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Sir Andrew Davis: A Tribute (1944–2024)

🕒 7.30PM, THURSDAY 7 NOVEMBER

CONDUCTOR Karl-Heinz Steffens*

PIANO Ingrid Fliter

BEETHOVEN *Leonore Overture No.3*

BEETHOVEN Piano Concerto No.3

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS *Job – A Masque for Dancing*



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Programme Notes

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Leonore Overture No.3 (1806)

DURATION: c.15'

Beethoven made many attempts over the course of his life to write an opera. He finally finished only one, *Fidelio*, which gave him no end of trouble. Between starting work on it in 1804 and the premiere of its final version in 1814, Beethoven tried out four different overtures, two titles, and quite a few other variants. The biggest of these overtures, *Leonore No.3* (named for the protagonist's real name, rather than *Fidelio*, the male name she has disguised herself under), was composed in 1806. Confusingly, it was the second version of the overture. The first (*Leonore No.2*) was heard in the unsuccessful premiere of the first version of the opera in 1805, and the third (called *No.1*) was probably prepared for an unrealised performance in Prague in 1808. *No.3* is on too grand a scale to work as an opera overture, but it has survived as a popular concert work.

Fidelio is essentially a German take on the French genre of the 'rescue opera', in which a hero or heroine has to rescue someone who has been imprisoned. The overture dramatises the opera's primary conflict between oppression and liberation; according to some commentators (including Wagner) it does this rather better than the opera itself.

The overture works like the first movement of a symphony, with a slow introduction and a sonata-form body. As befits its oppression/liberation plot, the development (the oppression part) is especially turgid and includes a surprise offstage trumpet call. The recapitulation is in such a forceful and declamatory C major that it is hard to imagine a whole opera following it.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Concerto No.3 (1803)

I. *Allegro con brio*

II. *Largo*

III. *Rondo: Allegro*

DURATION: c.35'

Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto was premiered in 1803 in Vienna, with Beethoven himself as soloist and on the same mega-programme as his first and second symphonies and his oratorio *Christus am Ölberge*. The oratorio attracted the most attention, and the new concerto was somewhat lost in the shuffle. The concerto's form is on the surface quite conventional: a sonata form first movement with the usual double exposition (first the orchestra plays it alone, then the piano joins in). But Beethoven plays with the conventions. For example, the orchestra starts the first theme at a mysterious, quiet dynamic, but when the

piano comes in it plays the same theme forte and with grand scales leading up to it. Then the cadenza ends unexpectedly, eliding into the movement's coda rather than articulating a triumphant return to the tonic. Beethoven may have been directly inspired by Mozart's similar trick in his own C minor concerto.

The second movement, in the very remote key of E major, offers the modern pianist pedalling challenges, as the smooth pedal system of a modern Steinway is very different from the more individual but less sonorous pedal array of early 19th-century instruments. E major is returned to in the middle of the Rondo finale after an amusing fugal passage ('amusing' and 'fugal' is not necessarily an oxymoron when we're dealing with Beethoven!), heard as especially distant when surrounded by C minor and its neighbours.

INTERVAL

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Job – A Masque for Dancing (1931)

- I. *Introduction. Pastoral dance. Satan's appeal to God. Saraband of the Sons of God.*
- II. *Satan's dance.*
- III. *Minuet of the sons and daughters of Job.*
- IV. *Job's dream. Dance of plague, pestilence, famine and battle.*
- V. *Dance of the Messengers*
- VI. *Dance of Job's comforters. Job's curse. A vision of Satan.*
- VII. *Elihu's dance of youth and beauty. Pavane of the Heavenly Host.*
- VIII. *Galliard of the Sons of the Morning. Altar dance and heavenly pavane.*
- IX. *Epilogue.*

DURATION: c.45'

Job would be Vaughan Williams's first major ballet score. It was originally meant for the great impresario Sergei Diaghilev (who commissioned Stravinsky's *Firebird* and *Rite of Spring*), but Diaghilev was not interested. The score was premiered in concert form in 1930, and in the next year was then taken up by the newly established Vic-Wells ballet (soon to become the Royal Ballet).

The ballet was inspired by William Blake's illustrations of the biblical Book of Job, in which God tests Job's faith by taking away all of his worldly possessions. Blake scholar Geoffrey Keynes developed a scenario for staging eight of the drawings and brought it to Vaughan Williams. The composer took Keynes's basic idea and expanded it; where Keynes interpreted the story as about the duality of good and evil and of spirituality and materiality, with Job resembling either God or Satan depending on the situation, Vaughan Williams focussed on the role of Job within his family and community. Where Keynes hewed more closely to Blake, Vaughan Williams arguably had more consideration for stagecraft.

The score is one of Vaughan Williams's most tightly constructed. A series of interrelated themes and motives represent the various characters and the heavenly, earthly, and satanic elements of the story. The earthly Job and his family are represented by modal and pentatonic music in Vaughan Williams's pastoral style. Satan's music is dissonant and rhythmically unsettled, while God and the angels have mostly triadic hymn-like music, set to Renaissance-style dances like the saraband and pavane. *Job* is one of Vaughan Williams's most important and representative works; it displays his dramatic sensibilities as well as his versatility in composing not just the pastoral music he is now best known for, but also more experimental styles.

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*Karl-Heinz Steffens replaces the previously advertised Sir Andrew Davis, who passed away earlier this year.