

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra

Nigel Hess

One of my earliest memories is watching the Humphrey Jennings film *Listen to Britain*, and seeing my great-aunt Dame Myra Hess playing Mozart in the National Gallery during one of the famous lunchtime concerts which she inaugurated during London's darkest hour. There in the audience sitting next to the Gallery's director Kenneth Clark is a radiant Queen Elizabeth, obviously enjoying every note of the sublime music. So imagine how thrilled and honoured I was when His Royal Highness asked me to compose a piano concerto in memory of his beloved grandmother – the very same lady who had sat enthralled by another Hess all those years ago. A daunting task indeed.

Prince Charles made it very clear at our initial meeting that he wanted an accessible piece, something that communicated and would be harmonious on the ear – in short, something that the Queen Mother might have enjoyed herself. Being a composer who is used to working with images, I was anxious to try and find a 'hook' on which to hang the concerto, either through a visual idea or a concept that could run through all three movements. During a fascinating meeting with the Queen Mother's niece, Lady Margaret Rhodes, she showed me a photograph she had taken herself in the forest at Balmoral of the Queen Mother, dressed in her walking clothes, scarf wrapped round her head, extending her arms in greeting with that devastating smile that so captivated both her friends and the country. And there was the piano concerto right there – or, at least, the first movement, which is full of lightness and gaiety, inspired by the warmth and fun which the Queen Mother delivered in abundance. The second movement is quietly reflective and depicts the love for her devoted family – and for her country, while the final movement opens with echoes of the dark days of the Blitz when the King and Queen worked so hard to bolster the morale of grief-stricken Londoners, before allowing the sun to come out again, and finishing in a glorious celebration of an extraordinary life.

It has been a privilege to create this piece, and I do hope that the Queen Mother – and my great-aunt – would have enjoyed it.

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