

Observations: Martinu benefits from BBC Symphony Orchestra's championship

By Jessica Duchen

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It takes courage to programme six symphonies by a composer who has always struggled for even a sliver of attention. But Bohuslav Martinu, the 50th anniversary of whose death falls this year, is about to benefit from the BBC Symphony Orchestra's championship under the baton of his fellow countryman Jiri Belohlavek – and not a moment too soon.

Five words tell us why Martinu's life and work were so problematic: "Born in Bohemia in 1890". He faced the meltdown of musical style in the 20th century, the turmoil of war, the heartache of exile. Sure enough, it was only after 1941, when he escaped his adopted home of Paris for America, that he began to write the symphonies that feature in this series.

By the 1940s, the symphony was supposedly a genre of the past. Martinu, who remained "high-minded" about art in an era that scoffed at tonality, emotional expression and traditional structures, had a fight on his hands. He stayed strong. He preferred untrodden paths to following fashion. His influences mingled Stravinsky and Debussy, the Baroque concerto grosso and the Renaissance madrigalists. He pushed tonality to its limits, but always in his own way. And he remained incredibly prolific – his works number more than 400.

"The artist is always searching for the meaning of life... searching for truth," he wrote. "A system of uncertainty has entered our daily life. The pressures of mechanisation and the uniformity to which it is subject call for protest and the artist has only one means of expressing this: by music."

This is where anniversaries come in handy. Full marks to the BBCSO and Belohlavek for helping to set the record straight.

BBCSO's Martinu series begins on 3 Oct at Barbican, London EC1 (020-7638 8891)