

St.Alphege' church in Solihull, West Midlands, 6th December 2017

Ottorino Respighi: "Aria" from 6 pieces for violin and piano P 31,

Jules Massenet: "Meditation" from Thais,

Jean Sibelius; "Waltz" from 5 pieces for violin and piano Op.81,

Gerald Finzi; Introit Op.6,

Gerald Finzi: Elegy Op.22,

Fritz Kreisler: Rondino on a theme of Beethoven,

Edward Elgar; Chanson de Nuit Op.15 No.1.

· · · Meditation from Thais · · ·

St.Alphege Church in Solihull is located at the southern end of the main shopping street, and is set in a spacious green area surrounded by leafy trees. It's appearance, formed by the hematite-coloured bricks of the exterior, and its high tower partially covered by dark green moss, warmed me in the freezing winter cold. Inside, the pipe organ, stained glass windows, inner walls and pillars of stone, create a rather solemn atmosphere, somewhat like a Catholic church and quite different from modern Anglican churches.

This year (2017), I have been concentrating on trying to find the essence of English violin music by referring to several continental violin pieces. And I think by realizing the delicate expression of the flow of sound that characterizes English music, I have been able, along with the audience, to get into the mind of the composers.

At this concert too, as the finale of this year's activities, I believe I was able to share a sensitivity to the music with the audience. This can be attributed to the atmosphere of the church hall as well as its acoustic effect. I would like to express my appreciation to Mr. Joe Cooper for offering me the opportunity to do this concert. Furthermore, I am deeply indebted to my partner, Mr. Alessandro Veil, the audiences, and the organizer from each church for this year's fruitful concert activities.

In this report, I would like to consider "**Meditation from Thais**" composed by Jules Massenet, which is a little outside the context I had intended for the concert. J. Massenet was one of the most famous opera composers from the latter half of the 19th to early 20th centuries, but now is only famous for being the composer of this piece. Someone only has to sing a couple of phrases from this piece, and almost all people recognize it but probably don't know the name of the piece or its composer. It is nothing but the frequent playing of this piece by many players (not limited to violinists, because it was arranged for various instruments) that has ensured it remains widely known. Taking a look at how this music is

used in concert programmes, you can easily suspect that it is positioned between more serious pieces to lighten the atmosphere and give both the audience and players a break.

So, this piece tends to be regarded as easily understood - having a beautiful melody but without any deep meaning. This understanding might be attributed to the story of the opera 'Thais' and the Meditation's position in it. The outline of 'Thais' is namely as follows: In the 4th century, Athanael, who had long been practicing pious Christian asceticism in a monastery located in the Egyptian desert, prevailed on a singing beauty, Thais, who had spent a pleasure-seeking life in Alexandria, to become a Christian and to enter a nunnery. He fell in love with her in the process and upon later hearing she was at death's door in the nunnery, he rushed to her. He prayed for her to live and declared his love to her but in vain. This opera is understood to be a tale of tragic love.

The Meditation is first played as Thais decides to escape from a world full of sin and become a Christian. Then it is played in the scenes where she expresses her faith and then again at the end, sonorously and touchingly as she is called to heaven. Therefore, the beautiful melody of this piece is interpreted as expressing her pureness of faith.

But does this interpretation accord with the composer's intention? I thought that it is possible that there are other viewpoints. So, let's think about that according to the following three points.

- (1) Is the motif of this piece suitable for the story?
- (2) Did the writer of the original work accept the opera being portrayed as a love story?
- (3) What relevance does C. Debussy's known fondness of J. Massenet's pieces have?

[\(1\) Is the motif of this piece suitable for the story?](#)

Assuming this opera is the story of 'Thais' growing up from her life of indolence in a corrupt society to becoming a chaste child of Christ, the Meditation is heard during the process of her 'initiation'. This kind of story is a basic style of folktales in every country, and there are also many novels with similar themes, usually involving some hard trial as part of an initiation.

In '**Magic flute**' by W.A.Mozart, Pamina, daughter of the Queen of the night, becomes a woman after going through a hard initiation in order to marry Tamino. The skillful way that Mozart describes the initiation, with beautiful and tough motifs, is well known. (This also true for Papageno and Papagena.)

As a second example, '**Pygmalion**' by B.Shaw describes Eliza's tough training process under the unsparing tutorship of professor Higgins, in which she struggles and almost breaks down so many times. Moreover, he also becomes a more rounded person through teaching her. This story, then, is different to The Magic Flute in that the 'initiation' is a two-way thing.

Also, in '**Little red riding hood**' of Grimm's fairy tales, the girl has to go through the ordeal of being swallowed by the wolf.

So the opera 'Thais' could be seen to involve a similar 'initiation'.

She was certainly put to the test having to burn her immense treasures and enduring the hard journey to reach the nunnery in the dessert. Accordingly, the Meditation should also

have a motif that suggests that element of tough training. However, it cannot be denied that there is no trace of this in the sweet motif. There might be some explanations for this -

This piece depicts the holiness of belief with just a sweet motif. That is, perhaps J.Massenet deliberately omitted the element of tough training from the meditation in order to express only the love story. Or maybe there is another unknown reason.

(2) Did the writer of the original work accept the opera being portrayed as a love story?

It is widely known that the opera 'Thais' is based on the novel 'Thais' written by Anatole France. The original has a similar outline but a different theme from the opera version. The main character is not Thais, heroine of the opera, but Athanael (Raphnuce in the original). And the theme is not a tragic love story but the strictness of faith in God. That is, Paphnuce, who had earned his high reputation as an abbot through harsh ascetic practices and the excellent education of his disciples, fell in love with Thais in the course of her conversion to Christianity. Of course, romantic love was forbidden to him in his position as abbot. In the end, he was rejected by God, which is proven by Saint Antonius's insight into his real intention, while Thais found faith and was called onto God.

This theme of the novel was transformed to a superficially simple romance in the opera. This surely must have been J.Massenet's strategy to fit in with the prevailing taste of Parisian opera fans at the time for fun. But did the Nobel Prize laureate (Anatole France) accept such an interpretation? It is said that he thanked J.Massenet after its presentation, and if this is true, he must have thought that the opera, at least partly, contains the meaning of the original theme. This would mean that our view of the opera as a mere romance is an incomplete understanding of it.

(3) What relevance does C. Debussy's known fondness of J. Massenet's pieces have?

C. Debussy mentioned J.Massenet as well as C. Saint-Saëns in his essay, '**Monsieur Croche, Antidilettante**'. He described J.Massenet very warmly even when his public reputation had already fallen, while C. Debussy always criticized C. Saint-Saëns scathingly. His criticism of them is apparently contrary to their position in the history of music. That is, C. Saint-Saëns was said to be an infant genius comparable to W. A. Mozart, and skillful in composition, which results in the high historical value usually attributed to his pieces. On the other hand, J.Massenet is rarely mentioned. He might be described at one time in regard to opera but he might be forgotten without the meditation.

A great music composer like C. Debussy must surely have appreciated their historical relevance, even though he made the above-mentioned criticism. It is reasonable to think that there are some unknown reasons for his opinion. Mr. M.Hirashima, the Japanese translator of '**Monsieur Croche, Antidilettante**', pointed out that it cannot solely be attributed to differences in their musical affinity.

C. Debussy writes about J.Massenet in the book- ‘ None of his pieces have that “sound down from the cosmos” like Bach's and Beethoven’s, but this fact just makes his pieces attractive in a different way.’. This means that despite the somewhat cold criticism, he still felt there was something beyond the beautiful harmony and melody. So, it can be said that the opera ‘**Thais**’ portrays more than mere romance, namely, that purported in the original book by A. France.

Having looked at the above three points, it seems that the Meditation does not portray a mere love story, and can be expressed as follows:

Both Thais and Athanael go through their own trials, but while Thais endures and is called onto God, Athanael fails the test by falling in love with Thais. Often an initiation is expressed using both sweet and hard motifs, as with Mozart. On the other hand, aiming for the greatest dramatic effect, J.Massenet used an over-sweet motif to express the sadness of Athaneal’s fate, and then overlapped it with the beauty of Thais’s.

This beautiful music might be a metaphor for the rigidness of faith and the difficulty of having to endure hard ascetic practices after being called by God.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes, The Old Testament)

To know is nothing at all; to imagine is everything. Anatole France

The End