

Tom Service and Stephen Johnson discuss the history and future of the Symphony

Tom: Stephen, where do you think, what is the symphonic impulse, why do people want to write symphonies?

Stephen: Well, I think if you look back to when the symphony really gathered momentum historically, it did so in a time of great ferment, all the old certainties were beginning to collapse. The courtly order, the authority of the church, that was going. It was an age of revolutions, an age of social change, of great aspiration and fear, and the symphony emerges as a form which in a way is trying to make sense of that new turbulence. And the hopefulness as well, if you look at the baroque forms that preceded it, they're all elegant and orderly and like the gardens of the Palace of Versailles. This is a new form which is about conflict, it's about instability and about trying to find order in that, and I think that really is the spirit of the beginning of the Romantic era and the end of the so called classical era.

Tom: Is there a problem with what happens after that flurry of activity, really around Beethoven in the early nineteenth century.

Stephen: Oh definitely I mean Brahms' famous remark, you know, you have no idea how hard it is to write a symphony with that giant marching behind you, and it took him twenty years nearly to complete his first symphony, Bruckner similarly put himself through incredibly apprenticeship for ten years

almost before he finally allowed himself at almost exactly the same age to write his official ***Symphony No. 1***. That inheritance has become a problem, by the end of the nineteenth century, by the late nineteenth century, you can see people struggling because they now have a tradition, which is a bit of a paradox in a way because it's a symphony about looking forward, it's about change, it's about the future, it's about where you're headed. And so at the same time to have this big tradition behind you, well it's an interesting counter-weight.

Stephen: It is a huge challenge in a way, it's not just for people like Haydn and Beethoven and Mozart who were so good at it, it's the fact that this music still obviously reaches large numbers of people today, there's still something contemporary about it in a way. And that's quite a legacy to face up to isn't it. You can see why some contemporary composers think maybe I'll try another form, rather than, I'll put off writing my symphony for a few years yet. But you do see, beginning towards the end of the nineteenth century, beginning with Mahler, that you find composers starting to capitalize on that tradition in a way and even write music that in a way is about the tradition, Mahler is a composer who consciously evokes the past, you know, definitely Beethoven is a model there, particularly the ***Choral Symphony***, Berlioz's programme symphonies like the ***Symphonie Fantastique*** and even Brahms, certainly Bruckner he starts to use them almost as archetypes, saying I'm the descendent of these people, they're my ancestors, I'm building on what they've made, and you know, this becomes even more sophisticated and complicated with composers like Shostakovich when you can definitely hear

him sort of invoking not just the European tradition but the Russian tradition like Tchaikovsky and then to figures like Luciano Berio with his *Sinfonia* which is a symphony about past symphonies as much as it's a work about the contemporary which is something of course you find very much reflected in contemporary novels too, so it's part of the spirit of our time.

Tom: Are we at the end of the symphony then now?

Stephen: Well, the number of times in history the symphony's been pronounced dead; it's part of its story in a way. You know it goes through a great period of flowering and then suddenly everyone says, well nobody's writing any great symphonies any more. Round about 1830 you'd have said the same thing, who's writing symphonies? After the First World War there were an awful lot of people who felt right, that symphony belongs to that world that's gone, we're not going to get any great symphonies any more. And yet we did, and it always seems to me that just at that point when people say the symphony is dead, that's when things start getting interesting again.