

BRAHMS 3

7.30PM, Thursday 27 February
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Concert Românesc (1951)

I. *Andantino* II. *Allegro vivace* III. *Adagio ma non troppo*
IV. *Molto vivace*

Movements played continuously

DURATION: c.13'

In his youth, György Ligeti had to fight hard to piece together a musical education — first in Cluj, the Romanian town of his birth, and then in the Hungarian capital of Budapest. Sadly however, Ligeti's intended student days were cut short in 1944 when he was sent to one of the forced-labour camps that had been set up to appease Adolf Hitler's increasingly virulent anti-Semitism.

After the war, and until his escape from Hungary in 1956, Ligeti continued to study and compose on his own, taking the Hungarian and Romanian music of Bela Bartók and George Enescu as his models. The *Concert Românesc* was completed in 1951, and the sound of Bartók is evident in the slow opening strings that gradually introduce harmonies built on open fourths and fifths. The second movement is a good-natured, village-band 'competition' in which small orchestral groups do their utmost with a single folk melody.

Two Romanian mountain horns call to each other in the third movement. Here, Ligeti spurns modern valves and requests natural tuning that evokes a sense of distance, and sounds 'olde-worlde'. The rushing, muted strings of the final movement recall the dazzling Roma fiddler tradition much loved by Enescu, yet the musical material is clearly modelled on the final movement of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra. An incredibly difficult solo violin part gives way to the far-off horns again, before an explosive, percussion-driven crash finishes the work.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Violin Concerto No.1 (1908)

I. *Andante sostenuto* II. *Allegro giocoso*

DURATION: c.21'

When he was composing this work (1907-8), Bartók was deeply in love with a talented young violinist called Stefi Geyer. In a letter, he described his love as 'a kind of opium' that fuelled his composing. Stefi broke up with Bartók before he could complete the piece, but he decided to finish it anyway. By the time he sent a manuscript copy to her, she had already moved on, and simply popped the work into a drawer — where it stayed unopened for nearly 50 years.

When Stefi died, her copy of the concerto was bequeathed to the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher and the first performance took place in 1958. Since then, a number of gifted soloists have brought the concerto into their mainstream repertoire and no-one has fought more often or more vigorously than our soloist this evening, James Ehnes, who has constantly championed its excellence, separate from its romantic back-story. Ehnes' scintillating performances have always proved his point and let the work speak eloquently for itself.

Conductor Giordano Bellincampi

Violin James Ehnes

In its course, the concerto avoids normal patterns. More like a rhapsody, it flows naturally from the opening theme, which Bartók called 'Stefi's' leitmotif. He also described the whole first movement as expressing the 'idealised Stefi Geyer, celestial and inward.' By contrast, the second movement suggests Stefi's quick wit, mocking words, and assertive nature.

INTERVAL

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No.3 (1883)

I. *Allegro con brio* II. *Andante* III. *Poco Allegretto* IV. *Allegro*

DURATION: c.37'

It was in the summer of 1883 that Brahms composed his F major Third Symphony which was given its first performance in December of the same year. Some notable features include the symphony's crystal-clear outline and onward purpose, and the varied harmonic language and colourful musical contrasts, a good example of which can be heard at the start: the opening, three-chord leap-into-action melts down to a sinuous string passage, before the folksy charm of a woodland clarinet ushers in the movement's second theme.

Lights and shadows play through the second movement's peaceful andante, after which Brahms dispenses with the usual scherzo in favour of a singing intermezzo whose autumnal colours show him at his best. The finale avoids established forms but the movement seems to find its own form as it goes, before finishing in a quiet sunset of great beauty.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Hungarian Dances (1868; orch. 1873)

No.1 in G minor (*Allegro molto*) No.3 in F major (*Allegretto*)

No.10 in F major (*Presto*)

DURATION: c.7'

Brahms's ever-popular Hungarian Dances consist of 21 dance-settings that he began during his first enthusiasm for the music of Hungary and its close neighbours. In 1848, at the age of 15, he met the young Hungarian-born superstar violinist Ede Reményi, who actively fanned this enthusiasm into a passion and their performances of the Hungarian Dances became exciting showstoppers. In 1869, some of the dances were published in a four-hand piano version (one piano, two pianists) and quickly swamped the burgeoning amateur music market of the day, leading to an eager demand for orchestral versions, which Brahms and his musical friends duly supplied.

The dances capture the lilting and foot-stomping energy of the csárdás and verbunkos, traditional Hungarian folk dances that juggle passionately heartfelt strains with dramatically changing tempos, popular rhythms, and whirling virtuoso sections.

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