

BRAHMS 3

GBSO

City of
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Symphony
Orchestra



Brahms 3
Symphony Hall
Wednesday 1 November, 2023
7:30pm

Concert programme £4

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, one wouldn't necessarily consider there to be much of an underlying philosophical or aesthetic connection between Ligeti and Brahms; one being the firebrand modernist of late 20th Century musical expression, and the other considered to be the staunch gatekeeper of classical structures and traditions of the 19th century.

Both Brahms and Ligeti lived during momentous moments of musical development and were constantly confronted by the almost puristic ideas of the more ardent modernists, whose gaze was fixed firmly on the future, often with a disregard for the past.

Ligeti on the other hand drew enormous inspiration from historical musical styles and often chose to ground his ideas in "traditional" contexts. Take the frameworks of "Passacaglia" or "Hocket", two particularly baroque or even medieval forms which adorn the titles of 2 of his movements here.

Even the boldness to call the piece a "Violin Concerto", rather than bestow a purely abstract title is revealing. For Ligeti it was important for his music to be understood in the context of the past from which it had evolved. Evolution and regeneration, rather than a scorching of the fertile ground that came before him.

Brahms too found great inspiration from such composers as Bach and Schutz, and the gorgeous and reflective 3rd Symphony have more than a passing allusion to the chorale preludes or the sacred choral music of these past masters who Brahms had so assimilated into his own musical language.

His idea of musical evolution was to mine the rich history which he had inherited to find expression for himself in new contexts such as the symphony or chamber music.

Opening our concert is a work of one considered to be the father of the Symphony - Joseph Haydn. Haydn was revered for his purity of form and effortless invention, both gloriously evident in his Symphony No.96.

Haydn, Symphony No.96 (Miracle)

21mins

Ligeti, Violin Concerto

29mins

Interval

Brahms, Symphony No.3

37mins

Nicholas Carter, Conductor

Carolyn Widmann, Violin

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BRAHMS 3

“Free but Happy” was Brahms’s motto, and he coded it into the very notes of his lovely Third Symphony. Back in the 18th century, meanwhile, Haydn’s 96th Symphony was such a hit with the British public that they called it a “miracle”. Conductor Nicholas Carter shows you why tonight, and joins violinist Carolin Widmann in the sonic wonderland of Ligeti’s Violin Concerto. Expect sounds like you’ve never imagined.

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

HAYDN SYMPHONY NO.96 (MIRACLE)

- I Adagio. Allegro
- II Andante
- III Menuetto: Allegretto
- IV Finale: Vivace

Without wishing to make anyone nervous, it was believed that the reason for this symphony’s subtitle is that during its premiere in London a chandelier fell from the ceiling. Haydn’s biographer Albert Dies reported it was a ‘miracle’ nobody was hurt: the seats directly under the chandelier had been vacated, as the audience had surged forward to get a better look at Haydn. It may be a relief that this in fact happened at the premiere of Symphony 102 four years later, and Dies’s recollection had become confused. But his account speaks to the popularity of Haydn with audiences in London, where Haydn spent two productive and enjoyable visits in the 1790s (as he wrote to a friend, ‘My arrival caused a great sensation...Everyone wants to know me.’) For the previous thirty years he had been working for the royal Esterhazy family as a court musician. After the death of the

Prince in 1790, he was free to travel and for the first time he was writing music not for a noble gathering, but for a discerning paying audience. Concert tickets in London were within the means of the (mostly) middle-class attendees - according to Haydn, a ticket cost 10 shillings, about the same price as a turkey.

The ‘miracle’ symphony went down like a storm at its premiere with calls for an encore of the second and third movements. It is in an extrovert and optimistic D major, a favourite symphonic key for Haydn. After a slow, rather sombre introduction the mood becomes brisk and energetic, with celebratory bursts from the trumpets and timpani. The central section flirts with a darker side, but can’t dispel the cheerfulness for long. The second movement is graceful and dance-like, providing a kind of mini-concerto for the solo violin and a starring role for the oboe. The oboe takes the spotlight again in the central section of the elegant ‘Minuetto,’ a charming Viennese-style waltz. The finale begins in a hushed, urgent way as if the players are whispering among themselves. Again, solo woodwind have their moment in the sun, before the full orchestra, complete with the triumphant trumpets, concludes this celebratory piece.

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

LIGETI VIOLIN CONCERTO

- I Vivace luminoso
- II Aria, Hoquetus, Choral. Andante
- III Intermezzo. Presto
- IV Passacaglia. Lento intenso
- V Appassionato. Agitato molto

György Ligeti was born in Transylvania, conscripted into the army under the Nazis, then fled to Hungary only to endure another authoritarian regime. He finally escaped to the west in 1956 by hiding in a mail train. In the following years he created huge, expansive pieces packed with a bewildering range of influences, and – perhaps understandably – a powerful sense of urgency. His Violin Concerto has been described as a ‘wild collage of atmosphere and colours’, and it is influenced by folk music from Hungary and Bulgaria, as well as by Renaissance and medieval song. It contains intriguing combinations of instruments and unusual effects. Swanee whistles and ocarinas make surprising appearances, while several of the string instruments are retuned, creating an eerie discord with their fellow players.

It is in five contrasting movements, each featuring a cinematic ‘montage’ of sonic landscapes (Ligeti’s music has frequently been used in soundtracks to films, famously those of Stanley Kubrick). The soloist introduces the first movement, gently at first, before embarking on some hectic scrambling up and down the strings, imitated by the rest of the string section. Percussion instruments periodically join in, providing a kind of punctuation: marimba, vibraphone, glockenspiel and finally gong. Some folk-like rhythms briefly pass through the texture, before an eerie slide from the timpani at the end, like distant thunder, closes the movement. The second movement features some beautiful, soulful melodies for the soloist, softly accompanied by other instruments. Alongside there are some

"Ligeti's Violin Concerto has been described as a 'wild collage of atmosphere and colours.'"

extraordinary quartets for ocarina (an unusual ceramic instrument, that can look like a small hairdryer or a potato depending on the type), joined later by swanee whistle. In the short, punchy third movement, woodwind and strings seem to imitate flights of birds, whirling around the soloist and a perilously high trombone.

The Passacaglia movement has a quality of meditative stillness to begin with, the slow-moving wind and brass instruments sounding like a church organ. Even as the movement gathers in energy, this chorale-like music continues throughout, overlaid by periodic stabs and shrieks from different parts of the orchestra. In the Appassionata movement, as elsewhere in the Concerto, contrasting textures and sounds are thrown up against each other, or played simultaneously. Some thunderous percussion and low strings usher in a passage sounding like a spooky folk-dance, full of jagged rhythms. More contrasts follow, before the violinist takes the floor with a cadenza which Ligeti leaves up to the soloist to improvise – a bravura ending to an astonishing work.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

BRAHMS SYMPHONY NO.3

- I Allegro con brio
- II Andante
- III Poco allegretto
- IV Allegro – un poco sostenuto

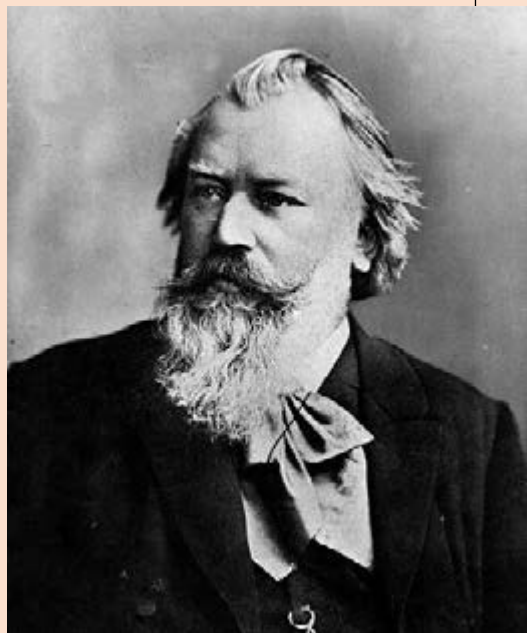
In the first ever episode of *Fawlty Towers*, the beleaguered hotel manager Basil attempts a moment of repose in his office by putting on some music. His disapproving wife, calling him back to his duties, declares it to be a 'racket': 'It's Brahms!' replies Basil. 'Brahms' Third Racket!'. Basil only has the chance to hear the noble opening chords of Symphony no. 3 but it is easy to understand why he might have turned to this particular piece to take a breath. It is considered to be one of the most 'perfect' of Brahms' symphonies: shorter than the others, but perfectly formed and with a brilliant control of momentum throughout.

Brahms composed it over the course of just a few months in 1883 at the age of fifty. In October of that year he played the first and last movements to fellow composer Dvořák, who raved about its beauty and abundance of melody (the third movement features one of Brahms' most celebrated tunes). It is, overall, in F major but even from the opening bars, it shifts restlessly from major to minor, giving a melancholy edge to the brighter passages and an optimistic sheen to the darker sections. Brahms has the confidence not to race towards a dramatic conclusion at any time: each movement ends gently, even the turbulent finale.

The orchestral texture constantly shifts, creating a multitude of different sound worlds. For example, in the opening movement, the orchestra clears a space for a glorious horn solo, joined by another horn, before re-gathering for a repeat of the opening material. The trumpets have a breather during the second movement, while the woodwind and strings share a gentle call-and-response theme, given

spice by a sinuous passage in a minor key. The third movement's famous tune has the quality of a regretful love song (Serge Gainsbourg pinched it for his song 'Baby Alone in Babylone'). Again, there is a disconcerting central passage off-setting the lyrical nature of the rest, but the end of this movement is pure (possibly doomed) romance. The fourth movement begins with a rumbling energy, before borrowing a theme from the second movement then embarking on the most fiery music of the whole symphony. As before, the mood is undercut by contrast as a surprisingly cheery melody intervenes, and becomes the material of the movement's final section. Before concluding, the chords from the start appear once more, to brilliant effect, in amongst some gorgeous, shimmering effects in the strings. The final bars are as noble and inspiring as the first.

Programme notes © Lucy Walker



RICHARD WAGNER, 1871.
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Conductor

NICHOLAS CARTER



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Most recently celebrated for his conducting of Brett Dean's *Hamlet* and Britten's *Peter Grimes* at the Metropolitan Opera, Nicholas Carter is one of the leading opera conductors of the younger generation. Since 2021 he has been Chief Conductor and Co-Operndirektor of Bühnen Bern, following his positions as Kapellmeister at the Staatsoper Hamburg and the Deutsche Oper Berlin, and as Chefdirigent of the Stadttheater Klagenfurt and the Kärntner Sinfonieorchester from 2018 to 2021. Serving as Principal Conductor of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra from 2016 to 2019, Carter has since been in international demand in the symphonic field. His extensive operatic repertoire ranges from Mozart, Verdi, Wagner and Strauss to Russian and French works and contemporary composers such as Brett Dean, with whom he has a close artistic relationship. Alongside regular collaborations with Australia's leading symphony orchestras, Carter's recent and forthcoming highlights include appearances with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Métropolitain, Orchestre Symphonique de Québec, among many others.

CAROLIN WIDMANN

A wonderfully versatile musician, Carolin Widmann's activities span the great classical concerti, new commissions specially written for her, solo recitals, a wide variety of chamber music and, increasingly, period instrument performances, including play/direction from the violin. Recent highlights include Carolin's debuts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic with Esa-Pekka Salonen, Scottish Chamber Orchestra with Maxim Emelyanychev, Munich Philharmonic, Dresden Philharmonic, Barcelona Symphony and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester with Robin Ticciati, her New York debut play/directing the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, as well as returns to the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra at the Musikverein, and the WDR Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Cologne. The 2023-24 season will see Carolin return to the Berliner Philharmoniker and Royal Stockholm Philharmonic to perform Jörg Widmann's Violin Concerto No. 2. She will also appear with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Musikkollegium Winterthur, Filarmonica Toscanini, NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover, Netherlands Radio Symphony, Polish National Radio Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, Oregon Symphony, the Schwetzingen SWR Festspiele and the Prague Spring International Music Festival.



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Simply visit cbsoco.uk/membership to sign up online, or call Rachel Cooper on **0121 616 6510**.

We look forward to welcoming you to the family!



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