

ORCHESTRAL CONCERT

Aeolian Sinfonia of North London - Thursday 30th November 2023, 8pm

Our Lady's Hall, Our Lady Help of Christians Parish Centre, Falkland Road, Kentish Town, London NW5 2XT

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847): The Fair Melusine: Overture

This piece was written in 1833 as a birthday gift for Mendelssohn's sister Fanny and in partial fulfilment of a commission for the London Philharmonic Society. It was designed as an overture to an opera by Conradin Kreutzer, a project which had been rejected by Beethoven; Mendelssohn thought he could do better than Kreutzer had. The opera was inspired by a popular legend from medieval European folklore. Melusine was a water-nymph who married Count Raymond on condition that he never entered her room on a Saturday, on which day she became a mermaid. Ultimately, curiosity caused the knight to break his promise with the result that Melusine returned to the water for evermore. The overture was first performed in London in April 1834 by the Philharmonic Society orchestra but was not a great success. On Fanny's suggestion, Mendelssohn revised it, and the revised version was published in 1836.

Broadly in sonata form, the piece opens with rippling themes suggestive of water, introduced by the clarinet and taken up by other winds and strings. It is thought to have influenced Wagner's depiction of the Rhine in *Das Rheingold*. The serene atmosphere is interrupted by a stormy section with dynamic rhythms, followed by an elegant second theme in more romantic mode. Midway Melusine returns to the sea for a Saturday sojourn. A dramatic climax depicts the discovery of her true nature and the piece ends as it began with her returning to her watery home.

Sergei Sergeievich Prokofiev (1891-1953): Symphony No 1 in D major, Op 25.

Allegro; Larghetto; Gavotte: Non troppo allegro; Finale: Molto vivace

Prokofiev composed his short 'Classical Symphony' mostly in the country between 1916-17, away from the misery and turbulence of the city. A recent graduate of the St Petersburg Conservatory, his intention was to write something in a neo-classical style of Haydn and Mozart, to 'tease the geese' as he put it. As Calvin Dotsey writes, "With its impish sense of humor, impeccable craftsmanship and charming melodies, it has remained one of his most popular works." Despite being a brilliant pianist, Prokofiev also made the decision to compose away from the piano as an experiment, to foster transparent orchestral colours. The premiere was delayed on account of the Bolshevik revolution of February 1917 but took place under his baton in April the following year. He reports that he had forgotten the score and not studied it from a conducting perspective but that the State Orchestra enjoyed playing it and that it was huge success. A few weeks later he left Russia, not returning until many years later. As Harlow Robinson comments, the work can be seen as a kind of musical requiem for the imperial, refined city of his youth.

The first movement is a snappy allegro in sonata form, with a bright, dynamic main theme. The second theme is simpler and delicate, a fifth higher in accordance with classical rules, on violins with large two-octave grace note leaps and a bassoon accompaniment. The tumultuous, witty development section has lots of surprising harmonic changes before a straightforward reprise, which nevertheless starts off in the 'wrong key'.

The more relaxed Larghetto showcases a lyrical melody, with trills and lilting figures, played high in the violins, later joined by the flute. The second theme begins with semi-quavers on the bassoon, later joined by other winds, brass and timpani. With contrasting episodes, the main melody returns twice with various harmonies and accompaniments.

A baroque Gavotte in 4/4 with two prominent upbeats replaces the more usual Minuet as the third movement. Written earlier, this also has a joking, tongue-in-cheek tone, with grotesque grace notes on the bassoon, octave leaps in the melody and clashing major triads. The pastoral trio section has a musette-style bass drone.

Prokofiev rewrote the Finale, after hearing that there was no joy in Russian music. It is fast, exuberant and scintillating in sonata form, with plenty of quirky turns. Three themes can be detected with certain symmetrical features. The development section jumps around harmonically, eschewing minor triads, always remaining in the major. There are virtuoso parts for flutes and oboes. Prokofiev reports that he was hugging himself with delight all the time he was composing it. He didn't have to play it!

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 –1827): Symphony No 8

Allegro vivace e con vivo; Allegretto scherzando; Tempo di menuetto; Allegro vivace

Beethoven's "little symphony in F" was composed in four months in 1812 but not premiered until 1814 in Vienna. Despite becoming increasingly deaf, Beethoven insisted on conducting it; it is reported that the orchestra largely ignored his ungainly gestures and followed the leader instead. The whole symphony is like a scherzo, full of jokes to listeners familiar with musical form and symphonic conventions: Sections begin or end in the 'wrong' key, the strong beat shifts in position, and there are rhythmic, harmonic and dynamic surprises.

The first movement is in sonata form with a fairly substantial coda. The opening eight-bar Haydnesque theme is unusually 'interrupted' by four bars on the clarinets. Syncopated sforzandi land in D major in the strings instead of the expected dominant key of C. The second dance-like theme returns to C (in the winds). There are strident hemiolas (duple cross-rhythms in what is ostensibly triple time) and octave leaps, a recurrent motif of the symphony. Excitement builds with violent interruptions and stark accents. After some uncertainty we finally reach the tonic key and the recapitulation of the opening theme fortissimo without the 'interruption'. The coda contains dramatic pauses and thumping chords, but the movement finishes quietly with a snippet of the opening theme.

The expressive markings of the second and third movements (scherzando and tempo di menuetto respectively) lead Wagner to suggest their order should be reversed, since a slow movement is typically followed by a scherzo. The short second movement in the subdominant key of Bb major is in sonatina form, i.e. it lacks a development section, consisting just of section A, a variation on section A and a coda. It is characterised by a 'sempre staccato ostinato' ticking motive. It has been suggested that it is a parody of the metronome, which had recently been improved by Beethoven's friend Johann Maelzel, but is more likely inspired by Haydn's Clock Symphony. The first theme is delicate; the second more vigorous and contains hemi-demi-semi-quavers and delightful interchanges between instruments. The rapid passages are played fortissimo by the whole orchestra at the end of the short theatrical coda.

The third movement is in ternary form. The thumping sforzandi at the beginning are hardly typical of a scherzo but the beautiful trio section for horns and clarinet, containing the only melodic writing in the symphony, greatly impressed Stravinsky. It is noteworthy for being the first occasion in which a clarinet played a high G6 (in the third octave above middle C).

The fourth, most substantial, movement is in sonata rondo form. Atypically the timpani are tuned an octave rather than a fifth apart – to underline the octave motif, which occurs at intervals during the movement. The movement is characterised by semitone key shifts. The first example is at the end of the first theme, where a 'rogue' syncopated fortissimo C# occurs instead of the expected dominant key of C. (Its significance is revealed later.) Then the second theme begins in A flat major instead of G, the expected dominant of C. The exposition ends in the tonic instead of the conventional dominant. The coda is 'too long'. The third appearance of the C# pushes the music into F# – again a semitone higher than it should be. The music then lurches down into F, emphasized by trumpets and timpani. The two themes reappear and the end of the movement is clearly signalled by octave timpani and repeated fully orchestrated F major chords.

The music should finish well before 9.30pm. At the end of the concert, please stay for refreshments. We are grateful to Father John Deehan, Liliana and Our Lady Help of Christians Church, to Richard and Rose from SankTus for publicity and refreshments, to Liz Valentine for writing programme notes and to various members of other local orchestras and the wider music community for their help in putting on this concert. Please, before you leave, donate generously to the **SankTus Welfare Project**, which provides help to homeless and vulnerable people, the elderly and those with support needs in the local community. The cost of providing these valuable services is currently rising sharply. You can make a cash donation in the hall before you leave, or send a donation using the instructions found on the website sanktus.org

Aeolian Sinfonia of North London, active for many years, was conducted for most of these by the late Roy Budden, who founded the orchestra at least thirty-five years ago as the Kensington Sinfonia. Known as one of North London's friendliest orchestras, we rehearse on Thursday evenings during school term time. If you know of anyone who would like to join us, we always need string players, and often extra woodwind and brass. Future concerts will be listed at aeoliansinfonia.com - send us a message via the site and ask to be added to our mailing list.

Elizabeth Ann Binks studied at the Guildhall School of Music and was awarded the AGSM and the Salzmann Scholarship. She has worked with the Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic, Scottish Opera, BBC Concert Orchestra and D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, and has led the Virtuosi of London.

Keith Bramich studied conducting with Mary Mogil, Paul Sarcich, Lawrence Leonard, George Hurst, Rodolfo Saglimbeni and Simon Johnson. He joined what's now the Aeolian Sinfonia of North London in 2008. He is also editor of the online magazine classicalmusicdaily.com which celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary on 1 January 2024.

Violin 1

Elizabeth Ann Binks (leader)
Pamela White
Fumiko Mihara
Peng Nian

Violin 2

Donna Chapman
Gita Croft
Sophie Davies
John Rokos

Viola

Richard Clarembaux
Vanessa Hristova
Chris Norden

Cello

Ruth Williams
Simon Hewitt
Jude Olabanji

Flute

Liz Valentine
Helen Barrett

Oboe

David Williamson
Alison Martin

Clarinet

Nick Charles
Nigel Brockmann

Bassoon

Bryan Ogilvie
Naomi Perry

Horn

Ian Baker (alto sax)

Trumpet

Nick Bramald
Anna Hughes

Timpani

Peter Warren

Conductor

Keith Bramich