

# Orchestra plays Tweet of the Day

## Beethoven, Birds and Bravura by Edward Peak



Astonishingly, it seems that man has had a need to season his life with some sort of music for many thousands of years. Crude flutes have been found in the archaeological record dating back over 40,000 years and there is no record of a civilisation or tribe or group of people who don't have some form of music in their lives.

So music is an ancient part of our lives, but what is its purpose? The question has been asked many times whether music is there just for its own sake or if it must relate *directly* to something in our human experience. This debate has never raged more fiercely than when classical composers included realism and the sounds of nature into their compositions. In the early 18th century, composers started to group their compositions into two main groups: *absolute* or *programme* music.

Absolute music can be described as a work which can be enjoyed just for its sounds and its form, the melodies, harmonies and chords themselves sweeping the listener along. In the same way as we might see pictures in a cloud formation, so it might be possible for us to imagine a scenario when we hear a certain piece of music. That the composer had no such idea in mind is immaterial – we are enjoying the music for its own sake and are putting on to it our own meaning, whether happy, sad, thrilling or tedious!

Many theorists have formulated complex theories about why absolute music is the purest art form. Some have insisted that absolute music should be heard with no thought of relating it to the outside world. However, one thing that typifies so much absolute music is that we constantly try to give it a *meaning*.

Programme music removes all of these unresolved questions. Now the composer has given us a musical road-map with which we can follow their vision, leaving no doubt about their meanings and intentions – no need to interpret the pictures in the clouds as the storyline is given to us in advance.

This in turn gave the purists a wonderful arsenal of journalistic missiles to hurl at those who have differing tastes. Programme music has been the subject of constant criticism from the early days of the famous symphonists. Surely the great composers like Beethoven would have stayed aloof from such nonsense, surely they would hold themselves apart from the debate, concentrating solely on producing magnificent music based only on abstract inspiration... but not a bit of it!

In his sixth symphony, the *Pastoral*, Beethoven breaks conventions in a big way by giving us a complete guidebook to his music. In the score he writes a narrative *in words* explaining what is happening, leaving us in no doubt as to what he was describing in music. There is a depiction of a peasants' merrymaking, an approaching storm, thanksgiving after the storm and a series of bird calls which are as obvious as sound recordings from nature.

Ludwig van Beethoven seemed to open a gigantic floodgate of inspiration – it was now permissible to write music *about* something. 'If Beethoven can do it, so can I...' The list of classical music which includes birdsong alone is seemingly endless, and composers have included musical representations of almost everything since – from nature sounds to industrial machinery, from railway engines to the battlefield. Richard Strauss courted huge criticism when he included a section in his *Domestic Symphony* depicting bathing the baby. In their series *Painting Pictures and Telling Tales*, the Orchestra dell'Arte are including some well-known sounds of nature in their next concert



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programme. In the concert on Sunday 24 February at St George's Hall in Liverpool, the orchestra will feature the concert suite *The Birds* by the Italian composer Ottorino Respighi. Known usually for monumental compositions featuring gigantic orchestras, Respighi composed *The Birds (Gli Uccelli)* as a delightful suite for small orchestra based on music from the 17th and 18th centuries and as a musical transcription of birdsong into an orchestral form.

We get to hear not just the songs but also fluttering wings and scratching of the bird's feet – the list includes pictures of the dove, hen, nightingale and cuckoo. The first movement will be familiar as the theme music for the BBC TV antiques series *Going for a Song*.

The Bradford-born composer Frederick Delius is also represented in the concert. His *Two Pieces for Small Orchestra* include one of the most well-known examples of programme music, the delightful *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*. Written in 1912, this glorious work blends the tone colours of the different sections into a wonderful whole – always the clarinet as the cuckoo having the final word.

When he moved to the French village of Grez-sur-Loing, Delius was inspired to write the second piece in the duo which became *Summer Night on the River*. The vague harmonies and misty sounds perfectly conjuring up the lazy, slow, meandering course.



Jon Gjylaci

The orchestra will be joined by the Albanian classical guitarist Jon Gjylaci for the ever-popular *Concierto de Aranjuez* by the Spanish composer Joaquin Rodrigo. Inspired by the gardens of the Royal Palace of Aranjuez, the concerto combines all of the expected hot Spanish sun with the sultry nights of this most Spanish province. The dialogue between cor anglais and guitar in the second movement is one of the most recognisable melodies in all music.

Join the orchestra on Sunday 24 February at St George's Hall for an afternoon of absolute delight. The concert starts at 3pm and tickets are available at the door. [www.dellarte.co.uk](http://www.dellarte.co.uk)