

Friday 25th June 2021, 8.30pm

Penarth Pier Pavilion

Late Night Concert

Saturday 26th June 2021, 9.45pm

Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama

Catch

Thomas Adès (b.1971)

1991

Robert Plane clarinet, David Adams violin, Alice Neary cello, Robin Green piano

Adès's inventive, theatrical work was first performed in 1993 at St George's, Bristol. The piece might be heard as an exploration in group dynamics. It begins with violinist, cellist, and pianist all onstage, the pianist playing a single high note, which is taken up by the other two. The clarinettist, heard offstage initially, tries to join the group but is rebuffed, or perhaps chooses not to commit. The clarinettist makes a second attempt, lyrical and more ingratiating, and a lively game for all four instruments ensues. However, after a duet with the pianist the rather itinerant clarinettist again leaves. After a rumbling section for the pianist, with colourful interjections from the strings, the clarinettist returns, and the pianist now finds themselves the odd one out before everyone rises through the registers to a witty conclusion.

Elegy for Solo Viola

Igor Stravinsky (1882 - 1971)

Composed 1944

Scott Dickinson viola

Germain Prevost, violist and founder member of the Pro Arte Quartet - an august institution that dates back to 1912 in Belgium and continues to the present day at the University of Wisconsin Madison (a move undertaken by the founder members in 1940) - commissioned this work from Stravinsky in memory of his violin colleague from the Quartet, Alphonse Onnou, who died of leukaemia not long after arriving in the US. The short work is the only piece Stravinsky wrote for the solo viola. Stravinsky's instruction to play muted throughout intensifies the viola's native inwardness, giving it a dark and sombre quality. The piece is in ternary form, and begins with a chant-like melody, short phrases for two voices, each phrase separated by breath marks or commas. The B section sustains the solemn mood, but the writing is fugal. The intensity builds before a return to the opening chant.

1982

- I. *Andantino con tenerezza*
- II. *Vivacissimo molto ritmico*
- III. *Alla Marcia*
- IV. *Lamento; Adagio*

David Adams *violin*, Ben Goldscheider *horn*, Robin Green *piano*

After 5 years during which Ligeti wrote relatively little, the Horn Trio marked a turning point, one in which the Hungarian composer entered a dialogue with the more traditional language of classical music. Though not abandoning his commitment to the avant-garde, from the Horn Trio forward his writing at times feels more at ease. It was the pianist Eckart Besch who suggested that Ligeti write a work to stand next to Brahms's Horn Trio, and the romance of this idea – the call of the horn – appealed immediately to the composer. He said of the Brahms that it “floats in the celestial spheres of the musical heaven as the incomparable example of this category of chamber music,” which makes heaven sound rather like a 21st-century museum space in which indicative artworks hang from the ceiling on invisible wires. Besch, along with violinist Saschko Gawriloff and horn player Hermann Baumann premiered the new trio in Hamburg in 1982, in a concert also featuring the Brahms trio, as part of the celebrations in Brahms's home city of his upcoming 150th birthday in 1983.

Ligeti disavowed much in the way of influence so far as Brahms was concerned, citing only a characteristic mix of conservatism and irony in an overall conception in which he draws upon central European folk music and some non-Western traditions. There are moments when the harmonies sound distinctly tonal, but the grammar is not the grammar of tonality – perhaps this is the seat of the ironic presence noted by the composer.

Ligeti explores alternate tuning and microtonality using the modern horn in its full capacity, at times asking for the use of natural harmonics. The composer himself explains:

“In my Trio I have taken the technical possibilities of the valve horn to its very limits, and not just in terms of virtuosity. Thus I did not really write for a valve horn in F and B-flat, but rather for a collection of natural horns. The sound would be much more beautiful on a true natural horn, but the horn player would then require a short pause to change crooks; as there is not time for this I wrote the piece for valve horn. Nevertheless, I was thinking in terms of natural horns pitched in various keys and I indicate these in the score. In this way mostly untempered overtones occur, which tend to throw the violinist's fingers off their mark. This is intentional, part of the riddle of this non-manifest musical language.”

The work opens with a 3-note motive in the violin, acknowledging not Brahms, but Beethoven's *Les adieux* piano sonata, which begins with a 3-note imitation of a forlorn horn call. Ligeti uses this motive not only in the first movement, but in each of the subsequent movements as well. The second movement is a fast dance with Bulgarian rhythms, a piano ostinato dividing the 8-beat pulse into 3+3+2 through most of the movement, though the horn and violin remain largely unaffected. In the third movement the violin and piano begin the March in rhythmic unison, though they gradually move out of sync, thereby increasing the rhythmic complexity. The middle section includes a wondrous dialogue for horn and violin before the opening returns with raucous outbursts from the horn. The dolorous *Lamento* is comprised of variations on a 5-bar set of harmonies. The discordant use of the horn adds to the anguish, and the work's initial 3-note motive is heard incessantly. Again, the extremes of register are exploited towards the very end of the piece, with high writing for the violin and barely audible low notes for the horn as the piano sinks lower and lower in funeral style.

Programme notes © James Lea

Artists' biographies can be found on our website: www.penarthchambermusicfestival.org.uk