

EDWARD ELGAR (1857–1934)

Introduction and Allegro, Op. 47 (1904–05) (14mins)

Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* is something of a paradox. A work of exhilarating, virtuosic buoyancy that seems to unfold in a single spontaneous gesture was actually the hard-won product of self-doubt and depression.

Although at the zenith of his career in 1905 – knighted the previous year, enjoying unprecedented popularity and celebrity in England thanks to works such as *The Dream of Gerontius* and *In The South (Alassio)* – Elgar was troubled by ill health and financial concerns, convinced that his greatest works were behind him. But, approached by the publisher Novello's August Jaeger – inspiration for the 'Nimrod' theme in the composer's *Enigma Variations* – to produce a "brilliant, quick scherzo... a real bring down the house torrent of a thing, such as Bach could write" for the newly-formed London Symphony Orchestra, Elgar returned to work with new vigour, composing the resulting single-movement work for string orchestra and string quartet at speed.

The initial mention of Bach lingers in the work's final structure. It is essentially a piece in the baroque style that sets up a comparison between the full string forces and the solo quartet, which drifts in and out of the textural foreground.

The work is built around opposition and contrast. The sonorous, rhetorical clatter of the opening chords – formal, arresting in their organ-like sonority – gives way to a gentle, almost improvisatory rising motif (described by the composer himself as

"Smiling with a sigh") for the solo quartet, which returns in the 'Allegro', and a solo viola introduces the wistful, folk-like "Welsh theme". Unusually, Elgar eschews any formal "working-out section" in favour of "a devil of a fugue", which eventually leads us back to the opening material of the 'Allegro', re clothed in new splendour by way of a finale.

GEOFFREY GORDON (b. 1968)

Prometheus, A Concerto for Bass Clarinet and Orchestra (after the treatment by Franz Kafka) (2018) (24mins)

Commissioned by the Philharmonia Orchestra

American composer Geoffrey Gordon roams widely across musical genres and forms, writing music for film, ballet and theatre as well as the concert hall. Melody is the touchstone of Gordon's works, driving vivid musical narratives whose drama is shaded and coloured by his rich textural imagination.

In addition to a large body of chamber, choral and vocal works, Gordon has written extensively for orchestra. His instinct for instrumental colour is showcased in concertos for violin, cello, trumpet, trombone and flute, which not only celebrate but sometimes challenge the distinctive voice and musical identity of their solo instrument.

In four contrasting movements, with two cadenzas, Gordon's concerto *Prometheus* presents an intense sonic interpretation of Franz Kafka's retelling of the Prometheus myth, in which the soloist provides the voice of the protagonist, against the

orchestra's evocation of the gods, the eagles and the inexplicable mass of rock.

There are four legends concerning Prometheus:

According to the first, he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second, Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it.

According to the third, his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, the gods forgotten, the eagles, he himself forgotten.

According to the fourth, everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily.

There remained the inexplicable mass of rock. –The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable.

Franz Kafka (1917)

Interval (20 mins)

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872–1958)

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (1910, rev. 1919) (15mins)

Although composed in 1910, Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* can trace its origins back to 1904, when the composer was invited to edit *The English Hymnal* – a project that would

prove uniquely influential for him. Many of the Renaissance and folk melodies the composer first encountered here would resurface in his later music, including the austere beautiful psalm-tune by Tudor composer Thomas Tallis, originally published in Archbishop Parker's 1567 psalter, on which Vaughan Williams based the *Fantasia*.

Commissioned by the Three Choirs Festival, the work's unusual orchestration may have been influenced by Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*, which also formed part of that programme. Vaughan Williams divides his string forces into three ensembles, separated spatially as well as musically. A full-size string orchestra is set against a smaller one, with a solo string quartet providing the third group. The combined effect has often been compared to an organ, swelling into greater and greater sonority as strings are layered more and more thickly on top of one another.

As the 'fantasia' title suggests, the work unfolds freely, without any fixed structural model. Vaughan Williams embellishes and elaborates Tallis's original theme, combining and colliding it with musical ideas of his own, each itself derived from the Tallis. The effect is organic, mesmeric – a continuous unfolding of sound whose wide compass (Vaughan Williams exploits the extremes of the string range) seems to engulf the ear, and whose uneven rhythms give a disorienting sense both of movement and stasis.

At once ancient and modern, spiritual and secular, the work is a potent reimagining of England's musical past that would go on to provide a blueprint for Vaughan Williams's musical present.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)

The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra (1946) (17mins)

Theme, *Tutti: Allegro Maestoso e largamente*
Variation A, Piccolo and Flute: *Presto*
Variation B, Oboes: *Lento*
Variation C, Clarinets: *Moderato*
Variation D, Bassoons: *Allegro alla Marcia*
Variation E, Violins: *Brillante: alla polacca*
Variation F, Violas: *Meno mosso*
Variation G, Cellos: *Lusingando*
Variation H, Double Bases: *Cominciando*
lento ma poco a poco accel. al Allegro
Variation I, Harp: *Maestoso*
Variation J, Horns: *L'istesso tempo*
Variation K, Trumpets: *Vivace*
Variation L, Trombones and Bass Tuba:
Allegro pomposo
Variation M, Percussion: *Moderato*
Fugue – Allegro Molto

"I have a small film to write for the Board of Education..." wrote Benjamin Britten in a letter of 1945. The film in question was *The Instruments of the Orchestra*; conducted and presented by Sir Malcolm Sargent, it was commissioned from Britten as a practical response to a national shortage of music teachers after the Second World War. Sargent and the London Symphony Orchestra would perform a short work intended to introduce children to the different instruments of the symphony orchestra. Alongside the soundtrack itself, Britten also produced a concert version titled (with delicious mock-pomposity) *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and it's this reworking that we hear this afternoon.

1945 marked the 250th anniversary of Henry Purcell's death. Britten's tributes to the 17th-century English composer had already included the Second String Quartet and *The Holy Sonnets*, but it was *The Young Person's Guide* that would provide the most elaborate homage. Taking the lively hornpipe 'Rondeau' from Purcell's incidental music for the play *Abdelazer* as its theme, the work proceeds to explore and unpack it in a sequence of variations, each intended to showcase the character and technical capacity of a particular instrument or group of instruments.

The theme is first introduced by the full orchestra in its stateliest form. But all this musical grandeur and solemnity soon dissolves and individual sections of the orchestra step forward to claim it and make it their own. First we hear it in the woodwind, brightly and lightly baroque, before it is snatched away by the heavy-footed brass. The strings take it up in newly varied, lyrical form, giving the timpani the final word before the concluding statement from the full orchestra.

Britten then begins a sequence of 13 variations, each distinct in mood and character. Purcell's simple theme becomes by turns a lightly sardonic march for bassoons, a dashing, swaggering polonaise in the violins, a passionate aria in the double basses, and a furiously virtuosic fanfare from the trumpets. An athletic fugue brings all the instruments together before the original theme returns, newly embellished with Britten's own fugue melody, for a climactic orchestral restatement.

Programme notes by Alexandra Coghlan with additional paragraph on *Prometheus* by Geoffrey Gordon /Anna Ferro
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Q&A with Laurent Ben Slimane, the Philharmonia Orchestra's Principal Bass Clarinet

What first drew you to the clarinet, and how did you move on to bass clarinet?

The clarinet came to me! The director of my local music school told me that clarinet would be great for me, but in fact he needed clarinets for his wind band!

When I was studying clarinet in Paris with Bruno Martinez, I absolutely fell in love with the bass clarinet, because Bruno had the best sound I had ever heard. I convinced him to teach me, and that was the best decision I have ever taken in my career.

Prometheus is inspired by the Greek legend – what aspects of the story can audiences listen out for in the music?

Kafka divided the story into four parables, and the concerto has four corresponding movements. The listener quickly comes to know the place and the characters. The solo bass clarinet identifies as Prometheus, the falling second heard in the orchestra as the Rock, the orchestra's rhythmic punctuation the Gods and the piercing trumpet figures the eagles.

What was it like working with Geoffrey Gordon?

Before Geoffrey started to write anything, I sent him a list of what I thought would sound great on the bass clarinet but also things I didn't want to play! I really wanted Geoffrey to showcase the velvety, rich and dark sound of this instrument. I also wanted him to use all the qualities of the Philharmonia, its rich sound, fantastic range of dynamics. I really think he achieved it to perfection.

How does it feel to be the first person to play a new piece?

The first word coming into my mind is freedom; being able to put your own stamp on a concerto that has never been played



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before is an indescribable feeling. You aren't tempted to copy any other version, you can just do whatever you want musically – always with the agreement of the composer of course!

Which concerts in our 2018/19 season would you recommend?

I'd highly recommend the concert with Maestro Temirkanov on 4 April. We'll play Shostakovich's Seventh symphony, which has one of the best bass clarinet solos ever written in the second movement.

The other concert I'm excited about is on 28 February with our Principal Conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. It is a fantastic, eclectic programme, as always with Esa-Pekka. I am really looking forward to playing the Berio *Folk Songs* and Donatoni's *ESA*, two pieces I never came across before.

A longer version of this interview is available on our blog: philharmonia.co.uk/blog