

ORATORIO again

RTHK Radio 4
10:00 – 11:00

Programme 4
Sunday 28 december 2008

MUSIC: Berlioz “L’Enfance du Christ” CD 44153 disc 1 # 11

KANE: v.o. at c. 0:25

This is Berlioz, the Overture to part 2 of his sacred trilogy, ‘L’Enfance du Christ’, ‘The Childhood of Christ’. The programme is “Oratorio”, and I’m Ciaran Kane. The *full* work takes over an hour and a half, so I’ve had to do some serious *editing* for you. Mainly, I’m omitting part 1 which is titled “Herod’s Dream” --- *it* doesn’t have any *overture*, and was the *last* section that Berlioz wrote. Part 2, “The flight into Egypt”, contains Berlioz’ original inspiration, the melody and verses you’ll *probably* recognise as often sung on their own at Christmastime, “The Shepherds’ Farewell”. Part 3 is an imaginative contemplation of the arrival of Joseph and Mary and the child Jesus in Egypt, titled “The Arrival at Saïs”. Berlioz added *this* section following the success of “The Shepherds’ Farewell” at a concert in 1850 and the *rest* of the “Flight into Egypt” section three years later. The whole thing actually began with a *joke*. Berlioz became bored and irritated at a party in a friend’s house when the guests began to play cards. “As you’re not *doing* anything”, one of them said to him, “*write* a piece of music for my album”. So Berlioz, in his own words, sketched out “an andantino in four parts for organ”. It was a parody on a 17th century organist whose works were popular in Paris at the time. But then Berlioz felt that the rustic and naïve character of the piece needed similar *words*, so the organ piece disappeared and became a chorus of Bethlehem shepherds. And with a play on his friend’s *name*, Berlioz put an attribution of the *words* to a fictional 17th century Master of Music at the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Then he added this simple fugal, modal overture. The joke became a hoax on his enemies a month or so later when he introduced the piece at a concert as a ‘discovery’, and some unwary critic praised the music of France’s

great heritage, in contrast with the modern rubbish being written by people like Berlioz ! [342]

MUSIC up! hold for c. 0:12 [music should be at about 2:30....]

KANE: v.o. In part 1 of Berlioz' "L'Enfance du Christ" we hear about "Herod's Dream" : his anxiety that he's about to lose his kingdom, because a child has just been born ; the advice his soothsayers give that, to save his kingdom, he must slaughter all the newborn boys in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem. [**music fade out..**] The ending of part 1 is the stable at Bethlehem, where Mary and Joseph are singing to their son, when they hear angel voices telling them of danger, and that they must immediately leave for the desert and Egypt. As they hastily get ready, the 'Hosannas' of the angel voices fade into silence. [107]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e ## 9, 10 11:14

KANE: The overture to part 2 represents the shepherds gathering around the stable in Bethlehem, and then they sing their farewell: "He is going far away from the land where He was born". [32]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e # 12 3:47

KANE: The "Flight into Egypt" section ends with the *narrator* telling of Joseph and Mary arriving at a pleasant resting-place on their journey, with leafy trees and abundant water, and a beautiful carpet of soft, flowery grass that Mary says the Lord spread out in the desert for her son. The tired travellers slumber awhile, as angels from heaven kneel about them, worshipping the divine Child. [65]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e # 13 6:40

KANE: Part 3 of The Childhood of Christ by Berlioz, "The Arrival at Saïs", begins with the *same* narrator describing the weary family trudging three days in the the searing heat of the wind, and arriving exhausted at the legendary city of Saïs, now under Roman control, and full of cruel and haughty people. Once there, their agony continued, as they sought shelter and food. Mary is afraid, in the vast city of crowds, and we hear Joseph go knocking on doors begging help and hospitality. He's answered by cries of "Go away, vile Hebrews! The people of Rome have nothing to do with tramps and lepers". Another time, and "the people of *Egypt* have nothing to do with tramps and

lepers'. A final time Joseph and Mary *together* knock and ask for pity and help --- and this time find welcome. It's an Ishmaelite house, and the father orders his servants and family to look after the travellers and their child, bind their wounds, bring water and food and a cot for the Child..

[174]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e ## 15, 16 10:55

KANE: The Ishmaelite tells his guests to take heart, banish fear, for the children of Israel and of Ishmael are brothers, and he will do everything to help. Discovering that Joseph is also a carpenter like himself, he invites the travellers to stay and work with his own family, let their child grow up in wisdom together with them.

[58]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e ## 17 stop at 2:50 2:50

KANE: To finish off a delightful evening, the Ishmaelite calls on his children to provide music for his guests; and there's a lovely trio for harp and two flutes at this point. Time, alas, dictates omitting it here, as we go on to hear the considerate 'good-nights' of the householder, the grateful thanks of Joseph and Mary and the blessings of the Ishmaelite family.

[63]

MUSIC: Berlioz "L'Enfance du Christ" CD 44153 disc 2 # 2 4:22

KANE: And so, the Narrator tells us, it happened that by an infidel the Saviour was saved. Mary and Joseph watched Him grow, and He went back to the land of his birth determined to accomplish his divine mission to redeem Mankind. The Epilogue concludes with the reflections: "O my soul, what remains for you to do but to humble your pride before such a mystery ! O my soul, my heart, be filled with that sober pure love which alone can open the heavenly mansion to us, Amen.

[88]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e disc 2 # 4 5:30

KANE: You've been listening to an abridged version of "L'Enfance du Christ", 'The Childhood of Christ', by Hector Berlioz. The recording is quite an old one, with Victoria de los Angeles (soprano) as Mary, Roger Soyer (baritone) as Joseph, Nicolai Gedda (tenor) as the Narrator, Xavier

Depraz (bass) as the Ishmaelite father. The Orchestre de la Société
des Concerts du Conservatoire, and the René Duclos choirs
were conducted by André Cluytens [70]

Music: 44:43

Words: 999