THE SORCERER’S APPRENTICE

Best known for its prominent role in Walt Disney’s Fantasia, Dukas’s scherzo is the translation into music of a poem by Johann von Goethe based on an ancient folk tale. The moral of the tale is ‘don’t try to run before you can walk,’ or ‘don’t meddle in matters you don’t understand.’ Goethe turned the fable into poetry, Dukas into a literal sound poem.

Dukas’s programmatic music recounts the story of a magician who could turn a broom handle into a living object which would then execute the duties of a servant, such as fetching water. The secret of the trick lay in the magic words the sorcerer used to work this miracle. One day the sorcerer’s apprentice overheard him rehearsing these words, and while his boss was away on an errand, the apprentice decided to try the trick himself – with disastrous results. The broom did become a servant, and it did fetch water as commanded, but the apprentice had not overheard the words needed to put the magic in reverse. The mindless runaway broom proceeded to flood the house. Desperately, the apprentice took an axe to the broom, splitting it in two – but then there were two mindless creatures flooding the house. Fortunately, the sorcerer arrived and put a halt to the mayhem.

Dukas’s clever music captures the story in great detail, with the bassoons and contrabassoon playing the part of the broom. As the flood increases, orchestral arpeggios create the effect of flooding water. Suddenly, everything stops. The apprentice has taken his axe to his tormenter. But now all hell breaks out with double the amount of water. The sorcerer arrives, and calm is restored. It’s a fun piece, but could Dukas have been anticipating and warning us against the perils of the robots of today controlled by artificial intelligence? Humm.