

The Dvořák Society

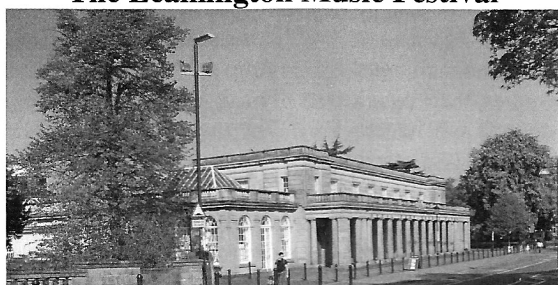
For Czech and Slovak Music

Founded 1974

Newsletter No. 124 **July 2018**



The Leamington Music Festival



The theme of Leamington Music Festival Weekend (4-8 May) was mainly Czech music and also music associated with the War and Britain. David Banister gives an interesting personal view of the Festival (page 3) and there are photographs on the centre pages. In addition there were talks by Dr Katya Kocourek and Patrick Lambert on 'The creation of Czechoslovakia and music during The Great War'. Richard Beith reports on the restoration of the fountain in Jephson Gardens dedicated to the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918 (pp. 3-4).

There have been few cd reviews in recent newsletters but that is not the case with this issue thanks to Mark Todd, Susan Jenkinson and David Roberts. Markéta Hallová sends news

from the Dvořák Society in the Czech Republic. Peter Herbert has provided reviews of several concerts.

SALES MANAGER URGENTLY REQUIRED.

Antony Gordon has now stepped down from this role and despite a number of appeals we are yet to find a new person to fulfil this position.

At the recent Leamington Festival we sold over £200 of materials. This is a source of revenue for the Society but more importantly it enables our members to buy titles not available in the UK. Through the Society website we also sell our publications to non-members both in the UK and overseas. This publicizes the work of the Society.

If the Society cannot fill this position, this service and its valuable resource will have to be terminated and any remaining stock disposed of,

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Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* Performed at the Royal Opera House 19 March 2018

The first production of Leoš Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* at the Royal Opera House is quite a spectacle. It is based on Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's semi-autobiographical novel *Занудка из Мёртвого дома* translated as *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, 1862. The story revolves around life in a Siberian gulag (prison) and characters give an account of episodes in their lives explaining how they came to be incarcerated. A key theme is prisoners being guilty of murder resulting from romantic betrayal. In Act II Skuratov tells of how he killed the man that his partner Luiza was forced to marry. In Act III Šiškov explains how his wife Akulka was rejected by her original fiancé, Filka Morozov, who claimed to have dishonoured her. She was forced to marry Šiškov instead, who on their wedding night realised she was a virgin. Šiškov discovers Akulka still loves Morozov and so Šiškov murders Akulka. Away from the prisoners' stories there is also despair and violence emanating from their present situation. But, rays of light shine into the darkness. In Act I we first encounter Alexandr Petrovič Gorjančikov, a political prisoner. In Act II Gorjančikov befriends the young prisoner Aljeja offering to teach him to read and write; Aljeja accepts. In Act III Gorjančikov is freed. Another more positive moment is in Act II when the prisoners perform two plays, *Kedril and Don Juan* and *The Miller's Beautiful Wife*. So, Dostoevsky and Janáček paint a living hell, but the idea is to also show, as Janáček put it in his superscription deriving from Dostoevsky and appearing at the top of his score; 'In every creature, a spark of God.'

Director Krzysztof Warlikowski has an alternative take on it all with contemporary stage scenery and costume and he moves the production away from Russia to a more universal setting. There is even footage of philosophising around the notion of prison – in the opening of the opera we see on screen French philosopher Michel Foucault discussing the prison system. Foucault wrote *Serveilles et punir: Naissance de la prison* translated as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1975, and he attacked the appalling conditions in French prisons. This film of Foucault and his meditation on prison arguably detracts from the central point of Dostoevskian philosophy of finding some good and redeeming quality within the minds of even the most hardened criminals.

The sound is raw and visceral. It is typical of Janáček in his drawing on Moravian folk harmonies and its bubbling violence that erupts to the fore. Credit to conductor Mark Wigglesworth and players in the pit, who all do justice to the orchestral music. There is a stellar cast of singers, which includes Ladislav Elgr as Skuratov, Johan Reuter as Šiškov and Willard White as Gorjančikov. The voices' presentation of text is realistically enhanced through Janáček's attention to speech melodies and rhythms, a hallmark of his operatic style.

This is Janáček's last opera, which he worked on intensively from February 1927 until July 1928. Janáček died before the rehearsals began. The première took place in April 1930 at the National Theatre Brno, Czech Republic. A version revised by two of his pupils, Osvald Chlubna and Břetislav Bakala, was used. It attempted to soften and romanticise the original orchestration; they added a completely new ending. The version at the Royal Opera House is a new edition by John Tyrrell, who is a very significant authority on Janáček. Tyrrell's edition is much more in line with what Janáček

intended.

Essential to the soundscape, is the libretto. Janáček, an enthusiastic Russianist, translated Russian from Dostoevsky's novel. Janáček included many Russianisms in his libretto. Danuta Hudecová and Petr Ch. Kalina in their study, *Leoš Janáček's Interpretation and Misinterpretation of Dostoyevsky's The House of the Dead*, give us various words non-existent in Czech, directly transliterated by Janáček from the Russian. One such example is *politický přestupník*, *политический преступник*, meaning political offender, political criminal. Previously, the opera has been sung in a modified Czech version to make it more intelligible to a Czech audience. This production is also a first in that through the use of surtitles providing the basic story, it allows the singers to use the text Janáček specified.

But, it is not enough to have exactly what Janáček wrote. Janáček's instructions are a framework for creativity. Opera is a multivalent art-form and our perceptions move continuously between music, literature and dramatic action. The singers and instrumentalists, conductor and director, all need to work together harmoniously for the opera to be a success. If Warlikowski's drawing on Foucault makes the production less sharply focussed, this move is not altogether irrelevant since related to Foucault's condemnation of poor prison conditions is the idea of compassion, which is central to the opera. The fact the audience is touched by the humanity and optimism that emerges from this grim backdrop is testament to the merit of this production.

Jamie Hancock

I have received two reviews of the Smetana Trio's concert at the Wigmore Hall, one by Philip Starnier and one by Leighton Jones. Since in some ways they complement each other I decided to include them both [Ed]. There are photographs of the Smetana Trio on page 20.

Smetana Trio – Wigmore Hall Sunday Morning Coffee Concert – 11.30am, 29th April 2018

Every time a musical ensemble steps out onto a stage there is an act of courage involved - each performance is a new venture. For the Smetana Trio, the excitement of that venture was enhanced at the Wigmore Hall's Morning Coffee Concert today owing to the fact that this was their first public performance in the UK in their new configuration, with violinist Radim Kresta joining the powerhouse partnership of pianist Jitka Čechová and cellist Jan Páleníček. All the more impressive, then, that the Trio succeeded in reinvigorating the souls of a Sunday-morning audience in a tired-out Capital, reeling from the mayhem of the week.

With the repertoire selected, the Trio were squarely on home territory - their performances of both the Dvořák 'Dumky' Trio and Smetana's Trio in G Minor having previously won them many accolades, including the prestigious BBC Music Magazine Chamber Award. I myself have heard the Trio perform both pieces on numerous occasions with their previous violinists – their performances of the Dumky with Jana Nováková-Vonášková count among some of the most pleasurable moments I have spent on this earth. So, it was with some anticipation that I came to listen to them perform with the new addition of Radim Kresta.

The intention of Jitka Čechová and Jan Páleníček to invite