The New Zealand Herald
Premier Series

BEETHOVEN'S PIANO NO.4

7.30PM, Thursday 15 October
Auckland Town Hall

Conductor Karl-Heinz Steffens
Piano Sophia Liu

Programme Notes

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Concerto No.4 (1805-1806)
I. *Allegro moderato*
II. *Andante con moto*
III. *Rondo. Vivace*

DURATION: c.34'

Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, with which he made his final public appearance as a concerto soloist, turns concerto form on its head: it begins with a soft statement from the solo pianist, the orchestra follows with an echo and a continuation. Premiered as part of the marathon concert that also premiered the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies in a freezing hall, lit by candles that Beethoven kept sweeping off the piano with furious gestures, the premiere was hardly auspicious.

The main theme of the first movement is characterised by the same triple upbeat made famous as the 'fate' theme of the Fifth Symphony, but here it becomes a gesture of fluidity and lyricism rather than fury and defiance.

The central slow movement is a study of contrasts, as if the piano and orchestra are reading from different scripts - a haughty declamatory orchestra alternates with a soothing piano chorale, which gradually subdues the orchestra.

The *Rondo* finale continues to treat the orchestra and piano as separate units, the main piano theme containing a striking offbeat implying a rustic dance. Reminders of the poetic lyricism of earlier movements return in the intervening sections, making the concerto as a whole an exploration of the possibilities of the piano concerto beyond bravura and technical display.

INTERVAL

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)
The Wooden Prince (1914-1916)

DURATION: c.50'

'The music of *[The Wooden Prince]* is a kind of elaborate symphonic music, a symphonic poem to be danced to,' wrote Bartók. In 1914, Bartók had almost completely stopped composing, discouraged by the rejection of his work in his native Hungary, especially his opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, which theatres refused to touch. 'Let's try again,' encouraged his friend Béla Balázs, who wrote the libretto for both *Bluebeard* and *The Wooden Prince*, arguing that the visual appeal of ballet movement and colour could capture the public attention. The one-act pantomime ballet opens from the depths of the orchestra, evoking a deep, ancient forest, a remote landscape that Bartók had become intimately familiar with while travelling on foot to remote villages collecting folk tunes with his phonograph.

The first dance introduces the princess with delicate woodwind lines. She is seen by a prince – who falls instantly in love. However, the jealous forest fairy prevents the prince's pursuit of the princess, enchanting first the trees, with rumbling timpani and then the river, floating in the exquisite tone colour of saxophones, to block his way. In a final attempt to gain the princess's attention, the prince hangs his cloak on a tree branch with a lock of hair and his crown, but the fairy enchants this into a wooden puppet and it is with this figure that the princess becomes enamoured and begins to dance.

The second section of the ballet is more 'tranquil, of a typical middle-movement character' according to Bartók, as the prince grieves and the fairy attempts to comfort him. This section ends with the wooden prince's magic failing, the music of bassoons and wooden percussive sounds (from percussion to strings *col legno* – struck with the wood of the bow) halting and stumbling and the princess realising her error.

In a reversal, the third section depicts the princess pursuing the despondent prince, but now she is impeded by the swirling river currents and the menacing trees before the fairy relents and the two lovers are united in a slow embrace, with a noble horn melody and twinkling celeste drawing the work to a close.

So great was the resistance to the production of the ballet, so poor was the general perception of Bartók's music, that Balázs recalled, 'As the date of the opening night battle approached, the newspaper critics were already circling the [theatre], cawing, like crows awaiting death.... The audience of boxes came to hear a scandal.' However, as the curtain fell on the premiere, 'A gigantic, invisible, silent balance teetered... And then, like a sudden explosion, a thunderous applause began in the gallery and swept down to the stalls.' Won over by the colour, vivacity and drama of the score, the tide of public support turned into a groundswell that led to more of Bartók's work being performed, including the previously rejected opera *Bluebeard's Castle*.

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