

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

7.30PM, Thursday 23 April
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

Oberon: Overture (1826)

DURATION: c.9'

Weber's last opera was written to an English libretto, based on a German poem. Commissioned by Covent Garden, it was first performed there in 1826. The opera tells the story of the King of the Elves, who has gifted a magic horn to the knight Hüon so he can summon Oberon at need. The overture opens with the horn call, followed by various quotes from the opera – from evocations of the kingdom of the fairies to the exploits of knights in a mythical Middle Ages.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Concerto No.1 (1933)

Four movements, played without pause

- I. *Allegro moderato*
- II. *Lento*
- III. *Moderato*
- IV. *Allegro con brio*

DURATION: c.21'

Shostakovich was a very fine (if somewhat edgy) pianist, and during the 1920s he earned a meagre living improvising accompaniments for silent movies. After six years of composing music mainly for stage and screen – incidental music, film scores, two ballets and two operas – he again turned his attention to the piano, writing a set of 24 epigrammatic preludes. An intended trumpet concerto gradually metamorphosed into a concerto for piano and strings with obligato solo trumpet.

In composing the concerto Shostakovich drew upon his experience in playing for silent movies, producing a parody of the traditional classical concerto. The opening gesture for piano and trumpet immediately announces the satirical tone of the piece. The piano then presents a mock-serious theme, soon taken up by the strings.

The second movement is a slow, brooding waltz whose main theme returns on muted trumpet. The brief third movement is an interlude before the finale bursts forth in a riot of scampering music hall allusions. There are many quotes and references, from Haydn and Beethoven to the nursery rhyme *Poor Mary*. After a manic cadenza the orchestra returns and the concerto hurtles to a frenetic conclusion amid precipitous trumpet fanfares.

INTERVAL

Brigid Ursula Bisley (b.1961)

Illumination (2002)

DURATION: c.12'

Illumination was first conceived in 2002 and workshopped by the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. The version you will hear tonight was revised and partially recomposed for tonight's performance.

Conductor Olari Elts

Piano Sylvia Jiang

Trumpet Huw Dann

The composer writes: "The title of this work came to me through my admiration of illuminations – the ornate illustrations on medieval manuscripts – which used gold or silver leaf to decorate the coloured pigment and to reflect light, giving the page a luminosity. Illuminations could be used for example to uplift the reader and facilitate prayer; or to connect with the stars, if decorating text on topics such as astronomy or astrology. These images segued easily into my musical imagination, being a composer who enjoys creating colour and light, and contrasting shadow."

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847)

A Midsummer Night's Dream (selections) (1826 and 1843)

Overture

Scherzo

Intermezzo

Nocturne

Wedding March

DURATION: c.32'

By the time Mendelssohn wrote his concert overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the age of 17, he was already a highly experienced composer. The four woodwind chords that open and close the Overture quickly became iconic – Rimsky-Korsakov references them in the first movement of *Scheherazade*.

Shakespeare's play comprises several interconnected subplots leading up to the marriage of Theseus, Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. One involves four star-crossed lovers, while another follows the antics of six amateur actors rehearsing a play. Both groups end up in a forest ruled by the King and Queen of the Fairies, Oberon and Titania, who are experiencing marital problems. Oberon casts a spell on Titania to make her fall in love with the first living creature she sees. This happens to be the weaver Nick Bottom, whose head has been magically transformed into that of a donkey.

The Overture is in sonata form, but with clear illustrative elements. The opening rapid figures for the strings evoke the fairies darting through the wood, while the majestic chords for full orchestra that follow represent the court of Athens. A broad, romantic theme led by the strings denotes the lovers, while even the braying of the donkey-headed Bottom is heard. As in Weber's *Overture*, Oberon's magic horn is sounded.

In 1842 King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia asked Mendelssohn to write incidental music for a production of the entire play. Tonight's selection continues with the *Scherzo*, which covers the scene-change from Athens to the enchanted woodland of the fairies. The *Intermezzo* comes at the end of Act II as Hermia plunges into the woods to find her lover Lysander. Act III ends with the *Nocturne*, depicting the sleeping lovers. Mendelssohn composed his famous *Wedding March* to bridge the transition to the final act.

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