

RICHARD RODNEY BENNETT (1936–2012)

Celebration (1991)
(5mins)

Celebration was commissioned by the Maryland Symphony Orchestra as a “celebration of its 10th anniversary season”. Dedicated to “the founders, subscribers, and musicians” associated with the orchestra, the work was premiered at Hagerstown, Maryland on 14 March 1992, conducted by the orchestra’s founding artistic director, Barry Tuckwell.

Celebration is audibly influenced by the music of William Walton (1902–1983), to the extent that it could almost be heard as a tribute or even pastiche. Walton’s *Johannesberg Festival Overture* in particular seems to have been a model for the work, although its arresting opening chords are also reminiscent of Britten’s ‘Sunday Morning’ from *Peter Grimes*. *Celebration* functions well as a concert overture, but has been described as a small-scale concerto for orchestra, at once ambitious in scope and self-contained in structure.

For all the influence of Walton, *Celebration* still bears the hallmarks of Richard Rodney Bennett’s style, particularly in its jazz-like harmonies and rhythms; Bennett was an accomplished jazz musician in tandem with his compositional career. As conductor John Wilson, who has recorded *Celebration*, argued: “There are certain harmonic progressions that are absolutely his own – something that can’t be said of a great number of other composers... certain harmonic progressions just could not be anybody else’s but Richard’s.”

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898–1937)

**Concerto in F for piano and
orchestra (1925)**
(33 mins)

Allegro
Adagio – Andante con moto
Allegro agitato

Gershwin spent much of the summer of 1925 composing his Concerto in F, a work commissioned by Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra. Damrosch had been present at the first performance of *Rhapsody in Blue* in February 1924, and he contacted Gershwin the next day to request a concerto. The delay between the commission date and Gershwin starting work on the concerto may be explained by the composer’s Broadway commitments; he was contractually tied to three musicals.

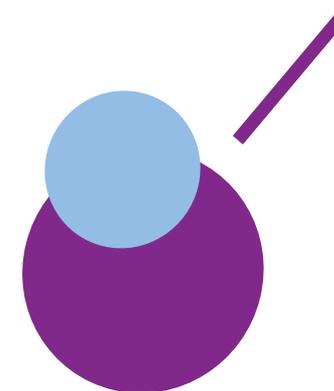
Gershwin’s initial sketches took the form of a two-piano version of the score, originally called the ‘New York Concerto’. He holed himself up in a practice shack at the Chautauqua Institution near Jamestown, with arrangements made that he would not be disturbed each day until 4pm. Gershwin produced the first movement in July, the second in August, and the third in September, with the full orchestration complete by 10 November 1925. *Rhapsody in Blue* had been orchestrated by Ferde Grofé, but Damrosch had requested that

Gershwin orchestrate the concerto himself, which represented a significant step for the composer. Gershwin then paid a 55-piece orchestra to run through the score; Damrosch attended and advised, before undertaking rehearsals with the New York Symphony. The sold-out premiere followed on 3 December 1925 at Carnegie Hall, with Gershwin as soloist.

Gershwin himself described the concerto:

“The first movement employs the Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young enthusiastic spirit of American life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettle drums... The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano. The second movement has a poetic, nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated. The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping to the same pace throughout.”

Interval (20 mins)



SIR WILLIAM WALTON (1902–1983)

**Symphony No. 1 in B flat minor
(1935)**
(43mins)

Allegro assai – Poco meno mosso – A tempo, agitato – Poco meno mosso – Agitato poco a poco – Animato
Scherzo: Presto con malizia
Andante con malinconia
Maestoso – Allegro, brioso ed ardentemente – Vivacissimo – Agitato – Maestoso

Ten days after the premiere of *Belshazzar’s Feast* in 1931, Walton was dining with his publisher, Hubert Foss, and Foss’s wife, Dora. Following the meal, Walton began improvising at the piano, coming up with what Dora described as “a heavenly tune”. This melody would find its way into the slow movement of Walton’s First Symphony. The conductor Sir Hamilton Harty asked Walton to write a symphony early in 1932. By October, Walton was able to report to Foss that the symphony “shows definite signs of being on the move, a little spasmodic perhaps, but I’ve managed to get down about 40 bars.” Progress was hampered by Walton’s involvement with the Baroness

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Imma von Doernberg, with whom he was staying on the shores of Lake Maggiore. Harty huffed to Foss that he should “go over to Switzerland and wrest poor W. W.’s Baroness away from him so that he can stop making overtures to her and do a symphony for me instead!”

The first two movements were finished by the spring of 1933, the slow movement following during the summer. But when the Baroness left Walton for a Hungarian doctor, the composer had even more difficulty progressing with the symphony, and was only able to orchestrate these three movements in 1934. Walton then became involved with a woman 22 years older than him, the Viscountess Alice Wimborne; this new relationship, and work on the film score for *Escape Me Never*, slowed things up yet further. A date was set for the premiere, to be conducted by Harty: 3 December 1934 (nine years to the day after the premiere of Gershwin’s Concerto in F). The finale, for which Walton had begun sketches in 1932, was yet to materialise, so the composer was persuaded by Harty and Foss that the work should be performed incomplete. It was a great success, but Walton was hospitalised soon afterwards, the stress of the preceding years taking its toll.

Early in 1935 Walton returned to the finale, but was still struggling. His friend, the conductor and fellow composer Constant Lambert, recommended the inclusion of a fugue, an intricate, formal structure of interwoven lines. Walton said he’d never written one; Lambert replied that there were “a couple of rather good pages on the subject in Grove’s Dictionary”. The fugue was finished in July, and by August the whole work was, at last, complete. On 13 October Walton played it through for some friends, and the whole symphony, dedicated “To the Baroness Imma Doernberg”, was premiered on 6 November 1935, again conducted by Harty.

The first movement, with its long-held notes, repeated motifs, meandering melodies, and resonant chords, is indebted to Sibelius. The ‘Scherzo’ is lighter, but with a sense of menace emphasised by punchy, syncopated rhythms. The melancholic slow movement recalls Elgar: richly romantic, and building to an impassioned climax.

The finale begins with a sonority that is quintessential Walton: a sweeping flourish answered by quick-fire fanfares. Following this majestic introduction, there is a series of themes heard in rapid succession, and two sections of counterpoint (the second of which is the fugue), after which the opening material is reprised.

Fellow composer John Ireland wrote to Walton: “This is the work of a true Master – unlike any other English symphony, this is the real line of symphonic tradition. It is simply colossal.” Proms conductor Sir Henry Wood told Foss that the work was “truly marvellous”.

Programme notes by Joanna Wyld
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Q&A with John Wilson



Sim Carthy-Clarke

Tonight we’re showcasing a transatlantic programme from Britain and America. What connections between the pieces should listeners look out for in this performance?

The greatest link between the three composers is a mutual admiration and respect for each other; without Walton, Bennett wouldn’t have been able to write *Celebration*; similarly Walton had a sense of indebtedness to Gershwin. The mutual influence these three had on each other is unique.

Gershwin and Walton met each other in the 1920s – do you think Walton’s First Symphony was influenced by Gershwin’s music?

Absolutely. Walton greatly admired Gershwin; he actually wrote a letter to Bennett that discussed Gershwin’s early songs, and one can really get a sense of the respect that Walton felt.

All three of tonight’s composers wrote music for films alongside their purely orchestral works – Walton and Bennett both even recorded soundtracks with us. Are there cinematic elements in tonight’s pieces?

Certainly. The direct and immediately attractive, colourful elements of Walton and Bennett are what make their music ideal for cinema.

In your performances with us you often showcase the music of British composers, from the likes of Finzi, Elgar or Holst. Is there something about the British sound that draws you in? Or is there a particularly British sound or style that you look for from our players?

I find the restraint, melancholy and regret that runs through British music very alluring.

Which upcoming concert in our 2018/19 season would you recommend to people who enjoy this one?

I would recommend Sunday 17 February 2019 as I have limitless admiration for both conductor and soloist [Jakub Hrůša and Denis Kozhukhin]. The concert on Thursday 4 April [Yuri Temirkanov and Denis Matsuev] will be very special too. Temirkanov is a magician who can take pieces heard a million times and change them in the moment into something truly original – thrilling!