

Incidental music to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" [Op 61]

Felix Mendelssohn [1809 - 1847]

[1] Intermezzo

[2] Nocturne

[3] Scherzo

Mendelssohn wrote a concert overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at the astonishing young age of 17 - when most of us ordinary mortals are just contemplating A levels. The piece quickly brought him international fame but it was not until twenty years later that he turned his mind to writing some incidental music for a production of the play itself which was staged in Berlin. His style, of course, had broadened in the meantime (not always for the better) but here he seems to have had no difficulty in throwing his mind back to his youth and recapturing the atmosphere of his first success. The play was not received with much enthusiasm - Shakespeare's comedy did not seem to find sympathy with German humour - but the music was acclaimed by all. Tonight we will perform three movements from this incidental music. The first paints a picture of the anguish of Hermia and Helena as they are lost in the forest, which leads into a comically rustic snapshot of Bottom and his friends. This is followed by a Nocturne in which various characters are lulled into sleep, and we finish with a Scherzo in which we are transported into fairyland with wonderful lightness and delicacy.

Concerto in A minor for Violin and Cello [Op 103]

Johannes Brahms [1833 - 1897]

[1] Allegro

[2] Andante

[3] Vivace non troppo

In 1887 Brahms embarked on what would be his last major orchestral work, a concerto for the unusual combination of violin and cello. Inspired in large measure by the examples of Beethoven's Triple Concerto and Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante the composer's thoughts also may have been influenced by his love of the old Baroque concerto grosso. There was another reason for his particular choice of instruments. He wanted to write something for his old friend Joseph Joachim. Their relationship had had been somewhat turbulent over the years but a welcome reconciliation had once more fired Brahms' enthusiasm for the playing of this brilliant violinist and had given him the opportunity to admire the talents of the cellist in Joachim's string quartet, Robert Hausmann. The idea of combining these two very different sonorities is first mentioned in a letter to Clara Schumann almost as a joke. "I can tell you something funny, for I have had the amusing idea of writing a concerto for violin and cello... you can well imagine the sort of pranks one can play in such a case." But as so often with Brahms, once he had immersed himself in the project, the music became much more serious and the work which emerged after much technical consultation with Joachim and Hausmann was one of considerable stature and importance.

In it Brahms abandons the symphonic four movement format he had used for the second piano concerto and returned to the more conventional three movement structure of his violin concerto. But this does not prevent a weighty symphonic feel emerging particularly in the first movement in which the two soloists weave a complex texture around forceful A minor harmonies within a strictly disciplined framework. After this somewhat aggressive opening the D major glow which greets the central Andante acts a gentle balm and the soft horn and woodwind calls which are built in to the musical fabric perhaps grew in Brahms' mind through the beautiful Alpine scenery with which he was surrounded as he conceived the work. For the finale, as with the violin concerto, the composer turns to his love of folk music and treats us to a rondo which contains more than a hint of a Magyar-style dance. The mood here lightens considerably and we are at last able to catch a glimpse of the humorous ideas he had originally suggested to Clara Schumann.

INTERVAL

Symphony No 7 in A major [Op 92]

Ludwig Van Beethoven [1770 - 1827]

[1] Poco sostenuto - Vivace

[2] Allegretto

[3] Presto

[4] Allegro con brio

No regular listener can doubt the individuality of each of the Beethoven symphonies. You cannot confuse No 1 with the 'Eroica' or the 'Pastoral' with No 5, or any of them with the 'Choral'. He was the first composer to turn what was basically an entertainment medium into one which became a vehicle for the creation and resolution of an abstract drama. By conceiving a unique sound for each of his nine symphonies Beethoven envelopes his audience in a sound world not found anywhere else in quite the same way. This is why most people know which one they are listening to without having been told and it is fascinating to see how this amazing composer achieves this often by using devices which, far from being confined to a single symphony, can be found in many other works without in any way spoiling their distinctive qualities. For instance the A major sound into which Beethoven throws us at the beginning of No 7 is immediately distinguishable from any other A major sound we may know and as the wonderfully impressive opening progresses we are led through all sorts of other keys and then find ourselves back where we started. Then, looking back on this longest of all Beethoven slow introductions it is not difficult to see that it is an extension of what he had done at the beginning of No 4 but using very different material. What is more, like No 4, he gradually prepares you for what is to come next. When this initial paragraph has run its course we are left with a conversation between strings and wind on one note in which the rhythm becomes the most important entity. This rhythm is taken down to its bare bones and, almost before we realise it, has been transformed into a jaunty dance-like measure which builds up through the orchestra and, after holding us in suspense for a moment, hurls us pell-mell into the main part of the movement. Once launched the energy of the music is virtually unstoppable and we are hurtled along as though on the crest of a giant wave. At the end, when we are deposited somewhat breathless on the beach we suddenly realise that the whole of the fast section was built out of that little rhythm in much the same way as the famous "fate" motif dominates the first movement of No 5.

The Allegro which follows was the most popular part of the symphony in its early days and was encored in many performances. Like the first movement its most essential constituent is the rhythm - here a march - out of which the various themes are allowed to grow. Again this central pulse keeps an iron grip on the music - even the sunny middle section with its lovely clarinet tune cannot escape its beat in the basses - and the dark minor-key tones combine with it to produce distant echoes of the funeral march from the 'Eroica'.

The term Scherzo literally means a joke and Beethoven was one of the first composers to take the word at its face value. Because of over familiarity much of the humour in his music tends to pass us by. This Presto, for instance, although modelled on the format he had already used in a number of symphonies, is constantly playing pranks on our ears. The sheer exuberance of the music drives us along but if you stop and think for a minute you realise how the composer cunningly varies phrase lengths all over the place to create little surprises hidden in the texture. At this point you would naturally expect the music to have reached its point of maximum vivacity but you would be wrong. As soon as the finale starts we realise we are captured in another maelstrom of sound and we can understand at last Beethoven's individual message in this symphony. Casting your mind back to the little gigue-like figure near the beginning of the work you realise that we have been taken on a journey which has made rhythm the centre-piece of every part and as we are propelled with ever increasing exhilaration through the final pages we understand why, many years after his inception, Richard Wagner called this symphony "the epitome of the dance".

Programme notes by Julian Williamson

DULWICH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Violin I

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 Ken Brace
 Tom Brockbank
 Chris Burns
 Stuart Dearnley
 Maisie Hipperson
 Julia Milne
 Gill Tarlton

Cello

Nicky Jackson
 Russell Ashley-Smith
 Charlotte Burkill
 Maria Rosa Borneo
 Katherine Croston
 Sarah Toyn

Violin II

Eric Croston
 Adrian Chen
 Elizabeth Cleary
 Ann Earle
 George Fuller
 Jane Howard
 Judi Kadifachi
 Sarah Milnes
 Jeanne Morrison

Viola

Frances Barrett
 Frances Lee
 Philip McKenna
 Anne Miller
 Maureen Montrose

Double Bass

Matthew Berry
 Mike Lasserson
 Samantha Weitzel

Flute

Zilla Smith
 Hannah Talbot-Cooper

Oboe

Louise Simon
 Ian Finn

Clarinet

Sue Best
 Christine Holland

Bassoon

Hilary Dodd
 Sven-Joran Schrader

Horn

Graham Vernon
 Lucy Steel
 Paul Kajzar
 Jane Urquhart

Trumpet

Tim Collett
 Eric Milner

Timpani

John Hargreaves

Over the last twenty years, **Julian Williamson** has been associated with a large number of orchestras and choirs. He has performed regularly at the South Bank, at St. John's Smith Square and the Barbican Hall where, apart from his many concerts with the Camden Choir, he has appeared with the London Bach Orchestra and the English Festival Choir. His work has taken him not only to many parts of Great Britain but also to Germany, Holland, Zimbabwe and the USA.

Frances Mason was a scholar at the Royal College of Music where she won all the top prizes including the Tagore Gold Medal. She was a prizewinner in the Carl Flesch International Violin Competition, the BBC Violin Competition and the Budapest Sonata Competition. She has broadcast regularly for the BBC, played concertos in the Proms and with many well-known orchestras. Her distinguished chamber music career started in the Julian Bream Consort, the Zorian String Quartet and then the Music Group of London. She now leads the Rasumovsky String Quartet and the Dartington Piano Trio, and formed the Tagore String Trio in 1996. Frances has made numerous recordings and is a professor at the Royal College of Music.

James Halsey studied at the Royal College of Music where he won many solo and chamber music prizes. He was the cellist in the Auriol String Quartet for ten years and now plays with the Bingham String Quartet. He has toured throughout Europe, the Middle East and Australia, and has recently performed Bach Solo Suites and Beethoven sonatas in Japan. James has broadcast regularly, has made numerous CDs and gives many solo concerto performances ranging from Haydn to Shostakovich. He has recently completed a cycle of the six Bach solo suites in London. He teaches at the Royal College of Music Junior Department and once a month he is flown up to teach at the North East Scotland School of Music in Aberdeen.

Paula Tysall studied the violin at the Royal College of Music and the National Centre for Orchestral Studies. She won the Associated Board Silver Medal for Grade 7. As a member of the New London Orchestra she has taken part in many acclaimed recordings for Hyperion Records, Radio 3 and Classic FM Quartet.

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