

MAHLER 1

7.30PM, Thursday 26 November
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Lohengrin: Prelude to Act I (1850)

DURATION: c.8'

Lohengrin is 'the embodied wish of the yearner who dreams of happiness in that land far across the sea he cannot sense,' wrote Richard Wagner.

Wagner was captured by the legend of *Lohengrin* or the Swan Knight in 1845 whilst taking the waters at Marianbad. Lohengrin, a knight of the holy grail, arrives on a boat drawn by a swan to save the Princess Elsa, but she is forbidden from asking his name. When she ultimately does, he steps back into his boat and is never seen again.

The first act prelude captures that yearning with a hushed orchestra, where Lohengrin's melody emerges from a texture of shimmering violins and evolves slowly in grandeur before disappearing again into a haze of sound.

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

Violin Concerto (1935)

- I. *Andante – Allegretto*
- II. *Allegro – Adagio*

DURATION: c.24'

In dire financial straits, poor health and ever-increasing danger from the reach of Nazi Germany who classed him a 'degenerate artist', Alban Berg received a commission from the American violinist Louis Krasner, which provided him with the impetus to complete his Violin Concerto in six weeks over the summer of 1935.

Berg dedicated the concerto 'To the Memory of an Angel' — Manon Gropius, who died tragically young that April. Manon was the daughter of Walter Gropius and Alma Mahler, with Alma being a key player in securing the publication of Berg's landmark opera *Wozzeck*.

The concerto opens with the harp and clarinet in an arch shaped melodic line drawing on the pitches of the violin's open strings. The solo violin sits within the ensemble rather than outside it and Berg's care for tone colour is paramount: as with his *Three Pieces for Orchestra* the instrument selected for each pitch is of critical importance.

In the second movement cadenza, Berg created music of grief and abandonment, using punctuations of timpani and growling double basses as if to outline a craggy barren landscape.

From the thunderous music of furious high trills and slashing brass punctuations a Bach chorale quotation emerges. The text 'Es ist genug' is a plea for release from this life into the rest of the next and Berg marks the text into the score, first played solo on the violin's lowest string, before moving to the choir of woodwinds.

The movement continues to meditate on this theme before evaporating into the highest register of the solo violin with the opening arch-like gesture of the concerto recalled in the orchestra.

Conductor Giordano Bellincampi
Violin Ning Feng

INTERVAL

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No.1 'Titan' (1884-1888; 1893-1896; 1899)

- I. *Langsam, schleppend* (Slow, dragging)
- II. *Kräftig bewegt* (Vigorous, moving)
- III. *Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen* (Solemn and measured, without dragging)
- IV. *Stürmisch bewegt* (Tempestuous, moving)

DURATION: c.53'

'Away with programs, they arouse false conceptions,' wrote Mahler. 'If the composer has impressed upon the hearer the feeling that flowed through him, then his goal is achieved. For the language of music has drawn close to words, but has proclaimed unceasingly more than they are able to express.'

Nonetheless, the title 'Titan' and accompanying programme Mahler provided (and later retracted) for his First Symphony has become an integral part of the work's mythos, encapsulating the grand scope of the symphony.

Mahler further encoded textural meaning into the symphony with quotations from his songs, such as the tune of his *Ging heut morgen übers Feld* (I walked across the fields this morning) which appears in the first movement's unfurling dawn.

The second movement is characterised by the rustic, bulky energy of a *ländler*, with prescribed melodic slides drawing the symphony away from the nobility and to the unfiltered joviality of tavern music.

The third movement takes the children's round *Frère Jacques/Bruder Martin* and turns it from a cheerful song of awakening into a haunting funeral march, putting the theme into awkward instrumental ranges (such as high on the double bass) to heighten the sense of unease.

Writing to a friend, Mahler likened the finale to an inferno, to the 'sudden eruption of a heart deeply wounded'. Throughout the course of this longest movement in the symphony, the hero's valiant struggle is punctuated with lingering reminiscences of elusive bliss, each time violently dispelled until the eventual triumphant chorale. As Mahler wrote, 'Time and again he – and the victorious motif with him – is dealt a death blow by fate whenever he rises above it and seems to get hold of it, and only in death, when he has become victorious over himself, does he gain victory.'

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