

**CBSO**

City of  
Birmingham  
Symphony  
Orchestra

Beethoven's Seventh Symphony  
Symphony Hall  
Wednesday 10 May, 2023  
7:30pm

CBSO.CO.UK



**BEETHOVEN'S  
SEVENTH  
SYMPHONY**

Concert programme £4



Principal Funders:

## PROGRAMME

**Weber** Clarinet Quintet  
(arranged for orchestra) 25mins

**Widmann** Con brio 12mins

*Interval*

**Widmann** Three Shadow Dances 10mins

**Beethoven** Symphony No.7 36mins

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**Jörg Widmann** Conductor / Clarinet

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# BEETHOVEN'S SEVENTH SYMPHONY

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Wednesday 10 May 2023, 7:30pm  
Symphony Hall, Birmingham

# BEETHOVEN'S SEVENTH SYMPHONY

It's not every day you meet a musician who's the complete package, but Jörg Widmann – dazzling composer, inspiring conductor and clarinettist extraordinaire – is exactly that. He's an artist with a serious sense of fun, and today he plays a delightfully operatic showpiece by Weber, conducts his own anarchic homage to Beethoven, and then throws caution to the winds in Beethoven's very wildest symphony. Hold on to your seats...

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

## CLARINET QUINTET IN B FLAT, OP.34 (1815)

Allegro  
Fantasia  
Menuetto, capriccio presto  
Rondo, allegro giocoso

There's a clear clarinet theme running through some of this evening's concert: tonight's soloist, Jörg Widmann, is a virtuoso clarinettist as well as being a composer and conductor, and all three sides of his musical personality are very much on display.

We begin, however, with another clarinet virtuoso, one from more than two centuries ago. From 1807 until his retirement in 1834, Heinrich Baermann was clarinettist with the Munich court orchestra, then one of

Europe's finest musical ensembles. And though his instrument was relatively well established by then – helped on its way, of course, by Mozart's Clarinet Quintet and Clarinet Concerto a couple of decades earlier – it had an unfortunate reputation for shrill, harsh sounds, certainly in the wrong hands. Baermann, however, was famed for his warm, rich playing. An 1818 review in the *Leipzig Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* praised his individual sound, "which has not the slightest strain or shrillness in it, both of which are so common among clarinettists".

In 1810, composer Carl Maria von Weber was briefly imprisoned for debt in Württemberg – largely because of the financial dealings of his father, which complicated his position as secretary to the city's Duke Ludwig (it's a long story) – and subsequently banished from the region. He travelled to Heidelberg and then Darmstadt, where he first met Baermann in 1811. The two men became close friends – and remained so for the rest of their

lives – in what would prove one of the most influential relationships in the early history of the clarinet.

So taken was Weber with Baermann's playing that the composer dashed off a modest Clarinet Concertino for him in a mere six days, followed by two larger-scale Clarinet Concertos, as well as tonight's Clarinet Quintet. Weber accompanied Baermann on a performance tour between December 1811 and March 1812, and saw for himself the challenges of sourcing expert orchestral players in provincial German towns. Accordingly, he created the Quintet on a smaller scale, requiring just a quartet of string players alongside its

clarinet soloist. He made few concessions in the Quintet's music, however: the piece is essentially a concerto in all but name, certainly in terms of the virtuoso demands it places on its soloist. It's entirely reasonable, therefore, to perform the piece with an orchestra expanding the original solo quartet parts, as is often done.

It's also a piece that draws heavily on Weber's love of opera: this is the composer, after all, who would place German-language opera firmly on the map, though his most pioneering work, *Der Freischütz*, only came a few years later. There's a sense of operatic drama even in the first movement's genial opening melody, followed immediately by a darker, stormier answer. The Quintet's second-movement *Fantasia* is almost a wordless opera aria with an achingly poignant melody for the clarinet, while the soloist bubbles their way through the mischievous third-movement *Menuetto* (which has little to do with any refined dance style, despite its name). Weber's rollicking finale pits an impetuous clarinet melody against galloping strings, and even after the breathtaking technical demands of earlier in the piece, its closing moments push the clarinetist to the edge of their abilities – though the effect is brilliantly entertaining.



CARL MARIA VON WEBER

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

## CON BRIO (2008)

'The most important thing in my artistic career is to combine tradition and innovation,' German composer Jörg Widmann has said. And in the way it places Beethoven amid a musical landscape very much of our own times, you could hardly find a more appropriate description than that of his 2008 orchestral piece *Con brio*. The piece's title means 'with vigour', and it was one of Beethoven's favourite markings on his scores, encapsulating the bristling energy and heroism that mark out much of his music. Widmann's *Con brio* was one of six pieces commissioned by the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra to accompany a complete cycle of Beethoven's symphonies – it was intended for a concert featuring the Seventh (which you'll hear later this evening) and Eighth.

And accordingly, the piece represents a restless interplay between Beethoven's musical language and Widmann's own, more contemporary sounds. Sometimes it's Widmann's provocative gestures that seem to intrude on Beethoven's musical world. At other times, however, it's Beethoven-style sounds that emerge from Widmann's more dissonant, colouristic soundscape. The result brings in tongue-in-cheek humour, mischievous wit, and also a kind of volatile energy verging at times on deranged frenzy.

*Con brio* begins with timpani strokes and decisive orchestral chords, both of which will play crucial roles throughout the piece. Instruments are propelled by the music's unstoppable energy to generate their own jagged, dissonant lines, or to multiply in filigree detail, or simply to break down into half-heard flutterings and mutterings. A sudden speed-up kicked off by lyrical woodwind figures propels us towards the work's mysterious, skittering ending, which sounds like an enormous machine winding down until it grinds to a halt.

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

## THREE SHADOW DANCES

(2013)

Echo-Tanz  
(Under) Water Dance  
Danse africaine

We remain with Widmann the composer, but return to the clarinet for tonight's next work. And like Weber in his Quintet two centuries earlier, in his *Three Shadow Dances*, Widmann seems intent on showcasing the technical prowess of his performer (who, tonight, is himself), as well as gently prodding at perceptions of what his instrument can do.

Widmann wrote these three brief pieces in 2013, with the intention, he says, of encouraging other clarinetists to explore unusual playing techniques in a playful way. Accordingly, there are a whole range of unusual techniques on display – and quite a lot of playfulness, too. Widmann's opening *Echo-Tanz* (Echo Dance) might sound like an experimental jazz solo, with unusual, ear-tweaking tunings, slides, tongue slaps and ghostly multiphonics, where the clarinetist magically plays more than one note at once. His *(Under) Water Dance* is strange and otherworldly, imagining the clarinet playing while submerged, its veiled, bubbling sounds caught distantly from the surface of the water. The concluding *Danse africaine* (African Dance) transforms the clarinet into a percussion instrument, with key clicks and rhythmic breathing effects punctuating its more conventional sounds. And you surely won't miss what Widmann describes as "elephant calls" as the piece heads towards its extrovert conclusion.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

## **SYMPHONY NO.7** **IN A, OP.92** (1812)

Poco sostenuto – Vivace  
Allegretto  
Presto – Assai meno presto  
Allegro con brio

We close tonight's concert with one of the very pieces that inspired Jörg Widmann's *Con brio*. In his Seventh Symphony, Beethoven seems to focus on rhythm as pure energy, an unstoppable force, something from which all else flows.

Richard Wagner famously described the Symphony as "the apotheosis of the dance itself: it is dance in its highest aspect, the loftiest deed of bodily motion, incorporated into an ideal mould of tone".

Compared with his earlier symphonies – certainly the bucolic picture-painting of the *Pastoral*, No.6 – it's one of Beethoven's most abstract and story-less symphonies, unless that 'story' is about the inner workings of music itself. And it's in those terms that Beethoven focuses so decisively on rhythm, deriving from that fundamental musical element a work that feels like a celebration of energy and positivity.

It's ironic, then, that Beethoven wrote it during one of the most difficult periods in his life. His deafness was growing steadily worse, and in 1811 he came down with a serious fever, as a cure for which his doctor sent him to the Bohemian spa town of Teplice for several stays. It was during these visits that he worked seriously on his new symphony.

Beethoven himself conducted its first performance, on 8 December 1813 in Vienna, at a benefit concert for Austrian and Bavarian troops wounded in the Battle of Hanau, an encounter that forced Napoleon's retreat. The concert was one of the high points of the composer's career – the event proved so popular, in fact, that it was repeated the following January, and again in February. The Seventh Symphony went down well – the audience demanded an encore of the second movement – but the concert's wild acclaim really came for another piece. The anti-Napoleon Wellington's Victory clearly captured the mood of the moment, but its popularity hasn't survived changes in taste.

Nonetheless, the Symphony's energy and positivity must have matched the celebratory mood, too. As must the propulsive rhythmic drive that pushes its music ever onward, even in its not-very-slow 'slow' movement. The Symphony's slowest music, in fact, comes right at the start, in the introduction to its first movement, although the loud chords that interrupt that opening hint at the energy about to be unleashed. The repeated long-short-long rhythm that leads into the movement's main, faster section quickly comes to dominate, as Beethoven plays inventive games with its perky main theme. The second movement's persistent long-short-short rhythm provides an implacable tread that's too quick to be a funeral march or dirge, even if the music has something of that character. The movement has maintained a remarkable life ever since its premiere, cropping up in movies as diverse as *X Men: Apocalypse* and *The King's Speech*, often symbolising a strange mix of nobility and dread, an inescapable unfolding of events.





LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

The third movement is a bright and bouncing scherzo whose unstoppable rhythm is simply a barrage of notes in three time. And if you felt there was any restraint holding back the Symphony's first three movements, Beethoven lets rip entirely in the blazing energy and wild, whirling motion of his finale.

Programme notes © David Kettle

"it is dance in its highest aspect, the loftiest deed of bodily motion, incorporated into an ideal mould of tone."

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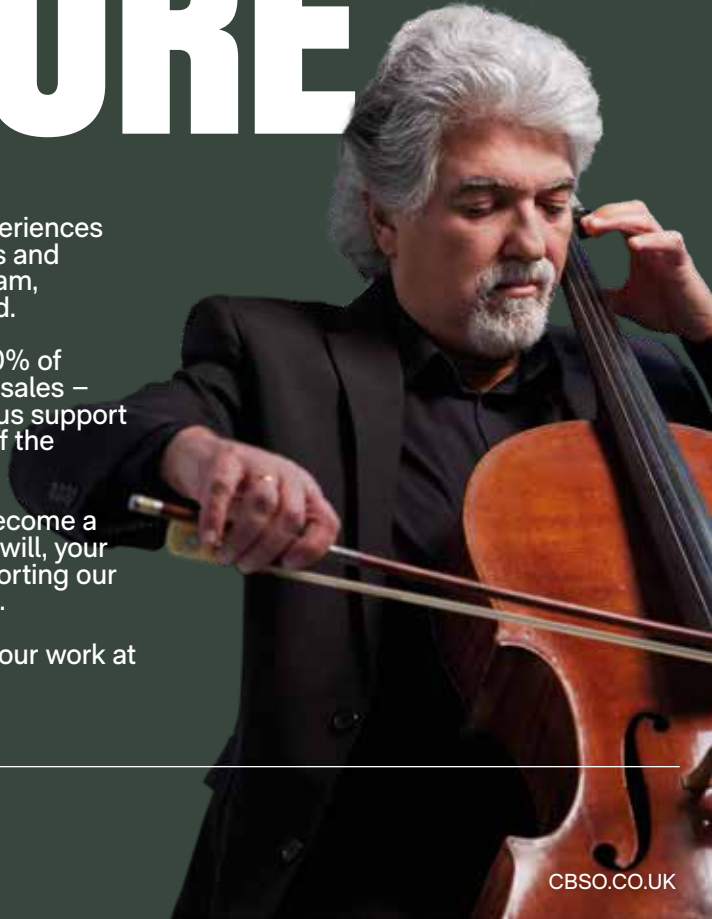
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# JÖRG WIDMANN

Jörg Widmann is considered one of the most versatile and intriguing artists of his generation. The 2022/23 season sees him appear in all facets of his work, including as Visiting Composer and Conductor with the Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo and the National Symphony Orchestra Taiwan, as Artist in Residence at Concertgebouw Amsterdam's Zaterdag Matinée, Alte Oper Frankfurt and de Singel in Antwerp. Continuing his intense activities as a conductor this season, Jörg Widmann collaborates with orchestras including Konzerthausorchester Berlin, Mozarteumorchester Salzburg, Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Barcelona Symphony orchestras as well as Radio Filharmonisch Orkest Amsterdam. He also continues his longstanding chamber music partnerships with renowned artists such as Daniel Barenboim, Tabea Zimmermann, Sir András Schiff, Denis Kozhukhin and the Schumann and Hagen Quartets. Widmann studied clarinet in Munich and at the Juilliard School in New York, and later became himself professor of clarinet and composition, first at University of Music Freiburg and since 2017 as Chair professor for composition at the Barenboim-Said Academy, Berlin.



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