

Bassonicus:

May the Force be with us

Jefferey Cox makes a welcome return to the pages of DRN.

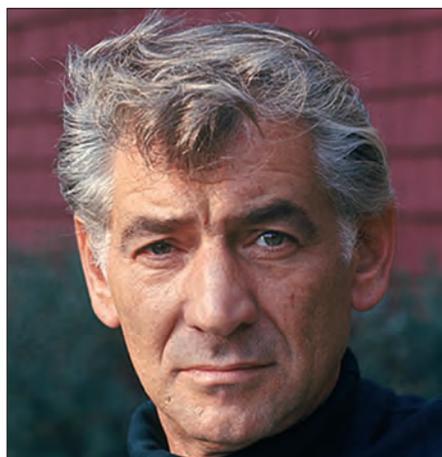


Brexit! Coronavirus! It's been a ghastly three years, including abusive and divisive behaviour, more or less explicit untruths, and even death threats! Public standards have taken a knock, and party politics have been allowed to take precedence over the country's needs (but nothing new in that!). And now we have the Coronavirus. Could this have been visited upon us as a punishment?

Will we be able to put this behind us? Over time, perhaps, but it won't be easy, and there were already signs before the Coronavirus of confrontation which don't bode well for the future. If you thought Brexit had gone away, think again. Negotiations about the exact terms of our leaving were only just getting into gear. Expect angry exchanges over fishing rights for starters; then the Irish backstop; and then immigration issues. I rather suspect that by the time the negotiations have reached some sort of conclusion, everyone will be exhausted and wondering what on earth prompted them to embark on such a bruising fight. There is unlikely to be a win-win result, of that you can be sure, and the wild Trump card makes predictions impossible. Was Napoleon right when he described the English as a nation of shopkeepers? He may have been, but perhaps it was a back-handed compliment: as traders we have done pretty well.

The EU has sloughed several skins before arriving at its current form, and we have never felt happy with any. Its over-riding objective was to create a mechanism which would ensure that Germany would

never be in a position to start another war. This was particularly important for the European countries which had been invaded and suffered the trauma of occupation. It was therefore less important for Britain, which had suffered neither. For us, economic considerations were paramount – those and managing relations with the Soviet Union in the context of a 'Cold War'. Reunification of its two halves was a natural goal for West Germany, but not at all desired by other members of the EU who preferred a Germany weakened by the uncertainty of a temporary capital in Bonn and a ruinously expensive Ostpolitik.



Leonard Bernstein

With the crumbling of the Warsaw Pact and Reunification finally taking place in October 1990, Germany marked the occasion with a ceremony at the Brandenburg gate. This was followed two months later by a Christmas Day celebration in Berlin's Schauspielhaus when Leonard Bernstein was invited to conduct a performance of Beethoven's Ninth. As you can imagine, this was no ordinary Ninth. But whatever the musical merits of the performance, there were also political factors in play. The decision to invite Bernstein – as opposed to a German conductor – could be seen as a symbolic gesture acknowledging America's contribution to the defence of Berlin during the blockade of the city and subsequent period. And Bernstein reciprocated by substituting *Freiheit* (Freedom for Joy) in the last movement. It was a moving occasion; Beethoven's music provided exactly what was needed – with passion and dignity – a real sense of occasion.

If only we had been disposed to do something similar when we left the EU! It is not as if we didn't have the music to reflect the bitter-sweet nature of the occasion – Elgar without the nobilmente for example, or Purcell's *Funeral Music for Queen Mary* – music which suited the fact that we were leaving organisations which had been the focus of the country's international and domestic politics for the best part of fifty years. This was not to be, however. Instead we were treated to a jokey speech by the Prime Minister who seemed to go out of his way to trivialise the occasion. 'Give a bung for a bong' was his message; make a donation so that Big Ben (itself in a state of mechanical confusion, and requiring a shedload of bungs) could be put right in time to mark the passing of a political era.

I feel sure that the ceremonies at the Brandenburg Gate and Schauspielhaus would have met with Beethoven's approval, and that he would also have approved Bernstein's textual tweak to the Ninth. After all, he would do the same thing when he heard that Napoleon had assumed the title of Emperor and had himself crowned in Notre Dame cathedral. A single word sufficed: Beethoven changed the dedication of his *Third Symphony* – the longest and weightiest of symphonic utterances since the symphonies of Mozart and Haydn – from 'Buonaparte' to 'Heroica'. Beethoven felt let down by his hero who had succumbed to vanity, and thereby disqualified himself from the honour which Beethoven wanted to pay him. Instead, Beethoven dedicated the symphony to the idea of heroism in general rather than any specific hero.

So what might Beethoven have made of the division of Germany and the Berlin Wall? It is difficult to imagine him putting his genius to the service of the Ulbricht and Honnecker regimes or cooperating with the Stasi, although great pressure could be brought on artists such as Beethoven who needed official recognition to obtain performances of their works. And if you had hearing problems, as Beethoven did, you could expect treatment commensurate with your attitude. Psychological pressures could also be brought to bear, as, for example, using your family as a lever. In Beethoven's case it might involve



Beethoven

pressure from his nephew Carl. And if you thought artistic success would protect you, think again. Awkward customers were silenced by encouraging them to perform in West Germany and then revoking their documents and refusing to let them return; the idea being that such artists would be deprived of the political or artistic oxygen they needed to make their impact in the West, and the West would gradually lose interest in them.

Beethoven's only completed opera, *Fidelio*, would have made him an obvious target for such treatment. The plot tells the story of a political bully who arrests and tortures anyone who gets in his way. Leonora's husband is just such a victim, and we learn that he is shortly to be murdered. Disguised as Fidelio, she risks her life to penetrate the prison and rescue her husband, and other political prisoners, too. For obvious reasons the opera was not allowed to be performed in East

Germany, but once the Wall had crumbled, there was nothing so relevant to the public mood as this opera. I was in the audience when *Fidelio* was performed at the Semperoper in Dresden, and witnessed the reaction of the East German audience when the prisoners were released from their cells and stumbled into the prison courtyard. A harrowing moment.

Ode to Joy using this technique, and the professional British choir Tenebrae has performed a programme of Bach, Purcell and Allegri with all 19 singers following the beat of their conductor from their homes. This technique as it stands has obvious limitations, and the performers themselves will need to adapt, but it is relevant to situations like now when ensembles can't get together.



Semperoper, Dresden

Reverting to the present, the big issue is the Coronavirus and how the government intends to overcome the huge problems we face. Already we can say that life after the virus could be very different from what we have been used to. New ways of performing and streaming music are evolving, as well as the use of click-tracks (a standard technique of session jazz and pop musicians, but as yet uncommon in classical recordings). The Rotterdam Philharmonic has produced a performance of (you guessed it!) the

For the moment a lot of music-making is on hold, but musicians are a resilient lot and I don't expect things will stay that way for long. And we have Beethoven's example to inspire us.

Happy Anniversary, Ludwig!