

EHNES & BELLINCAMPI

7.30PM, Thursday 20 February
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Manfred: Overture (1852)

DURATION: c.12'

"Agitated state of mind — I read Byron's *Manfred* in bed — terrible night." In 1829, Schumann was still in his excitable teens when he discovered *Manfred*, but even then it took hold of him fiercely as a work through which he might bring together his two artistic passions: literature and music. "Never have I devoted myself to a composition with such love and energy as to *Manfred*," said Schumann.

Two decades later, he had completed a repertoire of incidental music pieces — 16 items including the overture — to a German translation of Byron's poetic drama. The drama centres around Count Manfred's remorse over past acts (unspecified) that somehow resulted in the death of his beloved Astarte. Living by himself in the Alps region, he now seeks death as a release from torment.

The overture opens with a searing, threefold shout of defiance followed by a theatrical silence. A slow and tense prologue eventually tips over into the principal theme, restless and twitchy, transporting us into Manfred's alpine lair. By the end of the overture, disjointed elements of the prologue have returned, but the softly ambiguous ending brings no sense of relief.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Concerto (1878)

- I. *Allegro non troppo*
- II. *Adagio*
- III. *Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace*

DURATION: c.40'

One of the famous violinist Joachim's most abiding boyhood memories came from 1821 when, at 12 years of age, he appeared in London as a wunderkind soloist for the Beethoven Violin Concerto, with Mendelssohn as conductor — an occasion that people were still talking about nearly 20 years later, in 1853, when Joachim first met Brahms.

The idea that Brahms might one day write a violin concerto for the Hungarian superstar might well have been in the air for years, but it was not until 1878 that the composer finally settled down to write a Violin Concerto — in D major, just like Beethoven's. Some six months later, the job was done, and the concerto was first performed on New Year's Day 1879, in Leipzig, with Joachim the obvious choice as soloist.

The principal theme of the concerto's first movement has a warm nobility about it, and leads to exchanges between soloist and orchestra, ranging from dramatic contrast to sweet togetherness. Towards the movement's end, Brahms gives the soloist free rein to improvise the cadenza, confident in the knowledge that his soloist was the great Joachim, who needed no pre-composed music.

Conductor Giordano Bellincampi
Violin James Ehnes

A sublimely simple pastoral tune for oboe opens the second movement Adagio and leads to a boisterous finale based on Hungarian dance rhythms, spiced up here and there with resonant double stops.

INTERVAL

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Symphony No.3 'Scottish' (1842)

- I. *Andante con moto — Allegro un poco agitato*
- II. *Vivace non troppo*
- III. *Adagio*
- IV. *Allegro vivacissimo — Allegro maestoso assai*

DURATION: c.40'

When the 20-year-old Mendelssohn set off northwards from London in July 1829, he carried in his head a picture of what he would find in Scotland. He was more than ready to revel in the country's myths and mists, its tartans and tribes, its Rob Roys and its Young Lochinvars.

Musically of course there was the pentatonic scale, the Scotch snap, the sound of the pipes, and the lilting tunes for Highland dancing. Underneath all this there was also the haunting spirit of lament — the musical vein that begins the symphony, with a low oboe, a minor key, and a hesitant reach upwards.

Strangely perhaps, the Vivace of the second movement seems to drift from its Scottish anchorage. True, there's the skirl of the pipes in places, a couple of pentatonic melodies, and even a Scotch snap or two. Yet the feeling here of this music seems more Irish than Scottish; it's the childlike world of fairy glens and the Little People.

The darker spirit of lament returns in the third movement, a slow, almost mournful procession that grows increasingly powerful. But the finale recaptures the swing and colour of highland dance before Mendelssohn takes his leave, with the horns leading the assembled company into a boisterous farewell.

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James Ehnes' appearance is proudly supported by Kate Vennell