

SHEKU PLAYS ELGAR

7.30PM, Thursday 13 August
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Melodien (1971)

DURATION: c.13'

Throughout the 1960s Ligeti composed using a technique he called 'micropolyphony', in which instrumental lines are interwoven and packed together into a contrapuntal texture so dense and complex that individual parts are completely submerged. With *Melodien* (Melodies) he sought to soften and clarify this labyrinthine texture so that individual voices would emerge, each 'with their own style, tempo, rhythm and intervallic structure.'

Ligeti wrote: 'In this piece there are three dynamic planes – a "foreground" consisting of melodies and shorter melodic patterns; a middle plane consisting of subordinate, ostinato-like figurations; and a "background" consisting of long sustained tones.' The instrumentalists in the foreground are encouraged to think like soloists throughout, with an 'elastic' interpretation of their lines.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Cello Concerto (1919)

- I. *Adagio – Moderato*
- II. *Lento – Allegro molto*
- III. *Adagio*
- IV. *Allegro – Moderato – Allegro, ma non troppo*

DURATION: c.30'

By the onset of the Great War in 1914, Elgar had become uncomfortably aware that his star was waning in the eyes of the British public. He was furthermore in a state of despair over the war, writing to a friend, 'Everything good and nice and clean and fresh and sweet is far away, never to return.' With his wife and daughter, he relocated to an isolated cottage in Sussex. It was there that he experienced a renewed burst of creativity, writing a Violin Sonata, String Quartet and Piano Quintet.

Following the premieres of these works in the spring of 1919, Elgar began to compose his Cello Concerto. It opens with a forceful proclamation by the solo cello, marked *nobilmente*. The desolate main theme of the movement is advanced by the violas unaccompanied before the cello annexes it and leads it towards a statement by the full orchestra. The music attempts to find solace, but when the main theme returns in the solo cello the mood is inconsolable.

The cello repeats the opening chords of the first movement as a bridge to the second, this time pizzicato, leading to a swift, virtuosic scherzo. The *Adagio* is elegiac but concise, suffused with melancholy. After a brief *Allegro* introduction by the orchestra, the cello opens the finale with a recitative again marked *nobilmente*. Thereafter the mood of the movement is one of boldness and resolve in the face of catastrophe, until the tempo slows to *Lento*

Conductor Elena Schwarz
Cello Sheku Kanneh-Mason

for a final meditation that includes a reminiscence of the *Adagio* and a re-statement of the opening gesture from the first movement. The *Allegro* returns to end the movement in a mood of anger and defiance. Although he lived for another fifteen years, the concerto proved to be Elgar's last major composition.

INTERVAL

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Symphony No.5 (1915; rev. 1916, 1919)

- I. *Tempo molto moderato – Allegro moderato*
- II. *Andante mosso, quasi allegretto*
- III. *Allegro molto – Miserioso*

DURATION: c.30'

Sibelius's Fifth Symphony ends with such a boldly original final stroke, and its course from first notes to last seems so inevitable, that the impression is of a masterpiece that emerged fully formed from its creator's imagination. Nothing could be further from the truth. 'It's as if God the Father had thrown down pieces of mosaic from heaven's floor and asked me to put them back as they were,' he wrote.

The first version of the symphony, premiered in 1915, was in four movements. The themes are recognisably the same and the overall design of the work has the same trajectory, but it was clearly a work in progress. Sibelius revised it several times, but it wasn't until 1919 that the symphony reached its definitive form.

Some of the musical ideas in the first and second movements were closely related, so Sibelius fused them into one linked by an ingenious transitional passage. The first part of the movement is in a moderately slow tempo, while the second is a scherzo that accelerates in tempo, almost flying off the page at the final climax. In the middle movement Sibelius changed the order in which he presented his material, highlighting it with more colourful orchestration.

The final movement is two-thirds the length of the original, and considerably more effective. Sibelius rarely talked about his music, but in this case there is clear evidence that the finale's main theme was inspired by seeing sixteen swans in flight while on his morning walk. After a flurry of activity dominated by string tremolos and fast repeated staccato chords in the woodwind, the horns announce the broad, swinging theme depicting the swans' wings. In his diary Sibelius exclaimed: 'Nature's mystery and life's melancholy!'

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