

MSO

EARS WIDE OPEN: SCHUMANN

23 OCTOBER 2017

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra
Gordon Hamilton conductor/presenter

Schumann *Manfred* Overture

GORDON HAMILTON CONDUCTOR/PRESENTER

After freelancing for five years in Germany, composer and conductor Gordon Hamilton took over in 2009 as Artistic Director of one of Australia's foremost vocal ensembles, The Australian Voices.

Recently Gordon has composed four works for the Queensland Symphony Orchestra: *Ghosts in the Orchestra* (2014), *The Trillion Souls* (2015), *Thum Prints* (for beatboxer and orchestra, 2015) and *482 Variations on a Very Short Theme* (2016). His *Action Hero* (2016) pairs the recorded voice of Arnold Schwarzenegger with orchestra and was premiered by WDR Funkhausorchester, Cologne.

His 50-minute choral opera *MOON* (2011) has toured Australia, Germany and to the Edinburgh Fringe. Under a cheekier guise, Gordon reassembles the contributions of unwitting collaborators. His *Tra\$h Ma\$h* (2012) reassembles fleeting grabs from pop songs. *Toy Story 3 = Awesome!* (2011) – sets a stream of inane consciousness from his own Facebook news feed. His choral setting of a BuzzFeed article *The 9 Cutest Things That Ever Happened* (2013) has been viewed on YouTube over one million times.

Gordon is creative sound designer and radio producer, having produced

recordings for ABC of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and London Symphony Orchestra. Gordon presents Screen Sounds on ABC Classic FM. In 2015 and 2016 Gordon sound-designed the RiverFire fireworks for the Brisbane Festival. He has composed for several plays at Queensland Theatre and La Boite Theatre Company including *Medea* (2015), in which a 'Greek' chorus sings and interacts with the actors.

In 2017–18 Gordon will conduct the WDR Funkhausorchester (Cologne) and the St. Christofer Chamber Orchestra (Vilnius), the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, where he is Assistant Conductor.

**See Schumann's *Manfred*
Overture performed as part of
'MSO Plays Rachmaninov 2'
on 23 & 25 November at
Arts Centre Melbourne,
Hamer Hall.**

Tickets at mso.com.au



ROBERT SCHUMANN

(1810–1856)

Manfred: Overture, Op.115

Schumann composed his *Manfred* Overture in 1848 in Dresden, following it later the same year with incidental music for Byron's dramatic poem. The overture quickly established itself as a concert piece independent of the drama. Schumann was fully committed to the idea of the overture as a tone poem, treating a poetic or dramatic idea in symphonic form, as in Beethoven's *Leonore*, *Egmont* and *Coriolan* overtures. Schumann's overture was a concentrated response to *Manfred*, a hero described by his creator as 'a restless, wandering, distracted man, tormented by fearful thoughts'.

Schumann was greatly attracted to Byron and especially his *Manfred* (1817). Byron's *Manfred* is an enigmatic figure. He is a Swiss nobleman who has secluded himself within the walls of his ancestral castle in the Alps. From high on the Jungfrau mountain he surveys humanity's pride, degradation and mutual distrust. Like Goethe's *Faust*, whom he somewhat resembles, *Manfred* seeks an escape from unhappiness through necromancy, dealing with the spirits of nature and of evil. 'The hero,' wrote Byron, 'is some kind of a magician, who is dominated by a species of remorse, the cause of which is left half-explained.' *Manfred*'s sin from the past concerns his relationship with his sister *Astarte*, and Byron may have been portraying himself and his sexual liaison with his half-sister *Augusta Leigh*.

What particularly appealed to Schumann in Byron's sombre, self-torturing hero was his characteristic guilt and remorse, pushing him to the edge of madness. Schumann himself was tormented by fears of mental illness – all too justifiably, as it turned out. In the overture he was less interested in the story of the poem than in its psychological issues. There is a kind of mania in the way in which the main themes are assembled from juggled and repeated short motifs, as if in a breathless attempt to make themselves understood (writes Hans Gál). Some contrast comes in a group of more lyrical 'second subject' themes. But these themes add to the sense of yearning, of a restless search for escape, and of the Romantic alienation with which Schumann identified. In the coda there is a gradual subsiding, with fragments of the main themes, back into the darkly brooding music of the opening.

In Byron, *Manfred* dies fearless and unrepentant. It was daring of Schumann to end an overture quietly, in keeping with its message of Romantic pessimism.

Abridged from a note by David Garrett © 2005

The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra first performed this work on 9-10 October 1956 under conductor Kurt Woess, and most recently on 12 September 1987 with Georg Tintner.

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