DIGITAL CONCERTS

FRENCH CONNECTIONS

This concert forms part of the CBSO Symphonic Collection, and was filmed in Symphony Hall, Birmingham

Ben Gernon – Conductor
Mary Bevan – Soprano

Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges L’Amant anonyme 10’
Britten Les Illuminations 23’
Haydn Symphony No.84 24’

“I alone hold the key to this wild parade!” And with a dazzling flourish, Benjamin Britten launched Les Illuminations: ten glittering, sensuous songs that sent sparks hurtling into the grey skies of 1940s England. Mary Bevan is the singer today: critics have called her “simply spectacular”, and together with the sheer energy of our guest conductor Ben Gernon, she’s the vibrant heart of a concert that begins with a spirited overture by the composer they called “the Black Mozart” and ends with one of the pieces he would have played in 18th century Paris – an irreverent, deliciously witty symphony by Joseph Haydn. Join us to beat the seasonal blues: this is music to light up even the gloomiest winter day.

This concert is available to view online from Tuesday 30 March to Wednesday 30 June 2021

The CBSO’s digital work has been made possible thanks to generous support from David and Sandra Burbidge, Jamie and Alison Justham, Chris and Jane Loughran, John Osborn, and Arts Council England’s Culture Recovery Fund.

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Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-99)

L’Amant anonyme: Overture

Many tales have been told about Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, yet the simple facts are extraordinary enough. He was born in the French Caribbean colony of Guadeloupe, the son of a French planter and an African slave. He was taken to France and expensively educated, emerging first as a dazzling swordsman, and later, in the 1770s, as a highly skilled violinist and composer (he may have studied with the composer Jean-Marie Leclair, but this, like many anecdotes about Saint-Georges, is disputed). What’s certain is that by 1769, he was playing in Paris’ leading orchestra, the Concert des Amateurs. A bustling, headstrong opening movement uses the Conventional, first performed in March 1780 at the private theatre of Saint-Georges’ aristocratic patron, the Marquise de Montesson. He duelled in London with the cross-dressing diplomat the Chevalier d’Eon, he raised and led his own regiment in the French revolutionary wars, and narrowly escaped the guillotine. Portraits of Saint-Georges were widely sold in his own lifetime; and in the 19th century he was even the subject of a best-selling novel (the source of some persistent myths). There’s no evidence that he had any dealings with Mozart during the period in the 1770s when they were both in Paris, but as leader of the Concerts de la Loge Olympique in the 1780s – an orchestra managed by, and comprising freemasons – he took an active part in commissioning the six Paris Symphonies from Haydn in 1784, and almost certainly directed their premieres.

And if none of his own music is familiar today – well, in that respect posthent has treated him exactly the same as Gossec, Leclair, Leduc, Capron, Sterkel, Candeille, Toeschi and almost all of the other composers who dominated French concert life in the 1780s. Likewise his six operas, of which the comedy L’Amant anonyme – a drama of secret identities and lovers separated by social convention, first performed in March 1780 at the private theatre of Saint-Georges’ aristocratic patron, the Marquise de Montesson – is the only one to survive in its entirety. It opens with a sinfonia (overture) that doubles as a concise three-movement symphony (Saint-Georges later had it performed as one at the Concert des Amateurs). A bustling, headstrong opening movement uses the most up-to-date techniques – tremolando, crescendos – to build a sense of anticipation. Bassoons quietly underpin the elegant melancholy of the central Andante, before a boisterous and brilliant finale sweeps us towards the moment when the curtain rises and the action starts. Saint-Georges knew exactly what he was doing – this is music by a man of fashion, feeling and quite irresistible flair.

Benjamin Britten (1913-76)

Les Illuminations, Op.18

Fanfare – Marine
Villes – Interlude
Phrase – Being Beauteous
Antique – Parade
Royauté – Départ

Sophie Wyss, the soprano who gave the first performance of Les Illuminations and to whom the work is dedicated, recalled a conversation with Britten in 1938 and his excitement on discovering the writings of Arthur Rimbaud, to which he had just been introduced by WH Auden. “He was so full of this poetry that he just couldn’t stop talking about it.... He was eager to set it to music.”

Britten was so eager to create a song cycle to prose-poems from Rimbaud’s Les Illuminations that he got to work immediately – and, on at least two counts, recklessly. For one thing he had little experience in setting French words to music, which is a very specialised art. For another, Rimbaud’s poetry was inspired in some respects by his homosexuality, as Auden was aware of course, and it was a risk for a young composer at that time to associate himself with it. In the event, perhaps because the poems are written in fairly obscure French and certainly because of some judicious cutting, there was no scandal either when Sophie Wyss sang Being Beauteous and Marine with John Hock and his string orchestra in Birmingham in 1939, or when she gave the first complete performance with the Boyd Neel Orchestra in the Wigmore Hall early in 1940. On the contrary – in spite of the composer’s controversial absence in America, where he had completed the work in October 1939 – reactions were generally very favourable.

Given a score of such evident genius, entirely worthy of that of the teenage poet, reactions could scarcely have been otherwise. When, in the opening Fanfare, Rimbaud proclaims that he alone has the key to his fevered visions, Britten establishes the harmonic key to the whole work – actually a conflict of two keys in the brilliantly simulated trumpet fanfares on B flat on the violas and E major on violins.

The composer described Rimbaud’s Villes as an “impression of chaotic modern city life.” Rather than attempting to mirror each of a flood of poetic images, he sustains an equivalent surge of activity in a succession of ostinatos on different rhythmic figures until, at the end, he relaxes the dynamic pressure to reflect what he called “a prayer for a little peace.” The short but magical Phrase, poised on harmonics as tenuous as the poet’s golden chains, leads by way of a downwards swoop on the word “danse” to Antique – a sensuous near-waltz in B flat recalling one key element of Parade and featuring an intimate relationship between the voice and a solo violin. The other key element is recalled in the resplendent E major harmonies applied with ceremonial double-dotted rhythms to the happy couple in Royauté. The fanfares persist, now in a radiant A major, in the shimmering seascape of Marine.

Programme note © Richard Bratby
Interlude – which recalls the words of the opening Fanfare, “J’ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage,” in a far less exuberant mood than when they were first uttered – is, according to Britten, “a reproof for the exaggeratedly ecstatic mood of Marine.” Certainly, a necessary calm is established for the dreamily erotic, melodically inspired contemplation of Being Beauteous, which (dedicated to Peter Pears) is surely the most revealing as well as the most beautiful song in the whole cycle. The exuberance of “J’ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage” is restored as confidence returns at the end of Parade, a Mahlerian march of grotesque imagery which would have been even more disturbing if a cut had not been made in Rimbaud’s text here. Départ goes off at a harmonic tangent to the rest of the work, suggesting a reluctance to leave rather than a definitive departure.

Programme note © Gerald Larner

Les Illuminations
Texts by Arthur Rimbaud

Fanfare
J’ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage.

Villes
Ce sont des villes! C’est un peuple pour qui se sont montés ces Alleghanys et ces Li-bans de rêve! Ce sont des villes! Des chalets de cristal et de bois se meuvent sur des rails et des poulies invisibles. Les vieux cratères ceints de colosses et de palmeriers de cuivre rugissent mélodieusement dans les feux. Ce sont des villes! Des cortèges de Mabs en robes rousses, opalines, montent des ravines. Là-haut, les pieds dans la cas-cade et les ronces, les cerfs tettent Diane. Les Bacchantes des banlieues sanglotent et la lune brûle et hurle. Vénus entre dans les cavernes des forgerons et des ermites. Ce sont des …

Phrase
J’ai tendu des cordes de clocher à clocher; des guirlandes de fenêtre à fenêtre; des chaînes d’or d’étoile à étoile, et je danse.

Antique
Gracieux fils de Pan! Autour de ton front couronné de fleurettes et de baies, tes yeux, des boules précieuses, remuent. Tachées de lies brunes, tes joues se creusent. Tes crocs luisent. Ta poitrine ressemble à une cithare, des tintinnabulations circulent dans tes bras blonds. Ton cœur bat dans ce ventre où dort le double sexe. Promène-toi, la nuit, en mouvant doucement cette cuisse, cette seconde cuisse et cette jambe de gauche.

Royauté

And during one whole morning; whilst the crimsoned hangings festooned the houses, and during the whole afternoon, as they headed for the palm gardens, they were indeed monarchs.

Programme note © Gerald Larner
Chariots of silver and copper —
Prows of steel and silver —
Thrash the foam —
Rip up the bramble roots.
The streams of the wasteland, and the huge ruts of the ebb-tide
flow away in a circle toward the east, toward the pillars of the forest, toward the piles of the jetty, whose quoins are battered by whirlpools of light.

I alone hold the key to this savage parade!

These are very real rogues. Several have exploited your worlds. Having no needs, and in no hurry to put into action their brilliant gifts and their experience of your consciences. What mature men! Vacant eyes like a summer night, red and black, tricoloured, steel studded with stars of gold; features deformed, leaden, livid, inflamed; wanton hoarse-nesses! The cruel swagger of tawdry finery! — There are youths among them!

Most violent paradise of maddened grimaces! Chinese, Hottentots, gypsies, simple-tongs, hyenas, Molochs, old insanities, sinister demons, they mingle popular and ma-ternal tricks with bestial poses and caresses. They would perform new plays and re-spectable songs. Master jugglers, they transform place and person and make use of magnetic comedy.

I alone hold the key to this savage parade!
Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Symphony No.84 in E flat major

Largo – Allegro
Andante
Menuet: Allegretto
Finale: Vivace

Roughly contemporary with his String Quartet in D minor, Op.42, Haydn’s Symphonies Nos.82-87 are collectively known as the Paris Symphonies, as they were commissioned (late 1784 or early 1785) by the Concerts de la Loge Olympique, a Parisian concert organisation promoted by the Freemasons. The commission came from Count d’Ogny, a leading figure of the organisation who also played the cello in the orchestra. This Parisian ensemble, including as many as 40 violins and ten double-basses, was enormous by comparison with the group of 24 players to which Haydn had been accustomed at the Esterházy court. These Paris-based musicians were resplendently dressed in sky-blue dress coats with lace ruffles and carried swords.

Only in his London Symphonies (Nos. 93-104) did Haydn surpass these Paris Symphonies in richness of invention, sophistication and imaginative orchestration. So successful were they that d’Ogny commissioned a further three symphonies from Haydn (Nos.90-92).

Symphony No.84 opens with a Largo introduction which incorporates expectation and gravity within its mere 20 bars, while also including surprising dynamic contrasts. The following Allegro, beginning with a relaxed, jaunty theme, is monothematic – a method which Haydn used in many sonata-form movements in his mature works. Thus, after much vigorous transitional music, the “second subject” (oboes and bassoons) proves not to be a theme of contrasting character but merely a shorter version of the first subject, now in the traditional dominant key. Following a development section which is surprisingly lengthy and exhaustive, the recapitulation is mostly regular but with some re-scoring.

The Andante is a variation movement, its main theme closely related to the opening bars of the symphony’s Largo introduction, but early as the first variation the key changes to B flat minor. However, although this begins in a similar way, it could well be understood as a new theme. The following variation (strings only) reverts to B flat major, with delightful embellishment of the theme. The next variation, fully scored, is driven by its vigorous and adventurous bass – bassoons and lower strings – including many wide leaps. In the coda Haydn gives the woodwind section prominence above pizzicato strings – first playing the theme in canon, then with lively decoration in flute and bassoons. After this fine example of Haydn’s increasingly adventurous orchestration, the movement ends quietly.

The robust minuet features in its up-beats the sharp rhythmic figure known as the Scotch snap, but Haydn is wide enough not to overdo the effect, so the prevailing character is legato. The trio section is strongly contrasting in character, with many third-beat sforzando markings and little grace-note flourishes in the flute.

The finale – monothematic once more – has a lyrical main theme, followed by a long fortissimo passage which eventually and surprisingly drops to pianissimo for a hint of B flat minor. The forceful development section is unusually prolonged, so that the wait for the recapitulation seems interminable. Then, the continuation of the main theme is teasingly interrupted, as though we have absent-mindedly lost the thread. As always, Haydn is the master of surprise. Subsequently the first violins suggest that they are stuck in a groove, but the coda banishes these distractions with irrepressible exuberance.

Programme note © Philip Borg-Wheeler
Ben Gernon
Conductor

British conductor Ben Gernon is praised repeatedly for his effortless authority on the podium, his drive and command of the orchestra and his incisive, heart-felt and evocative interpretations. Gernon has already conducted many of the world’s major orchestras including the Czech Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Oslo Philharmonic and BBC Symphony orchestras and he is now increasingly in demand in the opera house.

Gernon recently made his debut with orchestras including the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, NDR Radiophilharmonie, Netherlands Philharmonic and Hallé Orchestras, and has upcoming debuts with the Finnish Radio Symphony, Basel Symphony and Tampere Philharmonic, amongst others. In July 2020 Gernon’s recording with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir, the 3D Classical Collection, was released by Warner Classics and includes a selection of popular classical music spanning four centuries. Other recent releases include recordings with the Czech Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic, BBC Scottish Symphony and Royal Scottish National Orchestras.

Equally at home in the opera house, Gernon made his debut in 2018/19 at English National Opera conducting Simon McBurney’s production of The Magic Flute and returned to Royal Swedish Opera for a new production of Madama Butterfly following his debut the previous season with The Magic Flute. Previous operatic productions have included The Barber of Seville with Glyndebourne Touring Opera and The Marriage of Figaro at Stuttgart Opera.

Recent highlights have included many significant debuts across the globe with orchestras such as the Vienna Symphony, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, DSO Berlin, Munich Chamber, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Orchestra of St. Luke’s and Swedish Chamber orchestras. He is a regular favourite of orchestras in the UK, including the Philharmonia, BBC Symphony Orchestra, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra at the BBC Proms on the occasion of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies’ 80th Birthday. From 2017 until 2020, Gernon was Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the youngest conductors to have held a titled position with a BBC orchestra. In 2018 he conducted them in a televised performance at the BBC Proms and he continues to work with them regularly.

Ben Gernon studied at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama with Sian Edwards, with whom he still works closely, and with Sir Colin Davis, who was a profoundly influential figure in Gernon’s musical development.

Mary Bevan
Piano

Praised by Opera for her “dramatic wit and vocal control”, British soprano Mary Bevan is internationally renowned in baroque, classical and contemporary repertoire, and appears regularly with leading conductors, orchestras and ensembles around the world. She is a winner of the Royal Philharmonic Society’s Young Artist award and UK Critics’ Circle Award for Exceptional Young Talent in music and was awarded a MBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours list in 2019.

In the 2020/21 season, Bevan returns to Royal Danish Opera for her role debut as Marzelline in Fidelio and for the production LIGHT Bach Dances with director John Fulljames and conductor Lars Ulrik Mortensen. She also makes her house debut at the Bolshoi Theatre in David Alden’s production of Ariodante as Dalinda. On the concert stage, she will sing the world premiere of Sir James MacMillan’s Christmas Oratorio at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and A.Bliss’ Rout with the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

Highlights of last season included Rose Maurrant in Weill’s Street Scene for Opera de Monte Carlo and Eurydice in Offenbach’s Orpheus in the Underworld for English National Opera. Bevan recently garnered praise for her Royal Danish Opera debut as Bellezza in Il Trionfo del tempo e del desinganna, for the title role in Turnage’s new opera Coraline for the Royal Opera at the Barbican, as well as for her return to the English National Opera as Zerlina in Don Giovanni, and her debut as Merab in Saul for the Adelaide Festival. For the Royal Opera House she created the role of Lila in David Bruce’s The Firework-Maker’s Daughter, sang Barbarina in Le nozze di Figaro on the main stage, and the title role in Rossi’s Orpheus at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

On the concert platform, recent highlights include appearances with the BBC Symphony, BBC Concert Orchestra at the Proms, and with Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla and the CBSO in the world premiere of Roxanna Panufnik’s Faithful Journey. She joined the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment as Mary in Sally Beamish’s The Judas Passion, performed Bach’s Christmas Oratorio on tour in Australia with the Choir of London and Australian Chamber Orchestra; and Handel’s Messiah with the Academy of Ancient Music. She also headlined a tour of Asia with The English Concert and Harry Bicket and made her Carnegie Hall debut with the ensemble as Dalinda in Handel’s Ariodante. In 2020 she will make her debut with the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

Bevan’s discography includes her art song album Voyages with pianist Joseph Middleton and Handel’s Queen with London Early Opera, both released by Signum Records, Mendelssohn songs for Champs Hill Records, Handel: The Triumph of Time and Truth and Handel: Ode for St Cecilia’s Day with Ludus Baroque, and Vaughan Williams’ Symphony No.3 and Schubert’s Rosamunde with the BBC Philharmonic. In autumn 2019 Signum released her second disc with Joseph Middleton including Lieder by Schubert, Haydn and Wolf.
CITY OF BIRMINGHAM SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Under the baton of its Music Director Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) is the flagship of musical life in Birmingham and the West Midlands, and one of the world’s great orchestras.

Based in Symphony Hall, the orchestra gives over 150 concerts each year in Birmingham, the UK and around the world, playing music that ranges from classics to contemporary, film music and even symphonic disco. With a far-reaching community programme and a family of choruses and ensembles, it is involved in every aspect of music-making in the Midlands. But at its centre is a team of 75 superb professional musicians, and a 100-year tradition of making the world’s greatest music, right here in the heart of Birmingham.

That local tradition started with the orchestra’s very first symphonic concert in 1920 – conducted by Sir Edward Elgar. Ever since then, through war, recessions, social change and civic renewal, the CBSO has been proud to be Birmingham’s orchestra. Under principal conductors including Adrian Boult, George Weldon, Andrzej Panufnik and Boult, George Weldon, Andrzej Panufnik and Louis Frémaux, the CBSO won an artistic reputation that spread far beyond the Midlands. But it was when it discovered the young British conductor Simon Rattle in 1980 that the CBSO became internationally famous – and showed how the arts can help give a new sense of direction to a whole city.

Home and Away
Rattle’s successors Sakari Oramo (1998-2008) and Andris Nelsons (2008-15) helped cement that global reputation, and continued to build on the CBSO’s tradition of flying the flag for Birmingham. As the only professional symphony orchestra based between Bournemouth and Manchester, the orchestra tours regularly in Britain – and much further afield. The orchestra has travelled to Japan and the United Arab Emirates in previous seasons, and in December 2016 made its debut tour of China. And its recordings continue to win acclaim. In 2008, the CBSO’s recording of Saint-Saëns' complete piano concertos was named the best classical recording of the last 30 years by Gramophone.

Now, under the dynamic leadership of Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, associate conductor Michael Seal and assistant conductor Jaume Santonja Espinós, the CBSO continues to do what it does best – playing great music for the people of Birmingham and the Midlands.

Meet the Family
The CBSO Chorus – a symphonic choir made up of “amateur professionals”, trained by Simon Halsey CBS – is famous in its own right. The CBSO Children’s Chorus and Youth Chorus showcase singers as young as eight. Through its un auditioned community choir – CBSO SO Vocal in Selly Oak – the CBSO shares its know-how and passion for music with communities throughout the city. The CBSO Youth Orchestra gives that same opportunity to young instrumentalists aged 14-21, offering high-level training to the next generation of orchestral musicians alongside top international conductors and soloists.

These groups are sometimes called the “CBSO family” – over 650 amateur musicians of all ages and backgrounds, who work alongside the orchestra to make and share great music. But the CBSO’s tradition of serving the community goes much further. Its Learning and Participation programme touches tens of thousands of lives a year, ranging from workshops in nurseries to projects that energise whole neighbourhoods. And everyone’s welcome at CBSO Centre on Berkley Street. As well as being a friendly, stylish performance venue for the lunchtime concert series Centre Stage and contemporary jazz concerts by Jazzlines, the CBSO’s rehearsal base is home to Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Ex Cathedra. Now in its Centenary year, the CBSO, more than ever, remains the beating heart of musical life in the UK’s Second City.

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