

# Foreword

BY RICHARD TOGNETTI

*The study of the history of music and the hearing of masterworks of different epochs will quickly cure you of vanity and self-adoration.*

— ROBERT SCHUMANN

Robert Schumann does have a point about the humbling experience of entering the environment of a great composer and attempting to unlock some of the mysterious magic entwined therein. Through the marvels of recording technology, our modern era offers us the unprecedented possibility of spiritual travel of the musical kind to any epoch and geography we choose. For many, such musical journeying is of the transcendent type, and all too often the material context in which this great music was written eludes us. So herein is a travel book of the most wonderful kind.

This book transports you to the places where some of the world's great composers' imaginations were forged. Some of these composers were comfortably at home, such as Elgar in Victorian England, whilst others like Prokofiev, Rachmaninov and Rodrigo were exiled, orbiting in a perennial state of homesickness. Others still, such as Shostakovich, stayed uncomfortably at home, fighting the tyrannical despots who had made their homes almost unbearable. What is evident is the profound connection all composers have to their countries – whether they lived there or not.

Not all of us are able to travel physically to the places from which this great music emanates, and obviously none of us can travel to the time when it was conceived. My orchestra, the Australian Chamber Orchestra, is itinerant, but its schedule does not allow a detailed exploration of our destinations. So it has been a compelling and informative undertaking to learn or re-learn the circumstances of creation viewed through the prism of the geography that moulded these musical geniuses.

The Strauss you hear (Richard, not one of the Waltz Kings) is from the tender heart of this composer. In 'Morgen', one of his most celebrated songs, the overarching sense of serenity in the text (from a poem by J. H. Mackay) motivates a mellifluous melodic contour of unspeakable beauty. It is this heart-aching sense of surrendering to love that is at one with Strauss's sense of belonging to the mountainous geography of his beloved Garmisch-Partenkirchen, which served as his inspiration for much of his life.

Rachmaninov's surprisingly austere villa in Switzerland, on the other hand, seems to be at odds with how we sometimes view his music (lush, perhaps overburdened late Romanticism), but Simon Callow suggests that the recordings of Rachmaninov's own performances of his music are as austere as his choice of house.

Some composers have clearly evolved from the 'cluster' notion of cultural emergence, such as Wagner, Liszt and Strauss; Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven; others appear to have sprung forth like errant shooting stars. After the glowing emergence of an English musical culture with Purcell and Dowland, why did England's musical scene duly shut down after the shooting star of Handel?

A line is drawn from that sumptuous genius of Handel, through the fallow hiatus in English music that followed his death, and on to the restorative and triumphal nationalism of Edward Elgar, culminating with the gentle restraint of Benjamin Britten's modernism. The peculiar character that is England is explored lovingly and explicitly.

Perhaps the answer to a nation's musical success lies in the general prowess and confidence of its status: art comes out of the deep dark well of human existence, but its expression is normally fulfilled in the more contented daylight hours that follow. But how does this account for a similar barren Romantic era in France? Napoleon's France had no Beethoven; the closest was a composer named Méhul, now consigned to the low rungs of history (although he was the first composer to be called a Romantic).

But perhaps the world operates more like a musical relay race, with different countries taking turns in carrying the baton. If this were the case, then France didn't get into its stride after the baroque period until the end of the nineteenth century, with Saint-Saëns and Bizet passing the baton to Debussy and Ravel.

The baton was far away from Russia during the Baroque era, but it was glimpsed for the first time in Glinka's hand, then passed decisively onto Tchaikovsky. With the rise of Stalin's totalitarian Soviet Union the race was really on, with Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and Shostakovich and their different ways of coping with and expressing the complexities of a regime that was rigidly repressive – yet ironically one that unleashed a torrent of creative output unparalleled in this area's musical history.

I recall reading that film director Franco Zeffirelli claimed that, growing up in Florence, he didn't need to go to school; rather, wandering the streets and galleries of his home town offered him the greatest access to the city's history, enabling him to find his own visceral context within it. Not all of us have access to such an education as Zeffirelli's in Florence, but it is the purpose of this book to offer the reader and listener a lucid opportunity to reconcile the local with the universal and the geographic with the transcendental.

