It seems all too much, but listen for the whispers of hope and hold on, for, just when the storm is at its strongest – breakthrough! With an almighty crash, the music takes a gigantic ‘leap of faith’ up into D major. Listen to those horns! How did we get here? The music dies down, and in an echo from the first movement, it becomes clear – the theme of the triumph actually comes from the cuckoo call with which the symphony began. Mahler gives us the most satisfying wrap-up: one last rendition of that winding string melody, one last look back at the storm (still scary, but no longer threatening), and one final ‘breakthrough’ to victory, led by those unstoppable horns.