

Wednesday 10 December 2014

Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin 8

CONCERT PROGRAMME

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732 - 1809)

Piano Trio No. 39 in G major, Hob. XV/25

I. *Andante*

II. *Poco adagio, cantabile*

III. *Rondo all'Ungarese: Presto*

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809 - 1847)

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49

I. *Molto allegro ed agitato*

II. *Andante con moto tranquillo*

III. *Scherzo: Leggero e vivace*

IV. *Finale: Allegro assai appassionato*

INTERVAL

SALLY BEAMISH (b. 1956)

The Seafarer Trio

PROGRAMME NOTES

by *Emer Nestor and Sally Beamish*

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732 – 1809)

Piano Trio No. 39 in G major, Hob. XV/25

I. *Andante* II. *Poco adagio, cantabile*

III. *Rondo all'Ungharese: Presto*

Towards the end of the eighteenth century London was the largest and economically most vibrant city in the world. Its musical life was a veritable feast of cosmopolitan diversity, enriched by a constant stream of artists from abroad. In 1790 the German violinist and impresario, Johann Peter Salomon (1745 – 1815) invited Haydn to London with an impressive financial offer. As part of the contract, the composer was guaranteed £300 for an opera, £300 for six symphonies, £200 for the rights to publish the latter, £200 for 20 other compositions to be conducted at Salomon's concerts, and £200 profit from a 'benefit' concert. Haydn agreed and immediately immersed himself within the bustling world of English society. His concerts garnered great success, and brought him to the attention of a wealthy widow, Rebecca Schroeter (1751–1826) who requested Haydn to give her piano lessons. During the winter months, the relationship evolved into a passionate affair. Little is known of their association as Schroeter took care to destroy any incriminating correspondence in her writings. However, Haydn was still married at the time, so a full and open union with Schroeter was not possible. It is believed that she remained Haydn's love interest following his return to England in 1795, during which time the Piano Trio in G major was written, with Schroeter as its dedicatee.

Nicknamed the 'Gypsy' or 'Gypsy Rondo' trio because of its finale in Hungarian style, this work was composed in an era in which the piano was becoming an increasingly popular domestic instrument.

This instrument's dominance within the scoring of Haydn's trios led his English publishers to define the genre as 'sonatas for the pianoforte, with an accompaniment of a violin and violoncello'. As a result,

a particular sensitivity to the fluctuating relationships between strings and piano, which Haydn exploits so delicately in his trios, is demanded from its performers.

The elegant first *Andante* movement is a set of double variations in waltz time, which wavers between the shades of major and minor tonality. Its expressive beauty is reflected in the poetic 'lark song' of its opening theme and unassuming harmonic palate. Haydn's second movement, this time in the unexpected key of E major, is a musical portrait of lyrical refinement in its gossamer-like rippling piano triplets, beautifully offset against a rich violin solo with supporting cello. The dramatic climax of the work comes in the form of the energetic *Rondo all'Ungharese: Presto* third movement, which is to be played 'in the Gypsy Style'. Reflections of the opening variations appear in frequent modulations to the minor mode. The almost unrelenting current of sixteenth notes, and festive character, makes for a spirited finale, that was undoubtedly created to bring down the house.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809 – 1847)

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49

I. *Molto allegro ed agitato* II. *Andante con moto*

tranquillo III. *Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace*

IV. *Finale: Allegro assai appassionato*

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s Mendelssohn's elevated status within the realm of German Art Music was compounded by his domination of, what R. Larry Todd refers to as, 'a German-English musical axis' connecting Leipzig and London. Whilst boasting an impressively prolific portfolio of compositions, Mendelssohn was frequently in demand as a conductor throughout Europe. During a sojourn in Frankfurt in the summer months of 1839, he penned his piano trio in D minor — the first important work in that genre since the great trios of Beethoven and Schubert. Premiered in Leipzig in 1840, with its composer

PROGRAMME NOTES *Continued*

at the piano, the Gewandhaus Orchestra's leader, Ferdinand David, and its principal cellist, Franz Carl Wittmann, played the string parts of the trio. Robert Schumann's review of the published score in the *Neue Zeitschrift* declared the work to be the 'master trio of the age', and famously christened Mendelssohn 'the Mozart of the nineteenth century; the most brilliant among musicians; the one who has most clearly recognized the contradictions of the age, and the first to reconcile them'. Since its debut, the piano trio in D minor has remained one of his most beloved, and popular, works within the chamber music repertoire.

The first movement, fashioned in sonata form, opens with a pleading, sweeping, theme in the cello, with the piano's syncopated accompaniment establishing an air of restlessness. The violin enters the musical dialogue in a distorted version of the introductory idea, before dissolving into the second theme in A major. As the melody develops, the piano part takes on a more dramatic role. Its character owes much to the suggestions of Ferdinand Hiller (1811 – 1885), Mendelssohn's friend and fellow composer, who at the time of composition advised Mendelssohn to incorporate some of the then advanced piano technical effects found in the works of Chopin, and Liszt, into the score. This is evident in the piano line's contrapuntal, weaving contours, which are voiced by an array of seemingly endless, dizzying, triplets and arpeggios. The return to the opening theme is particularly beautiful, with the cello's air joined by a haunting, descending melody in the violin. The movement ends dramatically over a superbly intricate cascade of piano triplets.

The piano introduces the lyrical and poignant second movement. Here, the texture of splitting the accompaniment between the hands, with a floating triplet motif in the centre, is reminiscent of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. The bass line moves methodically, taking care not to interfere with the elegant simplicity of the melody. The violin enters with the main musical idea, whilst the cello dialogues, mournfully, in counterpoint. This answer and call interaction continues throughout the movement, as the melodies of the violin and cello become more poignant, before evaporating into their gentle pianissimo close.

A quirky and jagged scherzo encapsulates the third movement. Like the previous *Andante*, the central theme is first announced by the piano, in staccato quaver motifs before the entry of the violin and cello. The three parts engage in a lively, seamless, technical exploration of their instruments. Flickers of angst perturb the middle section briefly, punctuated by staccato piano octaves, and yearning chords, as a foil to the original, playful theme. Nineteenth-century whispers of *sturm und drang* ('storm and stress') waft throughout the score, as the movement comes to its jovial conclusion.

Echoes of the driving sense of equilibrium that dominated the first movement return in the trio's Finale. Punching *Allegro* chords in the piano, announce the jaunty, opening musical idea of the strings. Again, Mendelssohn makes use of split octaves and spiralling arpeggios within the piano accompaniment to propel the motion forward. This serves as an effective contrast to the oftentimes searching character of the violin and cello. The trio ends triumphantly by casting aside the trappings of its minor tonality, and embracing the celebratory key of D major.

SALLY BEAMISH (b. 1956)

The Seafarer Trio

The Seafarer is one of a group of Anglo-Saxon poems found in the Exeter Book, *Codex Exoniensis*. Compiled around 970, it is the largest surviving collection of Old English literature. The poem explores life's apparent futility through the lens of a lone mariner. Richard Marsden describes the work as 'an exhortatory and didactic poem, in which the miseries of winter seafaring are used as a metaphor for the challenge faced by the committed Christian'. Over the expanse of 124 lines, the text leads the reader on a metaphysical odyssey through the meaning of existence and its fateful resolution: death.

The theme of *The Seafarer*, as translated by Charles Harrison Wallace, is the source of inspiration for three of Sally Beamish's compositions to date: the first is for solo violin; the second is for piano trio; and the third is a viola concerto. The trio, scored for narrator,

piano, violin and cello, was commissioned in 2000 for *Summer on the Peninsula*, in collaboration with the painter and printmaker, Jila Peacock. Since its premiere, the work has steadily gathered admiration and recognition within the realm of chamber music.

A solo silhouette of undulating, agitated, waves on the violin introduces Part I. Continuously rising motifs drape across the instrument's register, creating a sense of darkness and despair, as our narrator embarks upon his lament. The pair navigate the stormy seas together, before the forlorn voice dissolves into loneliness. His struggle with exile is captured in fragmented rhythmic motifs, and angular, dissonant lines in the piano and strings. The icy seas and screaming gulls are evocatively portrayed in the piercing upper pitches of the violin, with jarring, spiky chords in the piano. Constant changes in metre create a sense of panic.

A 'hammering heart' theme empowers the second part of the musical plot in which the narrator observes the mysterious attraction of life at sea, despite the trappings of materialistic goods. Part III opens with pizzicato quavers in the cello and piano alluding to a distorted representation of a cuckoo call. A transformation towards the metaphysical has begun. Unnerving, high-voiced violin utterances float above whale-like cello suggestions. Part IV is introduced by a descending solo cello passage. An air of acceptance appears to seep into the more flowing melodic lines. The final part of this unique trio takes the form of prayerful acknowledgment. Hints of a chorale-like texture in the strings, and piano, accompany the narrator towards his conclusion. The specter of hope emerges across a rising figure, first announced in the piano, then continued by the cello and finally, the violin.

by **Emer Nestor**

This is the central work in a group of three Seafarer pieces; the first is for solo violin, and the third is a viola concerto. They are all directly inspired by the translation from the Anglo-Saxon by Charles Harrison Wallace, and follow closely his view of the text, falling into five sections. Various themes reappear throughout, transforming as the music develops. The opening undulating wave motif, shortly followed by spiky hail-like counterpoint and the calls of birds (osprey and tern) are merged in various combinations. A 'hammering heart' theme emerges. The opening of Part III, with a sinister version of a cuckoo call, marks the

beginning of a transformation which culminates at the centre of the piece with eerie otherworldly string music where birds are transformed into banshee-like spirits, hovering as if suspended. Part IV begins with solo cello; the falling third of the cuckoo becomes a mellow elegy. From this point, bleakness almost imperceptibly becomes optimism – a trembling hesitant piano section resolves in a clamour of bells, and thereafter the music anchors itself into a prayer-like 'coming home'.

by **Sally Beamish**