

Dear All

A couple of things to cheer you up this month.

Firstly a link to a Guardian article about Pavel Kolesnikov which was sent to me to send to you all for you to enjoy and to dream of concerts to come:

https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/oct/29/js-bach-goldberg-variations-review-pavel-kolesnikov?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

Secondly, I don't know how much notice you take of the adverts on the television or whether you tend to record your programmes and fast-forward over them. However, if you happen to see the current advert for an insurance comparison site, which features a certain opera singer, and if you listen to the orchestra playing in the background you may be reminded of the last concert we held back in 2019. The orchestra which played at Sir Karl Jenkin's 70th Birthday celebration concert is the same one playing on the advert. It is The Chamber Orchestra Of Wales which has performed many times in the Gower Festival over the years and is Swansea's only professional Orchestra. So, even though there won't be any opportunity to hear that Orchestra playing 'live' this year, we can still see and hear it on TV over for the next few months and hopefully remind ourselves of the Gower Festival and the thought of better days to come.

Finally, our wonderful Mumbling Maestro has penned another little article to keep us amused over the next month. I hope you all enjoy it!

Now, before I get my Mumbling mojo going, I'd like to draw your attention to a short series that's playing this week on BBC's Radio 3. It should be fun - it's on every night this week at 10.45 and it's called *Composers and their dogs*. Quite a few good tails (see what I did there?!?) to enjoy.

I woke up feeling a bit inventive today - so I thought I'll mumble about a particularly inventive gentlemen whose story is really amusing.

The inventor Antoine-Joseph Sax was born on November 6 1814 in Dinant. (Happy 206th birthday Mr. Sax) The town lies in an area that was French and then it was annexed by the Netherlands and finally in 1830, it became a part of the independent country of Belgium. So, even where he was born is a bit of a kerfuffle but he considered himself Belgian - just like Poirot! The oldest of 11 children, the young Adolphe (as he became known) was lucky to survive his childhood which seems to have been a catalogue of disasters. He fell from a third-story window (and was given up for dead), he swallowed a pin – no, not a small safety pin but a hat pin! He was burned in a gunpowder accident and burned again by a frying pan full of hot fat, he was poisoned three times by varnish fumes, hit on the head with a cobblestone and nearly drowned in a river. Apart from these things it was an uneventful childhood by all accounts!

Charles-Joseph Sax, the father of young Adolphe, was a cabinet maker (hence the varnish fumes - see above). Sax became his father's apprentice and also studied singing and the flute. When he was 16, Adolphe started out inventing and designing new musical instruments. He came up with an original 24-key clarinet and a new bass

clarinet. At the Belgian Exhibition (an Industrial Fair) in 1840 he presented nine inventions, among them an organ, a piano tuning process and a sound-reflecting screen. The judges felt that Sax was too young to receive the gold medal and instead awarded him the 'vermeil' (gilded silver). Feeling a little miffed at this, Sax made a decision to move to Paris, the capital of musical life in the French-speaking world. He had only 30 francs in his pocket at the time but that didn't stop him - off he went.

When he arrived in Paris, he was forced to live in a shed and to borrow money in order to keep body and soul together whilst getting himself established. His fortunes turned around when he met Hector Berlioz who, in addition to being France's most successful composer was also an influential music critic. In 1842 Sax showed Berlioz an early version of what he called the "saxophone", an instrument different from any other that had been made up to that time. It had the power of brass instruments but it was blown with a reed and had the expressive, voice-like qualities of woodwinds. Having given the saxophone a thorough examination and listened to it being played, Berlioz told Sax that the following day he could read in the paper what he (Berlioz) thought of the instrument. Sax spent a nervous night before picking up the next day's paper where he read Berlioz's words: "He [Sax] is a calculator, an acoustician and when required a smelter, a turner and if need be at the same time an embosser. He can think and act. He invents and he accomplishes." Berlioz went on to praise the sound of Sax's instrument and so - fired up by this - Adolphe soon began to produce saxophones in seven sizes from soprano all the way down to double-bass and it was not long before composers in France started to write parts for them in military bands and the occasional small orchestra.

Sax won a gold medal for his instruments at the Paris Industrial Exposition in 1849 and set up a workshop in the City. You'd have thought that it would have been all plain sailing from then on - but no!! Although Sax's workshop sold some 20,000 instruments between 1843 and 1860, he was not a talented money manager. He filed for bankruptcy three times, in 1852, 1873 and 1877, and he was saved from a fourth debacle only by the intervention of one of his admirers - none other than Emperor Napoleon III.

Sax continued to devise improvements to his instruments and he taught at the Paris Conservatory but in 1858, he was diagnosed with lip cancer. Fortunately, he was successfully treated by an Afro-French herbalist. He had five children by his Spanish-born mistress Louise-Adèle Maor, whom he never married. Sax's son Adolphe-Edouard, followed him into the business and maintained the Sax workshop into the twentieth century when it was sold to the Selmer company, which still exists today - making saxophones. Sax lived his final years kept out of poverty only by a small pension arranged for him by an admirer. By the time of his death on February 7, 1894 at the age of 80, Sax feared that although his "saxophone" was used in French Military band music, it had little presence otherwise. He had no way of knowing that his creation would find its way to the United States by military bandmen returning from the Spanish - American War. It would eventually evolve into an icon of American music, played enthusiastically by musicians ranging from schoolchildren up to Bill Clinton, the forty-second president of the United States.

This is my penultimate mumbling of 2020 and it should have been a year of wall to wall Beethoven Sadly it was not to be, so we've been exploring some unusual aspects of his character.

Did you know that there are some two dozen sets of variations by Beethoven on themes by other composers? Almost all of Beethoven's variations were composed in his 20s just before or while he was trying to make a name in Vienna. Beethoven was not fussy where he took his themes from. There's one set based on a march by a man called Ernst Christoph Dressler. Beethoven was only 11 when he wrote this.

Paul Wranitzky was a Czech composer of 44 symphonies and 56 string quartets, all of them are completely forgotten!! Beethoven took one of his themes. This guy's only other mark on musical history was that he got to conduct the premiere of Beethoven's first symphony.

Another was Vincenzo Righini a Bologna singer and conductor who replaced Salieri for a few months in the Habsburg court before landing the powerful kapellmeister job at the Prussian court in Berlin. Did Beethoven think he might be a useful ally?

There was also Antonio Salieri himself who - thanks to the film *Amadeus* - is remembered in musical history for all the wrong reasons. Beethoven used a theme from his opera *Falstaff*.

Then there was the guy with the imaginative name of Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf. He was a Viennese veteran who had been friendly with Mozart and Haydn - the set is wittily titled 'There once was an old man'. Well, I say "friendly" but here's an interesting little aside - Mozart's string quartets were published by the Viennese firm Artaria and they generated some much-needed income for Wolfgang. Whether they made money for their publisher as well is another matter. Three years later, the aforementioned Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, offered Artaria six of HIS string quartets at the same price they paid Mozart, with a note that read, "I am certain you will do better with MY quartets than you did with Mozart's!" Some friend!!!

Back to Beethoven and the matter in hand and there's one more worth mentioning - Variations in F major on 'Tändeln und Scherzen' by Franz Xaver Süßmayr. He was the guy who got the job of finishing off Mozart's Requiem when the Master died.

In all, Beethoven wrote 60 compositions in variation form. It remains puzzling though, that so few great composers looked to Beethoven as a source for their own elaborations.

Of the few, the most interesting story surrounds the work by the Austrian composer Franz Schmidt . He wrote *Concertante Variations on a theme by Beethoven* as a left-hand-only piano concerto for the wealthy Paul Wittgenstein, brother of the philosopher, who had lost his right arm whilst in Russian captivity during the First World War.

At the end of Beethoven's life, the vultures descended. Friends, neighbours, acquaintances, passers-by, tourists and tradesmen, all popped in to see how he was getting on, some to make off with whatever they could. Any portable possession that

might have value as a posthumous trophy was taken. While he slept, people cut off locks of his hair.

One was the young composer Ferdinand Hiller who thought the lock might somehow lead him to the physical secrets of Beethoven's genius. The gruesome relic languished in his family for a century and more until it was put up for sale. There was a regular trade in the auction rooms in locks of Beethoven's hair, some of them genuine.

One came into the possession of a certain Dr. Alfredo Guevara who subjected the lock to multiple laboratory tests in an effort to support his theory that Beethoven's failing health and death were caused by a particularly unpleasant "social disease". Most musical scholars think this unlikely. Beethoven was a prudish man, embarrassed by talk of sex. He fought long and hard to stop his brother from marrying a woman that he considered to have loose morals. He disapproved of Mozart's opera Don Giovanni for its licentiousness and he shunned people who were living in sin, even aristocrats who could have been of good use to him. Makes you think!!!

Until December then -