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THE ART OF THE SYMPHONIC POEM

By R. W. S. MENDL

THE form of art known as the symphonic poem is comparatively recent in origin and differs in this respect from most other kinds of musical composition. For however widely we may agree that modern symphonies—those of Elgar, Sibelius, and Bax, for instance—differ in structure and character from those of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, they are still symphonies, and the operas of Wagner and his successors, broad though the gap is which separates them from those of Monteverdi, Gluck, Mozart, Weber, and Meyerbeer, in successive ages, are none the less links in a single chain; the oratorios of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are very different affairs from those of Handel in one generation and Mendelssohn in another, yet we recognise them as lineal descendants; and even the short piano pieces of Chopin may be said to be able to trace their ancestry back to the preludes of Bach and Couperin's "pièces de clavecin". But the symphonic poem was born into the world as a new creation in the nineteenth century, and there are reasons for holding that it has not yet reached the zenith of its development.

It is easier to describe its nature than to define it in a few words. It is an orchestral composition inspired by a literary, historical, or pictorial subject—or indeed by anything which exists also outside music (a natural scene, for instance)—and deriving its structure rather from the events or incidents or objects which it seeks to portray than from the inherited forms of the art of music itself. Whereas the motions and adventures of the themes in a symphony or a sonata are governed largely by the traditional structure (however much an independent genius such as Beethoven or his successors may modify or expand the form to suit the needs of the case), it is the order of events in the story that mainly prescribes the way in which the music of a symphonic poem is to go.

By ascribing the term "symphonic poem" to an orchestral composition based on any subject which also has an existence apart from music, we are employing a very wide definition, though it is hard to see how we can narrow it down without excluding such a work as Bax's "November Woods", which relates to no definite pictorial scene but is descriptive of any woods in late

autumn, and yet is undoubtedly a symphonic poem. The wideness of the definition admittedly includes music which is simply expressive of generalised emotions, seeing that the latter exist independently of music. There is, however, really no reason why such a composition should not be called a symphonic poem, provided that its structure is determined by the subject-matter rather than by the traditional forms of musical art. The term would be applicable, for instance, to a work which is given by its creator the title of "Anger" or "Sorrow" or "Love" and is intended to portray one of those emotions, and which, whether or not it possesses a thematic unity, follows the dictates of its own subject-matter and, as it were, generates its own structure, instead of adhering to one of the purely musical forms such as that of the first movement of a sonata, or a fugue, or a theme and variations. It would be illogical to withhold the title "symphonic poem" from such a work, while applying it to "November Woods"; for the only genuine distinction between them is that the latter depicts a piece of the material world, whereas the composition which we have visualised relates to the emotional sphere, and this difference affords no ground for calling the one a symphonic poem and the other not.

It is true that the portrayal of emotions, characters, scenes or events, which exist also apart from music, is a feature likewise of the majority of overtures and of most movements of symphonies from the later days of Mozart onwards. But the essential distinction between these and a symphonic poem is one of structure. The first movement of Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony", though it describes something outside music, namely the pleasant feelings aroused in a man on arrival in the country, avoids being a symphonic poem in two ways: in the first place, it is itself only a part of a whole, though separate from the other portions: secondly, it is written in the traditional form, with exposition containing first and second subjects, development, recapitulation, and coda. The overtures to "Egmont" and "Coriolan" are nearer to being symphonic poems, because, though they are in accordance with the established "first movement" or "overture" plan, they are complete works in themselves, in spite of the fact that each was intended as the prelude to a play, and they are certainly "poetic" and not absolute music. To the prelude to "Tristan und Isolde", if it were not part of a much larger whole consisting of the entire opera, the term "symphonic poem" would be applicable, seeing that it embodies the emotional essence of the story in an original,

though closely unified, structure, which was wrought in Wagner's brain by the subject itself and not imposed upon him by traditional usage.

In one respect the "Coriolan" and "Egmont" overtures approximate more closely to being symphonic poems than "Leonora No. 3" does, because in them the formal structure, though following the inherited model, does not contest against the poetic ideas. In both of them, the composer is representing a spiritual struggle in universalised form, whereas in "Leonora No. 3" he portrays the actual narrative of the drama up to a point but departs from it in one important respect—that the recapitulation, which musical tradition impelled him to introduce after the Minister's trumpet calls and the prayer of thanksgiving, does not fit in with the order of events in the story. In the "Coriolan" and "Egmont" overtures, on the other hand, there is no such conflict between poetic content and musical form, because no attempt is made to present the dramatic incidents of the play, and the composer therefore found it possible to effect a perfect marriage between the spiritual ideas and the traditional structure of a classical overture. In "Coriolan" the notion of a brave man who courts death rather than abandon his freedom of will, is treated in a generalised fashion without reference to scenes or events. The "Egmont" overture typifies a hero who is oppressed on earth but attains a glorious freedom in death. The representation of such themes could be wedded to the established plan of an overture without incongruity. Wagner regarded the occurrence of the recapitulation in "Leonora No. 3" as a flaw, because it, so to speak, interfered with the dramatic sequence: it is not, however, necessary to take this view, since it is possible to believe that Beethoven intended that overture to be only partially narrative in character. Nevertheless, the difference between his treatment of the story of Leonora in the 2nd and 3rd overtures of that name shows that he was hovering between two alternative forms, and merits attention here, because it bears on the origin of the symphonic poem.

Beethoven in his maturity never hesitated to alter the strict forms of musical structure which he had inherited from his predecessors, if he found that the spiritual or emotional needs of his creation demanded it. The replacement of the old minuet by a scherzo, the increased number of repetitions in the third movements of the Fourth and Seventh symphonies, the transference of the customary order of movements in which he often indulged, the enlargement of the slow introduction in those same two sym-

phonies, the immense enhancement of the importance of the coda in the "Eroica" and elsewhere, the transformation of the *reprise* into something which, though it still marked a return to the music of the exposition after the free fantasia of the development section, was nevertheless far from being a mere repetition of it, and the passing of the scherzo without a break into the finale in the C minor, are cases in point. But none of his innovations was more significant than the omission of the recapitulation in the 2nd Leonora overture, because by making this sacrifice of traditional form on the altar of dramatic requirements Beethoven was anticipating or even laying the foundations of the symphonic poem. He clearly felt that after bringing the concrete events of the drama into high relief by sounding the trumpet call which heralded Florestan's deliverance, it would be inappropriate to recapitulate the themes associated with Leonora's courageous enterprise and her husband's grief in prison: the very brief allusion to the latter which he introduced was evidently intended only as a reminder—as though he were saying that past pain is sweet—and does not interfere with the flow of the narrative. Thus, from the standpoint of musical history, "Leonora No. 3", which was intended to replace, but which, we must be heartily thankful, has only supplemented its predecessor, might almost be said to mark a step backward—in the sense that traditional structure in this work reasserted its supremacy in Beethoven's mind over the symphonic poem as anticipated—or represented—by "Leonora No. 2". Beethoven came to feel that chronology was less important than symmetry and that it was not essential, in order to write a suitable orchestral prelude to his opera, to follow the order of events rigidly: and he may also, on second thoughts, have conceived that to recall the earlier phases of the story in the hour of triumph was psychologically true and apposite. Nevertheless the interesting result, for our present purposes, is that "Leonora No. 3" remains an overture in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, whereas "No. 2", though it followed the old structure of an overture up to a point, deserted it at the critical moment and so marked the advent of the symphonic poem.

Beethoven anticipated the symphonic poem in the Pastoral Symphony, also. It is true that though this is essentially programme music, it is, of course, a symphony and retains most of the structural features of that form of composition. Nevertheless, the interposition of an additional and independent movement, representing the storm, between the peasants' festival of the

scherzo and the shepherds' thanksgiving of the finale, marks an important departure from precedent. The construction of the storm movement itself follows no inherited plan, but is determined by the composer's fancy or experience of the subject which he is depicting: the first crescendo and the lull which succeeds it, followed by the further climax, the subsidence of the tempest, and the refreshing reappearance of the sun and blue sky clearly represented by the oboe and second violins and the upward scale on the flute; are all entirely inspired by nature, not founded on the laws of musical form. Moreover, the way in which these last three sections of the work succeed one another in the order which the subjects portrayed by them would follow in real life, and the fact that they do this without intervening pauses, are typical of Richard Strauss rather than of Beethoven. They result in making the composition almost intermediate between a symphony and a symphonic poem.

"Wellington's Victory" or "The Battle of Vitoria", written a few years later, is an even more direct anticipation of the symphonic poem on Beethoven's part, but it is not of great intrinsic value and its interest is mainly historical, as that of a piece of programme music which was not an overture to a play or to an opera and also not a symphony in the recognised sense of the term.

It was not to be expected that the symphonic poem should have come into existence before Beethoven's day. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries musicians were busy working out the new forms of the sonata, the quartet, the concerto, and the symphony, or in carrying on the development of opera as a form of musical drama by means of the reforms which Gluck instituted or in the direction of the musical portrayal of characters, which Mozart achieved among other things. Though others since Beethoven have produced many notable examples in the instrumental forms which I have just mentioned, they may be said to have reached their climax in him, and the time was ripe for fresh types of instrumental composition. It was natural that side by side with—or soon after—Schumann's cycles of romantic or descriptive short pieces for pianoforte and the emotionally passionate or delicate piano creations which Chopin gave to the world without framing them in sonata form, there should arise a form of orchestral composition which followed no previous rules of musical structure and took its cue from the incidents of a story, the interplay of characters, or the phenomena of the external world. Moreover this was an age of romance, in which legends and fairy-stories

were filling the imagination of artists not only in music but in other spheres, and for the portrayal of such subjects a free fancy untrammelled by the set forms of musical tradition, seemed to be demanded. Lastly, the nineteenth-century development of orchestral technique and colour facilitated the expression of these magical, supernatural, and fantastic elements, enriched the power to portray varieties of character and events and the sights and sounds of nature, and made it possible to convey and suggest delicate effects and atmosphere in innumerable, subtle ways.

Programme music, though its enhanced development dates from the nineteenth century, was a natural manifestation of the art from the beginning, and countless examples of it exist in the ages before Beethoven. But the symphonic poem as an art-form was literally a new product of that century, and apart from the striking anticipations of it which we have noticed among the works of that master, both the species and its name were invented by one man, Franz Liszt.

Berlioz and Liszt are often coupled together as writers of programme music, but whereas Liszt composed the "Dante" and "Faust" symphonies as well as symphonic poems, Berlioz composed no symphonic poems, but only programme symphonies, which, though not strictly adhering to the old symphonic forms, followed them to a considerable extent so far as the division into movements and the character of those movements themselves were concerned. For example, in the "Symphonie Fantastique" the slow introduction is followed by an allegro; the second movement, "A Ball", is written in waltz time, and as a dance movement corresponds to the minuets of Haydn and Mozart; the '*scène aux champs*' is the slow movement. The '*marche au supplice*' is structurally an interpolation, but the "Witches' Sabbath" is an 'allegro' finale, though extraordinary in quality. The recurrence of the theme of the '*idée fixe*' in various forms in the different movements anticipates both the treatment of the 'hero' theme in successive sections of Strauss's "Ein Heldenleben" and the use of the '*Leitmotiv*' in Wagner's operas, and the internal structure of each movement is freer than in Beethoven. Nevertheless, the work remains a symphony, not a symphonic poem. And the same is true of "Harold in Italy", which is likewise programme music and also has a theme, associated with Harold, recurring in the different movements. It is regrettable that Berlioz did not write symphonic poems: his genius would, one thinks, have been well fitted to the task.

Liszt produced no fewer than 13 compositions to which he gave the name of symphonic poem, all between the years 1850 and 1860. Most of these works are short as compared with any of those of Richard Strauss except "Till Eulenspiegel", nor are they minutely descriptive. They present the general ideas of the subjects indicated in the titles, rather than detailed narratives like those of Strauss. One of them, "Prometheus", is more in the nature of a cantata, containing, as it does, a succession of choruses set to words, so that it cannot be suggested that the voices form part of the instrumental fabric, as might be said of the wordless choral part of Delius's "Song of the High Hills".

With the exception of "Les Préludes" and "Mazeppa", the symphonic poems of Liszt are not often heard in the concert-room to-day, and it would almost seem as though he has to suffer the same fate as pioneers in other spheres. The original Florentine creators of opera at the beginning of the 17th century have had to pay the not unnatural penalty for being first in the field, in the form of being overshadowed by Monteverdi and the great musical dramatists of successive generations. A large debt is due to Glinka for being the founder of Russian opera—a type of composition so different from the operas of Italy, Germany, and France, as to constitute practically a fresh art-form altogether. But Glinka's chief importance was that he paved the way for Moussorgsky, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov. Haydn has been called the father of the symphony: but the real originators of it were predecessors of his, whose works are seldom performed to-day. Similarly, the symphonic poems of Liszt are valuable largely from the historical point of view. Apart from the striking anticipations of this genre to be found in Beethoven, they were the first works of their kind. As such, rather than because of their intrinsic merits, they are interesting to students of the art, many of whom would welcome more frequent opportunities of hearing them. Liszt's use of themes associated with particular characters or ideas, and his practice of transforming them to suit the needs of the literary subject rather than developing them on traditional symphonic lines, are of great importance in that they led to the more elaborate employment of these methods by later masters of the symphonic poem and by Wagner in his music dramas.

Once Liszt had set the example, the idea spread rapidly through various countries. Smetana in Bohemia, César Franck in Paris, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov in Russia, are a few notable ones of the host of composers who contributed to the art

of the symphonic poem. Smetana wrote a cycle of six works of this kind, entitled "My Country", not so minutely detailed as the tone-poems of Richard Strauss, but nevertheless definitely narrative in character, as was natural in the case of a composer who was as far removed as any from the instinct to create absolute music. César Franck gave the name "Poème Symphonique" to works to which we should hesitate to apply it—such as "Rédemption" and "Psyché"—even as Liszt had done with his "Prometheus". If once we call a choral composition with words a symphonic poem, we shall find it impossible to draw a line between this art-form and a cantata or oratorio. Franck's real symphonic poems are "Les Eolides", "Le Chasseur Maudit", and "Les Djinns". The fact that the last-named is a work for pianoforte and orchestra and is to that extent akin to a concerto, does not disentitle it to the name "Symphonic poem" any more than Strauss's "Don Quixote" is in any way debarred from the description by the important parts for 'cello and viola solo. But powerful though the writing of "Le Chasseur Maudit" is, and vivid though the musical descriptions in "Les Djinns" are, it is not primarily as a composer of symphonic poems or of programme music at all that we think of Franck, but rather as one of the few masters of his age who successfully adapted the older instrumental forms to his personal requirements, as he did so triumphantly in the sonata for violin and pianoforte, the symphony in D minor, and the string quartet.

Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, was by temperament peculiarly well-fitted for the composition of symphonic poems. Even his works in other instrumental forms are very free in structure and frequently partake of the nature of programme music; but in "Romeo and Juliet", "Francesca da Rimini", and "Hamlet" he made three notable contributions to the art of the symphonic poem. These creations of Tchaikovsky are especially significant in that, while they contain many passages of wonderful description, (such as the scene of the "Inferno" in "Francesca da Rimini" and the tragic dénouement of "Romeo and Juliet"), they aim rather at character-drawing than at actual narrative. The musical portrait of Hamlet does not accord with our English notion of the prince as conveyed by Shakespeare, but it is none the less sure in its own Russian way. The loves of Romeo and Juliet, the feud of the Montagues and Capulets, the tragic picture of Francesca, are most convincingly painted, and throughout these works the rich orchestral colouring is a striking and appropriate feature.

It is, perhaps, apposite at this point to consider the debt which the symphonic poem owes to Wagner.

It might be thought that the mention of Tchaikovsky is the last thing which would be expected to raise the suggestion of Wagnerian influence, seeing that Tchaikovsky was hostile to the art of the great German master. That is true; but colour, characterisation, and descriptive power, which we have noticed as special qualities of the Russian composer's symphonic poems, are also, *par excellence*, features of the music of Wagner, though they had, of course, assumed very different forms in his operas from those which appear in Tchaikovsky. The sway of Wagner was, indeed, so tremendous that for many years few could resist it —even those who disliked his works finding it impossible to escape from their overmastering domination. The development of orchestral technique and colour, the vast range of instrumental subtleties, the power at one end of the scale and the extraordinary delicacy at the other, which characterise the Wagnerian scores, were of tremendous assistance to his later contemporaries and successors who were turning their attention to the furtherance of the art of composing symphonic poems. To state this is not in any way to belittle the enormous contribution of Berlioz to the exploitation of orchestral resources. Nevertheless, it is true that Wagner went even further in enlarging and enriching the orchestral palette and that the elaborate scores of Strauss and the subtle tints of Debussy (another anti-Wagnerian) would never have come into existence without him. The very nature of the symphonic poem demanded, for its successful development, a highly organised orchestral fabric; if its multifarious characters, events, scenes, and images were to be portrayed or suggested convincingly, the simple orchestra of Mozart or even the slightly more elaborate one of Beethoven's day was inadequate. Berlioz and Wagner between them made possible the orchestral technique which the art of the later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century composers of symphonic poems required.

But Wagner's contribution to the needs of the symphonic poem was not only a technical one. The scope and strength of his imagination, utilising the rich orchestral colour scheme which it and his industry had fertilised, opened up immense possibilities of musical character-drawing and of descriptive power. So far as the latter quality is concerned, it may be doubted whether anything that his successors have produced has surpassed in vividness Wagner's own achievements—his storms and forests and fire and

water, his giants and dwarfs and winged horses, his music of the forge and the sea and the night. The point with which we are concerned here is that these varied and lifelike images in sound made possible the manifold representations of natural or fantastic scenes required by the creators of symphonic poems. They prepared the way for the death-chamber in "Tod und Verklärung", the strange adventures of "Don Quixote", the battle uproar in "Ein Heldenleben", the seascapes and sylvan glades and cloud-effects of Debussy, the exquisite nature studies of Delius, and the rolling waves in Arnold Bax's "Tintagel".

The portrayals of character in Wagner helped to stimulate musical characterisation generally. It may even be said that in hitting off the subtler points of human personalities Strauss has shown himself more adept than his great predecessor. Wagner was supreme at representing the big, profound, elemental qualities, but it was left to Strauss to devise brilliantly appropriate musical counterparts for the impish rascality of Till Eulenspiegel, the homely humanity of Sancho Panza, and the lovable, mad chivalry of Don Quixote. But it is essential to remember that without the immense enhancement of the power of music to describe character, which Wagner achieved, and the greatly enriched instrumental vocabulary which he employed, those ingenious refinements by the aid of which Strauss carried further the art of the symphonic poem would never have been possible.

The sensational character of Strauss's musical personality, with his elaborate orchestration, his audacious harmonies and dissonances, and the detailed complexity of the programmes which he interpreted in sound, so dominated the close of the nineteenth century that it is scarcely surprising that his work should have been regarded as marking the zenith of the symphonic poem as an art-form. His genius for character-drawing and power of description, the brilliance of his scores, the charm intermingled with the humour and oddity, the frequent deft touches of phraseology and instrumentation, and in general the unflagging interest sustained through compositions which in some cases occupy about forty minutes without a break, are sufficient to account for this. Moreover, the symphonic poems of Strauss were the first works in their genre which (with the exception of "Till Eulenspiegel") compared in length with the symphonies of a bygone age, so that their bulk as well as their qualities commanded attention.

Like Elgar's "Falstaff", they are very detailed pieces of narrative or description, as contrasted with those symphonic

poems which merely require a title or brief indication of the subject matter in order that their significance may be appreciated properly. This applies especially in the case of "Till Eulenspiegel", "Don Quixote", and "The Alpine Symphony". Yet, except in the case of the last-named work, it is noteworthy that the delineation and development of character are uppermost in the composer's mind. In "Macbeth", which was one of the earliest of the series, he was more concerned with characterisation than with the actual plot of the drama: there is no attempt to tell the story of Shakespeare's play, in the manner in which he afterwards portrayed the career of Don Juan, Till Eulenspiegel, the Hero, and Don Quixote, or narrated the ascent and descent of the mountain in successive stages. With the exception of a theme which may be taken to represent the witches, he is solely concerned with the contrasted characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Too much attention has been focussed on the momentarily sensational incidents, such as the "enemies" in "Ein Heldenleben", the "attack on the windmills" and the "flock of sheep" in "Don Quixote", and the baby's bath in the "Sinfonia Domestica," each of which occupies a very small part of the time taken by the whole work. Far more important is the way in which he treats in musical fashion the psychology of his characters at the different stages of their lives: the initial ardour, the diverse passions, and the recurring and increasing satiety of Don Juan; the attractive devilment of Till Eulenspiegel in the several episodes of his existence; the courageous determination of the central figure in "Ein Heldenleben"; and in "Don Quixote", the knight's mental derangement which persists through many adventures but is eventually shaken off before his death.

Yet it is, I suggest, a mistake to regard Strauss as the consummation of the symphonic poem. He marks the highest point hitherto reached by a certain type of work in that genre, but for all its scope and variety his art is subject to certain limitations. In saying this, I am not referring to his occasional lapses from taste or to the way in which, for instance, in "Ein Heldenleben" the autobiographical element obtrudes itself so that the composer seems at times to be identifying himself with the hero: the "enemies" consisting of hostile critics of his music, and "the hero's works of peace" taking the form of quotations from Strauss's own compositions. Rather am I thinking of particular intrinsic attributes, which limited his field. In the first place, there is in his musical mentality a superficiality or hollowness which some-

times detracts from his greatness. Although he is such an adept at characterisation he is apt to look at the surface of human nature. He is a brilliant, but not a profound writer. He is incapable of portraying the elemental passions and the great forces of nature in the way that Wagner did, or of sounding the depths in the manner of Beethoven. His Don Juan is buoyant and vigorous, but not markedly sexual. The closing section of "Tod und Verklärung" is a gorgeous piece of orchestral pageantry, rather than a picture of divine transfiguration. Even the wonders and fascination of "Also sprach Zarathustra" somehow fall short of its tremendous theme. The hero in "Ein Heldenleben", for all its strength, lacks the depth of character evinced in Beethoven's "Eroica" or the fundamental power of Wagner's "Siegfried". The "Sinfonia Domestica" and the "Alpine Symphony" (which are really symphonic poems in spite of their names) mark a falling-off from their predecessors. The "Domestica", apart from its love-music, is emotionally and intellectually empty; we might, perhaps, say that the baby is only a doll dressed in rich and luxurious clothing. The "Alpine Symphony" is an agreeable excursion, but its thematic material is distinctly weak and its merits are almost entirely affairs of orchestration: there is little sign that the composer's imagination had been set aflame by the beauties of the mountains. It is a far cry from this to the earnest love of great solitudes that we get in Sibelius or the exquisite nature poems of Delius. "Till" and "Don Quixote" are, I think, the only symphonic poems in which Strauss's music completely realises the subject matter: in "Till" great profundity is not called for, but rather the instinct to portray mischief and roguery; "Don Quixote" is the finest of his tone-poems, just because, in addition to its vivid pieces of description, it is here, and here alone, that he has fully interpreted a character in the round, with its crazy knight-errantry, its humour, and its kindliness.

Secondly, though Strauss called his works "tone-poems", he does not really possess a poetic mind. This is, of course, no flaw in him—we might as well criticise a novelist for not being a poet—but it does suggest that, though Strauss has covered a great deal of ground, he has left a wide field untouched. He is not an artist of dreams and visions and evanescent atmosphere, nor a teller of legendary tales, nor is he—in spite of "Ein Heldenleben"—a true poet of heroic deeds, but a bold and vigorous narrator, who gains his points by definite strokes and vivid, sonorous passages. His language is the language of prose—a

forceful, supple prose—and his so-called "tone-poems" are not poems at all, but rather brilliant short stories, insofar as it is possible to draw an analogy between music and literature. As such, they have not been surpassed hitherto, but it is misleading to attribute the consummation of the symphonic poem to a composer whose works present few of the characteristics of poetry.

It would seem, therefore, that Strauss's achievements, because of their frequent superficiality on the one hand, and their essentially prosaic nature on the other, left the way open for a symphonic poetry which should deal with profound elemental issues, or should be truly poetic in character. These two roads are, of course, by no means entirely separate, but the rough distinction between them is familiar enough. The greatest poetry is profound, but depth is present not only in poetry but elsewhere, and it is possible for a writer to strike deep into human nature or into the elemental truths of existence, without being a poet. Plato and Dickens were great artists, as well as Shakespeare.

There is much to be said for the view that music does not lend itself to the presentation of philosophy. It can, however, give utterance to such profound, or even metaphysical, thoughts as are revealed in the works of Beethoven's last period, and it might seem that the art-form known as the symphonic poem, by utilising the many voices of the orchestra without adhering to a prescribed musical structure, would be capable of sounding the depths of human nature and searching the hidden secrets of things. It is some such task as this that Scriabin attempted in his three works "The Divine-Poem", "Prometheus", and "Le poème de l'extase". The first of these is on the border-line between a symphonic poem and a symphony. It resembles a symphony in that it is framed in distinct movements (three in number), and that the first of these is approximately in sonata form: but the linking together of the three sections into one continuous composition, and the fact that the traditional structure is moulded to suit the programme which the work illustrates, bring it near to being a symphonic poem. It marks the parting of the ways in Scriabin's career, and is, I think, the only one of these three works in which the composer embodies his ideas in music in a wholly satisfactory way. The struggle between the sensual "voluptés" and the "jeu divin" of true freedom of the spirit is set forth in a composition of great strength and beauty, untarnished by the excesses which mar the later works. Both in "Prometheus" and the "Poème de l'extase" we feel that the music, for all its technical power and vivid

imagination, fails to rise to the heights of the tremendous subjects which he set himself. "Prometheus", or the "poem of fire", afforded a superb opportunity for a masterpiece, but Scriabin had not the genius to accomplish it. It is almost as though he was so bent on showing himself to be a revolutionary (and also on developing his scheme for a 'keyboard of light') that he missed the greater issue. It is true that in the "Poème de l'extase" we do get ecstasy indeed, but we also find hysteria, verging even on insanity, in those repeated, almost intolerable, climaxes of unrestrained sound and fervour.

Thus the road which might lead the symphonic poem in the direction in which the subject matter at least, though possibly not the music itself, of "Also sprach Zarathustra" seemed to point, has remained to a large extent unexplored hitherto—Scriabin having on the whole failed to make great headway along it. But the path of poetic imagination, which perhaps affords a more natural outlet for the symphonic poem as an art-form, has attracted several composers. We shall find no surer guide to it than Frederic Delius.

None of Delius's works is entitled a symphonic poem, but this fact need not surprise us when we recall that the world is now rich in compositions which are in truth symphonic poems, though not so described. The fantasia overtures of Tchaikovsky, a "prelude" such as Debussy's "L'Après-midi d'un faune", a "symphonic movement" like Honegger's "Rugby", a "scherzo" as Dukas called his "Apprenti sorcier", a "symphonic rhapsody" such as Ireland's "Mai Dun", or even a piece bearing only the title of "Pacific 231", are just as certainly symphonic poems as are those works for which Liszt originally invented the phrase. It is possible to take the view that "tone-poem" (which is Strauss's expression) is a better name, on the ground that this class of work breaks away from the tradition of the symphony and that it is therefore unsuitable to call it a "symphonic poem." On the other hand, the description is apposite from the point of view that it correctly associates the genre with the orchestra, and a symphony is but an orchestral sonata; whereas "tone-poem" might be said to be too wide a term, seeing that it would be just as appropriate to a song or an opera, for instance, as to the kind of work which we are considering. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that some of Delius's compositions are as essentially poems of orchestral sound as any musical creations in the world could be. If Strauss is a master of musical prose, Delius is *par excellence* a musical poet.

He has something of the mentality of Wordsworth—a profound and instinctive sense of the beauty of nature, illumined by a poet's insight into the significance that lies behind and beyond that beauty.

To think of Delius is to remember those exquisite nature poems for small orchestra, "A song before sunrise", "Summer night on the River", and "On hearing the first cuckoo in spring"; or the unutterably lovely fantasy, "In a summer garden". It was at one time suggested that in these and other works, for all their beauty, there was a lack of form; but closer acquaintance with them reveals that though they follow no traditional structure, Delius has created the appropriate form in each case. It is the old tale. The notion that Wagner's music-dramas were formless because they were outwardly unlike any operas that had preceded them, has long since been exploded, and it is now generally recognised that he was one of the greatest musical architects in history. Similarly, there are a unity and a shape in each one of these masterpieces of Delius, which are lacking in many more formal works of an earlier age. He will take a few themes or even mere phrases, and by countless subtle transformations of harmony and colour they twine in and out of one another in a fashion inevitably right and genuine and yet so indefinable, that the original notion of Delius being deficient in a sense of form was not, perhaps, unnatural in the early days, mistaken though we can now see it to be. Sometimes, indeed, he utilises, though in a very free manner, the traditional method of a theme and variations, even as Strauss did in "Don Quixote". But in Strauss we become so absorbed in the knight's strange adventures that we almost forget that we are listening to a work in 'variation' form, just as we are apt to overlook the fact that "Till Eulenspiegel" partakes roughly of the character of a 'rondo'. With Delius's "Brigg Fair" and "Appalachia", on the other hand, we never lose sight of the truth that they are sets of variations, and the poetry seems largely to consist in the manner in which the theme assumes these different and beautiful shapes. "Appalachia" is partly a choral work, and is something between a symphonic poem and a cantata. No words are sung until the thirteenth variation is reached, and only there and in the final, fifteenth, variation; elsewhere, the voices, where used, utter wordless music with mysterious or tranquil effect: the orchestra predominates throughout. In the magnificent "Song of the High Hills", the chorus is as important as the orchestra, being utilised to represent humanity as contrasted with nature,

but is given no words to sing at all, and for this reason the work can legitimately be described as a symphonic poem without qualification, the voices being employed as though they were instruments; by this I do not mean to imply that the vocal writing is itself instrumental in character, but merely that the employment of voices, without words, simply to produce musical sounds, either as part of the orchestral fabric or as forming an antithesis to the orchestra, involves their being treated as instruments.

"Eventyr" is in a class by itself among Delius's works, because it represents his one excursion into the sphere of the grotesque. The graphic representation of the goblins and fantastic creatures of the supernatural world, which break in upon the tranquil existence of the peasants, comes as a surprise to those who make the mistake of regarding Delius as a composer lacking in variety. No greater contrast to the dreamy mood of some of his nature-pieces could well be imagined. The "North Country Sketches" are four in number, three of them (Nos. 1, 2, and 4) —"Autumn", "Winter Landscape", and "The March of Spring"— being exquisite poems of the seasons; but in the remaining one the composer refrains from portraying summer and calls the movement a "Dance", though it is a dance of a curious kind which gradually rises to a climax of frenzy and then dies away. The movement seems to stand apart from the others, and yet its dance-character links the work as a whole (which has been described as a suite by virtue of its being a cycle of short pieces) to the old suites of dances.

The modern suite can hardly be sundered entirely from the symphonic poem, for it often consists of a group of short orchestral poems which, though each is a distinct piece, possess some underlying unity. Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade", for instance, is a suite of four poems representing four of the tales which Scheherazade told to the Sultan Shahriar, and there is a recurring motive which typifies her taking up her narrative again between each story. They are not really intended for dancing purposes, and the ballet which Diaghileff associated with the music deals with a different subject. "The Planets" of Holst is another example of a so-called "suite" which is really a cycle of small symphonic poems. The central idea which binds them together is that they express the astrological significance of various planets: Mars, the bringer of war; Venus, of peace; Jupiter, of jollity; Saturn, of old age; and so on. And though each is sufficiently a separate piece to make it possible to perform it, or two or three of them, apart from the rest, something is inevitably lost when they are not all played in the

proper sequence, both because the work as a whole possesses a unity and because the order of the movements has been so arranged as to provide particular contrasts between them.

Debussy did not give the name "Suite" either to his "three nocturnes" for orchestra or to "La mer", which latter work he entitled "symphonic sketches". These compositions, however, are also cycles of tone-poems. The nocturnes are a group, possessing a single character in that they are the air-borne fancies of a musical poet—images in sound of slowly moving clouds, of a heavenly procession, and of the voices of sirens floating over the gently rocking waves. The bond between the three pieces which comprise "La mer" is obvious: they represent different aspects of the sea. The work might almost be described as a miniature sea-symphony, except that the internal structure of each piece depends upon purely poetic considerations and not upon any symphonic tradition. "Ibéria" is another group of orchestral images bound together by a common idea—in this case the character of the Spanish scene, so that they form a Frenchman's counterpart to de Falla's "Nights in a Garden of Spain" which is also a cycle of three little poems setting forth a Spaniard's conception of three landscapes in his own country.

Sibelius is one of the few great composers of symphonies who have also created a series of symphonic poems. In their own way his works are just as poetic as those of Delius and Debussy—as opposed to the sonorous prose narratives of Richard Strauss—but they are utterly different in character. There is nothing superficial about Debussy—he is too genuine a poet for that; but he lacks the profundity of Delius; his art is imaginative, bewitching and delicate; it is objective in character. Delius combines both depth and outward charm: the surface beauty of his music penetrates down to its core—like the all too rare cases of women whose inward natures are as lovely as their faces. Sibelius is at the other end of the scale: not that his music is ugly—far from it; but in its uncompromising strength, and even occasional austerity, it seems to disdain the outward graces and to seek only the profound underlying truths of legend or nature, striving to illumine these by musical poetry. In "Finlandia", an early work, it is true that he is voicing the spirit of his countrymen and his art therefore wears here a simpler, even popular, garb. Sometimes too, as in "The Swan of Tuonela", he writes with a quiet, elusive charm that is hardly characteristic of the bulk of his work. But in "En Saga" and "Tapiola", which are more typical of him, he has

a different tale to tell. "En Saga", for which the composer has issued no precise programme, is imbued with a rugged, romantic grandeur; "Tapiola" is a superb, but sombre, picture of vast Northern forests, within which the Forest god lives and mysterious beings fashion weird spells.

From the æsthetic standpoint, Arnold Bax—another creator of symphonic poems as well as of symphonies—occupies an interesting position in the world of the symphonic poem. His "November Woods" is on the same lines as Delius's poems of nature—a poetic reflection on a natural scene—even though its idiom is different. On the other hand, "The Garden of Fand", though it contains descriptions of the sea, is largely a fairy story. "In the færy hills" depicts the revels of the little people and the fate of Oisin, the harper, while the Irish hills are only a background. "Tintagel" is not merely a picture of the waves rolling and dashing themselves against the Cornish headland, but is also partly a reflection of the legend associated with the place, though here nature predominates over mythology. Thus Bax, being a nature poet, shows an affinity to Delius on the one hand, and on the other to Sibelius with his poems of myths and fairy stories in a natural setting. But his art, so far as the symphonic poems are concerned, is lighter in texture, less forbidding than that of Sibelius: he reveals the romantic imagination of his Celtic blood, whereas the other is a Finn imbued with all the rugged strength of his race.

On the whole, the tendency of symphonic poems during this century has been away from the detailed narratives of Strauss and towards the more generalised, or suggestive, poetic elegies, for which a mere title, a few verses, or a brief indication of the subject described, are sufficient to set up in us the right train of thought to enable us to follow the composer's intentions. Perhaps the most notable exception to this has been Elgar's Symphonic study, "Falstaff," which, though so different intrinsically from the art of Strauss, follows the Straussian model not merely in representing the principal characters of the story psychologically but in depicting the successive events in close detail. The whole career of the fat knight as described by Shakespeare in "Henry IV" and "Henry V", is here set forth in musical tones, so that the work is one of the most complete contributions to Shakespearean portraiture in existence.

The only important respect in which it might be said that Strauss's narratives have had successors is to be found by regarding the music of certain ballets as symphonic poems. If the com-

plete music of the ballets of Stravinsky and de Falla or of Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe" be performed in a concert-room, with notes in the programme describing the action which would be taking place on the stage, the result, it may be suggested, is in effect a symphonic poem of the narrative type. In our mind's eye, we can follow the tale of the Firebird or watch the antics and the careers of Petrouchka and the other figures of the story. It is true that by this process we are not apprehending even the music itself exactly in the way in which the composer intended that we should, seeing that he meant it to accompany some of the most brilliant stage-pictures, choreography, dancing, and miming that have ever been presented in a theatre. Nevertheless, the music of Stravinsky in his finest ballets, of de Falla in "The Three-Cornered Hat" and "El Amor Brujo", of Ravel in "Daphnis and Chloe", if we are given clear verbal descriptions of all that is supposed to be passing on the stage, can hardly be said to fail to create its proper effect in a concert-hall. This would seem to be one more illustration of a class of work which is on the border-line of the world of the symphonic poem, seeing that it is purely orchestral music, the shape and contours of which are dictated by a story external to music itself and not by any traditional musical structure: its association with a theatrical mise-en-scène is the only feature—admittedly an important one—which prevents it from being recognised as belonging completely to the sphere of the symphonic poem.

The number of symphonic poems composed during the comparatively short period for which this form of composition has been in existence is enormous, but there is no reason to imagine that its career is approaching a close or that we have yet seen an end of the varieties of which it is capable. It might be thought that in an age which has witnessed an attempt to return to abstract music there would be an aversion from an art-form which is essentially a species of programme music; but experience has proved the contrary. The number of modern composers of naked sound sensations is small in comparison with those who still delight to convey emotions in tone or to portray the scenes and events and characters of the external world. The scope of the symphonic poem is almost infinite, and the more that music develops its orchestral technique, its varied power and subtlety of effect, the more paths are likely to be opened up, along which the symphonic poem can progress. The art of portraying personages and describing their careers, is almost in its infancy—in the sense that that which has been already

accomplished by Strauss and Elgar might be followed by others in the case of countless striking characters both of fiction and of history. The pictorial and poetical sides of music are practically unlimited, and though for many of the profounder issues the symphonic poem may not be a more suitable medium than the symphony, there is no reason why the two art-forms should not continue to flourish side by side. It is even permissible to imagine that, whereas the symphony has already found its Beethoven, the greatest genius of the symphonic poem is still to come.