

LONDON CONCORD SINGERS

CONDUCTOR MALCOLM COTTLE

THURSDAY 4TH JULY 1996
ST. CYPRIAN'S CHURCH, GLENTWORTH STREET

HANNS EISLER: DIE MUTTER.

Cantata for soloists, choir and two pianos. Texts by Bertolt Brecht.

Hanns Eisler was born in Leipzig in 1898. From 1919 to 1923 he studied in Vienna with Arnold Schoenberg, who considered him one of his most talented pupils. But although Eisler retained to the end of his life the greatest respect for Schoenberg's musical mastery, he became increasingly dissatisfied with his teacher's bourgeois social outlook. Eisler was not content to produce art music for consumption by a small elite - he wanted his music to be socially useful.

In 1925 Eisler moved to Berlin and became involved in the German workers' movement. He strongly believed that music could be radical and modern but at the same time direct in expression and readily comprehensible. He was appalled by the existing musical repertoire of the workers' choirs, which consisted largely of sentimental settings of reactionary texts, which encouraged a passive, uncritical emotional response. He set out to demonstrate how modern music could help the workers' struggle for power by composing choruses, ballads and marching songs to political texts, and also by means of a series of collaborations with playwrights and film makers. He developed a musical style which is clear, straightforward and strongly articulated.

In 1933 when the fascists took power, Eisler was forced to leave Germany, and for the next 15 years he worked in exile in various countries. Like many European artists he spent the war years in the USA, but in 1947, partly at the instigation of Richard Nixon, he was investigated by House Committee on Un-American Activities, and blacklisted. He returned to Europe in 1948; in 1950 he settled in the newly formed German Democratic Republic (whose national anthem he composed), and he lived in East Berlin until the end of his life in 1962. His music includes a large body of songs and cantatas, chamber and orchestral music including suites from his many film scores, and music for the theatre.

The most fruitful collaboration of Eisler's career was with the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose views on the social function of art were similar. Their first large-scale projects were the theatre parable *die Massnahme* (1930) ("the Decision" or "the Measures Taken"); the film *Kuhle Wampe* (1931-2) and the play with music *die Mutter* ("the Mother"), which was first performed in 1932.

The play *Die Mutter* is based on a story by Gorky, set in Russia in the period from 1904 until the revolution in 1917, but chosen for its relevance to Germany at the beginning of the 1930's, a time of high and rising unemployment. Pelegea Vlassova is the widow of a worker and mother of a worker. At the start of the play she is in a state of ignorance and despair; her son's wages have been cut and she cannot make ends meet. Through the involvement of her son Pavel in organising a strike for better pay, she comes into contact with the ideas of communism, and realises the necessity of educating herself so as to play an effective part in the struggle of the workers against oppression. She learns to read, and when her son is arrested and eventually executed she takes over his role in the movement.

The central theme of *die Mutter* is learning - the workers need education so that they can organise themselves to take over the leadership of the state. Musical numbers are placed at key points in the play, and the music is carefully designed to clarify the text and help the listener to think critically about the issues raised. The music is typical of Eisler's style at this time: simple musical materials are used; the tone is friendly and encouraging when explaining the benefits of learning and of communism; stirring and sometimes aggressive when commenting on the class struggle.

The cantata performed tonight is an arrangement of the music from the play for soloists, chorus and two pianos. The action of the play is reduced to brief sections of narration and dialogue linking the musical numbers. Some of the arrangements were made by Eisler for concert performances during his lifetime, and the cantata version was apparently completed by members of the *Deutsche Akademie der Künste* in 1968.

JM

INTERVAL

GIOACHINO ROSSINI: PETITE MESSE SOLENNELLE

for four solo voices, chorus, two pianos and harmonium.

In 1829, at the age of 37, Rossini had a resounding success with his opera *Guillaume Tell*, which was premiered at the Paris Opéra. It was to be his last opera. The leading operatic composer of his generation and at the height of his career, Rossini retired and never wrote for the opera house again. Behind him he had a 20 year career and nearly 40 operas, comic and serious. Retired from the hurly-burly of the nineteenth century opera house and semi-invalid, he devoted himself to enjoying the good things in life at his Paris salon, entertaining the artistic world at his Samedis Soirs. He did not completely stop composing, but produced a string of songs, piano pieces and chamber works which were performed in his salon and at the houses of friends, these were subsequently published as his *Péchés de Vieillesse* (*Sins of old age*). In fact his rate of composition had been steadily decreasing. Early in his career he had averaged 3 operas per year, gradually declining to 1 opera per year, this rate had dropped even further since his arrival in Paris in 1824.

But he did not stop developing his style. In the *Péchés de Vieillesse* he turned his wit into musical terms incorporating grace and charm, sharp parody, a dash of sentiment and a combination of sophistication and naivety. Apart from these he produced two major works, his *Stabat Mater* of 1842 and the *Petite Messe Solennelle* of 1864. By the time that Rossini produced the mass, the musical world was very different from the one which had received *Guillaume Tell*. Wagner was about to produce *Tristan und Isolde*, Verdi had written *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore* and in 1867 would produce *Don Carlos* at the Paris Opéra, Liszt had produced his Faust Symphony and the B minor piano Sonata, and Berlioz had written *Les Troyens* (and he would die the same year as Rossini, without ever hearing the bulk of that opera).

The mass was first performed in 1864 at the house of Countess Louise Pillet-Will by a choir of 12, two pianos and a harmonium. The 4 solo singers were well known operatic names (including the Marchisio sisters), and were supported by 8 singers from the conservatoire, all 12 singers participating in the choral numbers. It was conceived as a chamber work, though Rossini subsequently orchestrated it (mainly to prevent anyone else doing the orchestration.) The first public performance was the premiere of the orchestral version at the Theatre Des Italiens in Paris in 1869, after Rossini's death. He retained a preference for the smaller scale version. It was first performed in the Pillet-Will's private chapel because of the Catholic church's ban on female singers. Rossini took advantage of this, to write a work that is most at home in a private salon or chapel.

The *Petite Messe Solennelle* is neither little nor solemn. There is over 80 minutes of music and the score is prefixed by a dedication in which even Rossini seems unsure about whether to take the work seriously. "Dear God, Here it is, finished, this poor little Mass. Have I written sacred music [*musique sacrée*] or damned music [*sacrée musique*]? I was born for opera buffa, you know it well! Little science, some heart, that's all. Be blessed then, and grant me peace in Paradise." Rossini used to refer to it as the last mortal Sin of my Old Age.

The solos in the work could all quite happily find their way into one or other of Rossini's operas. This is partly because the artistry of the Marchisio sisters, who sang in the premiere, recalled the vocal glories of the singers from Rossini's Neapolitan period.

The role of the chorus is quite a substantial one and ranges in style from the opening *Kyrie Eleison* could be an ensemble in an opera, the unaccompanied *Christe Eleison* in which Rossini seems to be paying homage to Palestrina, through to the two great choral fugues which close the *Gloria* and the *Credo*. In these the chorus sings classical style fugues which would not look out of place to Haydn, but the effect is completely subverted by almost tongue-in-cheek oompah style accompaniments.

In fact, style is the biggest problem of the work. How seriously can we take this enjoyable music. It is only in the last 10 years that we have started to consider Rossini's non-comic operas as serious dramatic works. But there is no doubting the sincerity of the *Petite Messe*. Part mass, part cantata, the work is quintessential Rossini hiding an essential seriousness behind a public face which is ironic and relaxed. The irony is evident in the *Credo's* jokey tempo indication *Allegro Cristiano*, and is persistently deployed.

Additionally, our contemporary mind rather boggles at the generous length of the piece (but in Rossini's day operas were seriously long). Even if it had been allowed by the church, just think of the length of a full sung Tridentine Mass with the addition of Rossini's music. Rather interestingly, in 1902, the Gramophone Company recorded the Vatican choir. These recordings have become famous because they are the only records of a castrato voice. One of the few major pieces of music recorded is the *Crucifixus* from the *Petite Messe Solennelle*. Which gives us the delightful (and probably erroneous) picture of Pontifical High Mass in the Capella Sistina, accompanied by Rossini's positively toe-tapping music.

The movements of the mass are as follows:-

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|--|
| 1) | KYRIE | Soloists and Chorus |
| 2) | GLORIA | Soloists and Chorus |
| 3) | GRATIAS | Terzetto for Contralto, Tenor and Bass |
| 4) | DOMINE DEUS | Tenor Solo |
| 5) | QUI TOLLIS | Duet for Soprano and Contralto |
| 6) | QUONIAM | Bass Solo |
| 7) | CUM SANCTO | Soloists and Chorus |
| 8) | CREDO | Soloists and Chorus |
| 9) | CRUCIFIXUS | Soprano Solo |
| 10) | ET RESURREXIT | Soloists and Chorus |
| 11) | PRELUDIO RELIGIOSO | for Harmonium or Piano |
| 12) | SANCTUS | Soloists and Chorus |
| 13) | O SALUTARIS | Soprano Solo |
| 14) | AGNUS DEI | Contralto and Chorus |

RCH