

DULWICH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

CONCERT

Saturday 15th March 2003 at 7.45pm

St Barnabas' Church, Calton Avenue, Dulwich SE21

Julian Williamson

Conductor

Ben Hancox

Violin

Paula Tysall

Leader

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Overture: Ruy Blas (Op 95) Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809 – 1847)

Mendelssohn never liked "Ruy Blas". Victor Hugo's play is set in the Spain of Charles II and its hero is a servant whose talent and ambition propel him from his humble circumstances to the highest level of government and to the heart of the queen. The tortuous plot is filled with intrigue, jealousy and murder and its inevitable tragic ending which finds the queen inconsolable over the body of the dead lover was hardly designed to appeal to the composer of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* music. In fact, he tried to wriggle out of the commission at first, pleading overwork and submitting other music instead. But eventually, under heavy pressure from the theatre in Leipzig, he succumbed and completed the whole job in three days, giving the world a composition of much greater stature than he might have cared to admit.

The overture begins with some dark chords for wind and brass which embody the grim atmosphere of the play's setting. These reappear at intervals while the main faster section gives us three principal themes, each revealing a different aspect of Hugo's drama. The first, a swirling motif mainly for violins and flutes, displays the mirky, sinister backdrop of the events portrayed. The lovely second theme touches on the love between Ruy Blas and the queen and the third (reminiscent of Weber) depicts the hero's courage and steadfast character. There was no way in which Mendelssohn would write a tragic ending – it was not in his nature – and the rousing conclusion perhaps owes something to Beethoven's "Egmont" in which the final bars look beyond any present adversity to the hope of a brighter future for all.

Violin Concerto No 1 in G Minor (Op 26 No 1) Max Bruch (1838-1920)

- (1) Prelude: *Allegro moderato*
- (2) Adagio
- (3) Finale: *Allegro energico – Presto*

Ben Hancox (Violin)

A precocious child, Bruch very quickly made his mark on the German musical scene. One look at his work list will tell you that his preference was for vocal music and it was in this medium – particularly with his large scale choral oratorios and cantatas – that he first achieved international fame. Although he completed three symphonies and a number of other orchestral pieces it was always with some trepidation that he explored this path, and he was especially scared of the problems of combining a soloist with an orchestra. It therefore came as something of a shock when he realized that, at his first attempt, he had created a concerto which would carry his name all over the world and would outshine anything else by him before or after. In fact, as the years rolled on this began to annoy him more and more as concert managers and performers alike were interested only in this work and increasingly ignored the extensive repertoire of the remaining fifty years of his life – a fault which has persisted today.

It is not difficult to see why the concerto has remained so popular. It is instantly appealing and the brilliance of the solo part is cunningly wrapped within a beautifully melodious texture. The whole has more than a little of the Rhapsody about it, particularly the first movement in which free-flowing cadenza passages are given full rein within a structure which pays only lip service to textbook rules. This joined without a break to the slow movement, one of the many debts to Mendelssohn displayed in the work. This adagio is one of the loveliest movements Bruch ever penned in which the soloist and orchestra gently bathe themselves in a stream of the most exquisite tunes, enticing the listener into a haven of total serenity. This is only broken by the rhythmic vigour of the finale where Bruch shows his passion for gipsy folk music in much the same way that Brahms was to some years later. The violin part is here at its most virtuosic and after a movement full of flamboyant touches it leads off a final paragraph in which the excitement builds bar by bar until a brief presto flourish brings the concerto to a scintillating conclusion.

INTERVAL

Symphony No 6 in B minor – “Pathétique” (Op 74) Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893)

- (1) Adagio – Allegro non troppo – Andante – Allegro vivo –
Andante come prima
- (2) Allegro con grazia
- (3) Allegro molto vivace
- (4) Adagio lamentoso

If you count “Manfred” Tchaikovsky completed seven symphonies and, taken together, they form a graph by which one can trace his development and achievements as a composer. He was always intrigued by the form and, although frequently wracked by doubts as to his abilities (like Bruch), he was determined to make his mark in a medium already explored almost to its limits by other creators. With the first three he was finding his feet and wrestling with structural problems which threatened at times to inhibit his free-thinking Romantic flow of thought. Nos 4 and 5 saw him conquer these restraints allowing his personal voice to emerge, but it was only with No 6 that he truly achieved his goal of producing a symphony of a sort the world had never heard before. In fact, the “Pathétique” (the title was Tchaikovsky's own) could claim to be the most innovative symphony of the late nineteenth century influencing a host of composers after him from Mahler to Shostakovich. Many people have seen it as a final lament of a deeply troubled mind but, more importantly, it should be regarded as a testament to a composer's striking originality. The problem is that the symphony has become so popular that (like Beethoven's 5th) its many novel features have been blurred by familiarity.

The first movement opens conventionally enough with a slow introduction which gives us misty hints of material to come. The first major theme is more rhythmic than melodic and builds gradually to an impressive climax before yielding to a second theme – one of Tchaikovsky's most haunting tunes and typical of his supreme ability to mix beauty with melancholy. This, combined with a third theme plays out the long first part of the movement before we are suddenly launched into a vicious central section which lashes and tears at the material we have already heard. The tension which is unleashed here seems unstoppable and sweeps us on through the point when the opening theme is reintroduced propelling the music ever forward on a tidal wave of sound which can only be calmed by the return of the second theme. This acts now like a healing balm, restoring an atmosphere of tranquillity and leads to a quiet closing paragraph which brings the movement to a serene conclusion in B major – it is possible that Tchaikovsky was influenced here by the end of the first movement of Berlioz's *Symphonic Fantastique*.

After such an impassioned opening an intense slow movement would have resulted in emotional overkill. Realizing this Tchaikovsky lightens the mood with a delightful intermezzo for which he lent heavily on his experience as the most successful ballet composer the world had known. Simple in structure this movement leads us gently into the world of the dance and so hypnotized are we by its charms that we are apt to forget that dancers might have had a problem here. The whole movement is in 5/4 time (almost unheard of in the pre-Stravinsky era) but it is handled so subtly and fluently by the composer that the angularity of this rhythm can easily pass us by.

Another innovation of this symphony is that Tchaikovsky discards the normal scherzo for a vigorous march. This begins with a waspish triplet figure thrown around the orchestra while the march theme is initially announced in outline by the oboe. The whole movement from then on resembles a helter-skelter ride during the course of which cascades of sound flash by again and again until the march finally appears with full force on the whole orchestra. The music then hurtles to its end with such a sense of finality that many people have been fooled into thinking that the symphony has finished. But Tchaikovsky at this point plays his most novel and audacious card. He places here the impassioned adagio which would not have fitted earlier and becomes

the first composer in history to dare end a symphony with a slow movement, the aching intensity of which contains the very kernel of the work. Following the diversions of the central episodes we are now thrown back to the emotive force of the opening and the feeling of passionate longing there laid bare is here allowed, with new music, to work itself out to its natural end drawing the symphony into the darkest chasms of gloom and despair where it would finish with no relief. No other composer before him – not Beethoven, nor Brahms, nor Bruckner – had done this and Tchaikovsky knew when he had written the final notes that he had, at last created a symphony which said something quite new. "I take more pride in this than in any other of my compositions" he said "it is my most sincere work"; remarks which take on an added poignancy when one realises that soon after the premiere the despair here expressed in music would become all too real. Within a week he was dead.

Programme Notes by Julian Williamson

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NEXT CONCERT: 28th June 2002 St Paul's Church Herne Hill
Brahms – *Concerto for Violin and Cello*
Beethoven – *Symphony No. 7*
Mendelssohn – *Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Sally Park
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Julian Williamson Over some 20 years Julian Williamson has been associated with a wide range of orchestras both professional amateur. He has directed concerts with the London Mozart Players, City of London Sinfonia, Milton Keynes City Orchestra and the Ernest Read Symphony Orchestra. Apart from conducting in all the major London Halls he has performed in many other venues throughout Britain. His work abroad has taken him to America, Zimbabwe, Germany, France and Holland.

Paula Tysall studied the violin at the Centre for Young Musicians and went on to study at the Royal College of Music and the National Centre for Orchestral Studies. Since then she has divided her time between freelance orchestral playing and violin teaching. As a member of the New London Orchestra she has made recordings for the BBC, Classic FM and Hyperion and appeared at the Proms. With various orchestras she has toured Italy, Spain and America. She is 1st Violin in the Ashington String Quartet.

Ben Hancox has played the violin since the age of four. In 1997 he became a student of Serguei Fatkoulina, studying in Madrid and Bonn. Last year he entered the third year of the Royal College of Music, where he now studies with Felix Andrievsky. Here, he has recently won the Helen Just violin prize and been awarded scholarships to study at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Ben has performed extensively as a soloist and chamber musician in this country and abroad. Last year he performed concerti by Bach, Haydn and Bruch and gave a performance of The Lark Ascending with the Kent Sinfonia. He has recently performed the Bach Double Violin Concerto with Maidstone Symphony Orchestra and has given recitals in the 2002 Sounds New Festival and in the Metropole Arts Centre. He was also soloist with the Kent County Youth Orchestra on their summer tour to Florence, performing the Bruch G minor concerto. Ben leads the Sacconi String Quartet, which perform frequently in London and the UK.