



City of Birmingham
Symphony Orchestra

CENTRE STAGE

THREE TRIOS: BAX, WEINBERG AND DEBUSSY

CBSO Centre, Birmingham

Thursday 18 November 2021, 2pm

Marie-Christine Zupancic – Flute

David BaMaung – Viola

Katherine Thomas – Harp

Bax Elegiac Trio

Weinberg Trio

Debussy Sonata for flute, viola and harp

Arnold Bax (1883-1953)

Elegiac Trio

Moderate tempo – Much slower

It's not unknown for middle-class youngsters from dull English suburbs to affect a new identity; but few can have gone quite as far as Arnold Bax. At the age of 18, this Streatham-born music student opened a volume of W.B. Yeats, and "in a moment the Celt within me stood revealed". His first visit to Ireland some months later was just the start of an extraordinary double life, spending months of each year roaming the Irish countryside and writing poetry and plays under the name Dermot O'Byrne. By the time of the Great War he owned a house outside Dublin and was part of the nationalist literary set headed by Yeats. The poets Padraig Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh accepted Bax as a creative equal without even knowing that he was also a composer. Bax was in England when the Easter 1916 rebellion in Dublin failed, and the damage that it wrought on his romantic vision of Ireland was compounded by personal pain when he learned, in May that year, that Pearse and MacDonagh had been executed for treason along with 13 other leaders of the failed coup.

The Elegiac Trio, written in the late spring of 1916, was Bax's first (but not last) musical response to these events. The flute and (naturally) the harp were the instruments that Bax always associated most closely with Ireland; the viola, the most subdued of string instruments, added the necessary colours of mourning. Yet despite the melancholy title, the Trio is a lyrical, even gentle work - quite without the fierce, dissonant anger of Bax's later commemoration of 1916, his First Symphony (1922). Still too close to the events to be able to articulate the full extent of his pain, Bax laments the loss of his comrades and their dream in the musical language of Celtic romance. The Trio is an extended single-movement rhapsody, and it's neither difficult nor inappropriate to hear the harp as a bardic accompaniment to the echoing, intertwining laments of the flute and viola. Two distinct voices, accompanied by the instrument that symbolised Irish nationhood – well, Bax always described himself as "a brazen romantic" and if we read a very specific symbolism into this work, we can be confident that he (of all composers) would not have objected.

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

Trio Op.127 for flute, viola and harp

Crotchet = 63

Crotchet = 48

Dotted crotchet = 92

Mieczysław Weinberg went by many different names. In Warsaw between the wars, he grew up as Mojsze Wajnberg, the son of a Yiddish-speaking theatre musician in the city's large and lively Jewish community. In 1939 he graduated from the Warsaw Conservatoire, and fled the German invasion in the only direction that seemed possible: to the USSR, where he settled in Moscow. Here, as Moshe Vainberg, he lived and worked for the rest of his life – his roots eradicated by the Nazis, who murdered his entire immediate family. Nor was the USSR a safe haven. Weinberg was persecuted, along with many of Russia's leading composers, by Stalin's propaganda minister Zhdanov. In 1948 his music was banned, and his father-in-law was murdered by state operatives. In 1953, Weinberg himself was arrested and imprisoned on charges of "Jewish bourgeois nationalism". It's unclear whether his release was due to the death of Stalin, or a letter interceding on his behalf from his friend Dmitri Shostakovich.

Weinberg's friendship with Shostakovich was lifelong; he was, he said, Shostakovich's "pupil, his flesh and blood". Shostakovich in turn considered Weinberg "one of the outstanding composers of our time" and would frequently play new works to Weinberg before anyone else had heard them. But by 1979 – the date of this *Trio for flute, viola and harp* – Shostakovich had been dead for four years. It's possible that Weinberg's sense of isolation informed the music, though of course his whole creative life had been shaped by his sense of mourning – for an identity, for a way of life, and for his whole family, as well as millions of fellow-Jews. The expressive power of Weinberg's music often seems to lie in the way it shapes itself around those absences: the things left unfinished or unsaid. But there's sunlight here, as well as shade, and the first movement of the *Trio* begins as a lyrical (if sombre) duet for the viola and flute before the harp enters, throwing shadows that are both playful and (at times) menacing. The outer sections of the central slow movement judder and gasp to chilling effect, but there's an eerie tranquillity too; and the finale opens with the viola striking up a dance. It's vigorous, and sometimes violent, but the final gestures point towards joy rather than sorrow. Weinberg saw his survival as a gift; and his music always allowed at least a crack of light into the darkness. "It is impossible to repay the debt" he told his second wife. "No amount of creative work would ever take me even an inch closer towards paying it off".

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Sonata for flute, viola and harp

Pastorale: Lento, dolce rubato

Interlude: Tempo di minuetto

Finale: Allegro moderato ma risoluto

When we think of the First World War, the music of Debussy is not, generally, our mental soundtrack. And yet Claude Debussy's three final chamber works were as patriotic and determined a response to the Great War as the brashest military march. Debussy's initial reaction to the outbreak of war had been to withdraw from composition outright: "I can neither laugh nor weep while so many of our men heroically face death." Along with 200 other artists in the autumn of 1914 he contributed to *King Albert's Book*, a charity anthology in support of the people of Belgium. That was about it. But Debussy had been diagnosed with cancer of the colon in 1909, and by 1915, his condition was worsening. He would undergo painful and ineffective surgery in December 1915.

Meanwhile, aware that music was the mainspring of his life, he looked for an excuse to compose, and by the summer of 1915 he'd found one: "It would be a form of cowardice to think only of the horrors being committed, without trying to react by creating, to the best of my ability, a little of that beauty against which the enemy rages". He announced a series of six instrumental sonatas, each to be published under the name of "Claude Debussy, musicien français" and intended "as proof, however slight, that, even if there were 30 million Boches, French thought is indestructible". "There are many ways that one can vanquish the enemy" he wrote, in an essay published in 1917 "and it is important, above all, to remember that music is both an admirable and fecund means to do so".

The *Sonata for flute, viola and harp* was completed between September and October 1915. By reverting to the baroque practice of producing a set of "six sonates pour divers instruments", Debussy was reaching back to a time in French music before the influence of Wagner, Beethoven and Mozart (or in other words, Germany). But none of the three sonatas he completed captures the spirit of Rameau and Couperin quite as magically as this one, the second, which he dedicated to his ten-year old daughter Claude-Emma, and which was first performed in Paris on 10 December 1916, with Darius Milhaud playing the viola. The spirit, that is, not the style: this is no pastiche, but a realisation of the ideals of the French baroque in Debussy's own ultra-refined late style (although the writing for harp is more like a transfigured harpsichord part than the sensuous sounds we might expect from so-called "impressionist" music). The three movements cover a remarkable range of instrumental colour. There's a Pastorale (both melancholy and idyllic), a fantastic minuet that Debussy entitles simply Interlude, and a whirling Finale, like a danse macabre in bright sunlight. But the limitless shadings, highlights and subtleties that he draws from his three instruments are simply the medium for the work's equally complex – and far less definable – emotional message. "It is the music of a Debussy I no longer know" wrote the composer. "I don't know whether one should laugh or cry – perhaps both?"