

DACORUM SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Sunday 5th March 2017

The Centenary Theatre, Berkhamsted

Two rare French 19th century talents dominated the opening of this concert. *L'Arlesienne* (The Girl from Arles) was a play by Alphonse Daudet which (unusually for a writer at the height of his success) flopped after twenty or so performances. On the other hand the incidental music for the play was composed by George Bizet who spent much of his life struggling for recognition, but ultimately made a hit with this one. In composing the suite Bizet was not much concerned with the indifferent play but produced some of his most enchanting melodies which have become concert favourites since they were re-discovered. The composer, of course, crowned his career with *Carmen* which is the most frequently performed opera in the repertoire. The tragedy is that Bizet died at the age of 36 and never heard or saw his masterpiece performed

Many composers, especially those of the 19th century, were influenced by the folk music of their homelands and showed that in their work- one thinks of Albeniz in Spain and Grieg in Norway, to mention only two – but few can have been so wedded to their native lands as Antonin Dvorak for whom the melodies and dance rhythms of Bohemia (later Czechoslovakia) were never far removed from his output. So much so that he cut short a hugely successful and profitable stay in America, where he was director of the New York Conservatory, and returned to Europe -homesickness undoubtedly being a factor in this move. His remaining years were less active from a musical point of view but he continued to produce varied work including some charming tone poems based on Czech fairy tales, opera, choral and chamber pieces – hardly an inactive “retirement”! The *Czech Suite* is truly Bohemian in flavour but also unmistakably Dvorak with its poignant tinged “dying falls”.

What more robust and cheerful way to end the first half of the programme than Sibelius' Karelia March!

Historically there have been some pieces of great music which have, to borrow a famous quotation “risen like a phoenix on the ashes of its dead self” This could apply to Tchaikovsky's *piano concerto in b flat minor* which, when it was first performed privately in 1875, was torn to shreds by Nicholas Rubinstein, and other Russian critics, thereby putting the young composer into deep shock. Since then it has become, arguably, the most popular work of its kind ever written, adored by audiences throughout the world and by artists such as Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels, Claudio Arrau, van Cliburn, Vladimir Horowitz, Martha Argerich, Horacio Gutierrez and Vladimir Ashkenazy. In this concert DSO enjoyed the services of the BBC's Young Musician Of The Year 2014 *Martin James Bartlett* who, for the past three years (he is only twenty now) has been mesmerising music lovers everywhere with his astonishing technical skill and artistry. Our concerts can always be classed as “events” but this one was memorable. Martin's playing exuded a power which spread throughout the orchestra and seemed to invigorate its performance anew. I would not hesitate to add his name to the distinguished list above, and on one more upbeat note we hear that Martin is one of the final entries to the prestigious van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Texas this year.

Our best wishes and support are his