**The Emperor’s New Clothes?**

(Phil Race, July 2020)

Beethoven may at one time have planned to name his 5th piano concerto ‘Emperor’ but this is regarded as highly unlikely, especially since Napoleon had declared himself Emperor much to Beethoven’s disgust in 1804, well before the concerto was first performed in Leipzig in 1811. There does seem to be some agreement that Beethoven's editor in the UK, Johann Baptist Cramer, was the one to actually give the piece that name. Unlike most well-known piano concerti, Beethoven’s 5th concerto does not have a cadenza, (a bit where the soloist alone usually demonstrates extreme virtuosity or insight) possibly because this concerto was written for Archduke Rudolph, who was Beethoven’s patron and pupil but no piano virtuoso, and gave the first performance.

iPod shuffle can surprise one. When using my exercise bike, I play classical music on iPod to keep me at it, and set it on shuffle by ‘song’ (none of my music is songs, as I like orchestral, instrumental, chamber, brass band and anything but choral). Connected is an old iPod with 80Gb worth of classics that I’ve transferred from CDs over the years – this iPod last filled a decade ago.

Pedalling away, the unmistakable strong chord which launches the 1st movement of Beethoven’s 5th piano concerto burst forward. Immediately, I identified the work, and waited for the piano arpeggios which follow – they came, but slowly, expansively, and differently to all the other versions I have collected over the years, since first being enchanted with the concerto with Clifford Curzon and the Vienna Philharmonic under Hans Knappertsbusch on my late brother-in-law’s LP way back in monophonic times.

I got off my bike to inspect the iPod to find out who were the conductor and pianist, and it was Glenn Gould on the piano and Leopold Stokowski conducting his own American Symphony Orchestra. How did they do? Monumental? Passionate? Steady? Not steady. Admittedly, I heard subtleties that evade many of the modern performances I have on CD, and the orchestra was at times grander and yet more detailed in recording than on many. The mood of the performance did seem somewhat episodic, but each episode was revealing in its own way. The record is dated 1966, well into stereo. Stokowski was by then legendary, and the much younger Gould was much lesser known, except for his Bach. I did sense that Stokowski was tending to try to speed up Gould, and Gould was tending to slow down the tempo, but the performance came across strongly enough. Stokowski was about 82, and Gould was around 32.

Next piece to come up – by unbelievable coincidence with 80Gb to select from – started with the very same chord! That has hardly ever happened to me in well over a decade of iPod shuffling. But here were different performers. The piano arpeggios followed the chord, but they came much more like ‘normal’ rather than expansively and deliberately. Of course, I dismounted to find out who was responsible – this time it was Klemperer with the young Daniel Barenboim at the keyboard. Now, recently I’ve been re-listening to quite a lot of Klemperer and reading about him. I listened on (continuing to pedal the bike, at a slightly slower but steadier pace – nearly 24 minutes for that 1st movement, compared to nearly 22 with Gould and Stokowski, as the music drove me on). Somehow, the performance was strong and sincere enough, but not distinguished. Klemperer was around 83, while Barenboim as only around 26.

Would I take either performance to the legendary desert island? I don’t think so – if I were restricted to one bit of Beethoven it would not be the 5th piano concerto, more likely to be the quartet Op.131 or the 8th symphony at the moment of writing this story. But excitement and food for thought were both there, hearing these legendary pairs interpreting the piece in their quite different ways. That said, I’ve come to enjoy better Beethoven’s 5th concerto interpreted on a smaller scale, with orchestral forces matching those normal in his time.

Now for a parallel tale. I love going to live concerts (and miss them greatly during Covid-19 times!) and a couple of years ago I was on my way to the Sage, Gateshead, where Lars Vogt (then the Royal Northern Sinfonia’s music director) was to play and direct Beethoven’s 5th Concerto in a concert also being recorded. I’d already been at concerts when he’s recorded earlier Beethoven concertos – and at many pre-concert talks where he’d talked about playing Beethoven, and the joys and hazards of playing and conducted at the same time. He was also going to conduct Dvorak’s 5th symphony in the concert I was heading for – relatively rarely heard in concert these days.

When I took my seat, I noticed there were no microphones. Thorben Gittes, the orchestra’s manager came on and told us Lars was not well, but that the concert would still take place, but in reverse order, with the Symphony first, as a substitute pianist had been arranged at very short notice, and he was on his way up to Gateshead from Oxford where he’d been working. Bradley Creswick, the orchestra’s leader would direct from the violin the orchestra for the symphony. Now Dvorak’s 5th is far from well known, but I’ve enjoyed it for many years on records so know it well, and Bradley and the orchestra did a very commendable performance of it, no doubt having polished their interpretation in rehearsals earlier in the week with Lars Vogt.

After the interval, the identity of the guest pianist was revealed, and Peter Donohoe took his place at the piano. It turned out that he had no opportunity to rehearse with the Royal Northern Sinfonia of course, but professionalism prevailed. Those of you who know Peter Donohoe’s work will probably associate him with a very wide range of music, particularly relatively modern classical pieces. He clearly knew Beethoven’s 5th concerto very well, but perhaps with a grander more-stormy vision of the piece than the careful German kind of idiom that Lars Vogt is now known for. The ensuing performance was electric, with the soloist and conductor learning from each other, and adjusting their approach on-the-hoof. As a member of the audience, it was like hearing the piece being interpreted live for the first time.

Weeks later, after a full concert with Lars Vogt and the orchestra (which was being recorded as well), the audience was invited to stay on for an additional part after the concert, when Beethoven’s 5th concerto would be played and recorded. Excellent as this was, the performance I’ll never forget was the spontaneous one with Peter Donohoe, inventing the dialogue with the orchestra as if for the first time – sitting on the edge of my seat. For all the wonders of recorded music (thank heavens for this in Covid-19 times) there’s nothing quite like being there and breathing the same air as an audience, and orchestra and those re-creating the notes written by the composer.