SHOSTAKOVICH’S FIFTH

Symphony Hall, Birmingham
Wednesday 26 May 2021, 2.00pm & 6.30pm

Nicholas Collon – Conductor
Lawrence Power – Viola

Stravinsky. Symphonies of Wind Instruments 8’
Britten. Lachrymae 15’
Shostakovich. Symphony No.5 46’

Shostakovich called his Fifth Symphony "a Soviet artist’s creative response to just criticism". That was the official line, anyway: the reality was a bit more complicated, and a lot more gripping. Conductor Nicholas Collon brings all his freshness and fervour to a symphony that defined the 20th century – music that really is a matter of life and death, and the most powerful possible conclusion to a concert of music by composers in troubled times. Stravinsky mourns the death of Debussy in a bold sonic ritual, painted in primary colours. And Benjamin Britten evoked tears from another century in his haunting Lachrymae – played today by a true poet of the viola, the wonderful Lawrence Power.

You are welcome to view the online programme on your mobile device, but please ensure that your sound is turned off and that you are mindful of other members of the audience. Any noise (such as whispering) can be very distracting – the acoustics of the Hall will highlight any such sound. If you use a hearing aid in conjunction with our infra-red hearing enhancement system, please make sure you have collected a receiver unit and that your hearing aid is switched to the 'T' position, with the volume level appropriately adjusted.

Audiences are welcome to take photographs before and after the concert, and during breaks in the music for applause. If you would like to take photos at these points please ensure you do not use a flash, and avoid disturbing other members of the audience around you. Please note that taking photographs or filming the concert while the orchestra is playing is not permitted as it is distracting both for other audience members and for the musicians on stage.

Keeping you safe: Please ensure that you are following all of the covid-safe measures that are in place, including: arriving at the time indicated on your ticket, wearing a face covering whilst in the building (exemption excluded), keeping a social distance from other audience members and staff, following signage and/or guidance from staff, and using the hand sanitising stations provided. Thank you.

The Sound of the Future

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Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Symphonies of Wind Instruments

Stravinsky himself gave the best description of this work, when he called it ‘an austere ritual which is unfolded in terms of short litanies between different groups of homogeneous instruments’. Of these instruments there are 23, the instruments of a symphony orchestra that has lost its strings and percussion, to leave three each of the woodwinds, four horns, three trumpets and three trombones, and a tuba. There are some rarities: an alto clarinet and a trumpet in A.

All the instruments play together only in the chorale that punctuates and concludes the ceremony; otherwise the ‘short litanies’ involve smaller groupings, sounding one after another, in a crossplay of wordless chants, most of which keep returning. There is no development, only statement and restatement. And the ritual effect is enhanced by the fixed tempo of each chant, and further by the limitation to three tempos in the strict proportions 2:3:4. The ceremony happens as a machine, delivering its solemn pronouncements as if of itself. It is a ceremony that may have been based, Richard Taruskin has suggested, on the panikhida, or funeral service, of the Russian Orthodox church.

In 1908 Stravinsky had responded to the death of his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, by writing a ‘funeral chant’ for wind instruments. Some 12 years later the occasion was the death of Debussy, who had welcomed the young Russian’s arrival in Paris, and even been influenced by the fresh spring he had brought to music. But we seem to be witnessing also the obsequies of that period in Stravinsky’s music during which he had reconstructed an ancient Russia of modal tunes, robust rhythms, and music ingrained with the seasons of human and agricultural life. For one last time these things pass in review.

Stravinsky — like Messiaen — wrote very little music that could be used in church; his sacred works are sacred not because of their place in the liturgy but by virtue of their words, reference points and auras. The Mass (1944-48) rules out regular church performance by requiring, along with the choir, an ensemble of reed instruments and brass: oboes, cor anglais, bassoon, trumpets and trombones. And its sacredness comes not so much directly from its liturgical text as from its summary of a whole history of divine celebration, a history that includes plainsong, holy bells (in much of the wind chording), Georgian harmony and the alternation between voices and instruments characteristic of Giovanni Gabrieli. Other, closer ancestors include the composer’s own Symphony of Psalms and the works just heard: his Symphonies of Wind Instruments and settings of Church Slavonic prayers. Yet, despite all these allusions, the Mass is unique.

Working, unusually, without a commission, Stravinsky had written the Kyrie and Gloria by December 1944, but there the work stayed while he turned to other projects — finishing the Symphony in Three Movements, creating the score for George Balanchine’s ballet Orpheus, beginning The Rake’s Progress. Only in March 1948 did he complete the Mass, though there is no evidence of a break in the music. Much of the setting has the chorus singing in quick chords, bouncing their syllables against changing patterns of accents and durations. This is especially the manner of the Credo, which we may compare with the earlier unaccompanied setting. It is the longest section because, as Stravinsky pointed out, ‘there is much to believe’.

After arriving in the United States, in 1939, Stravinsky revised many of his earlier works, partly in order to renew his copyright but also for practical reasons. In this case the revision removes the rare instruments of the 1920 score and so streamlines the textures a little.

Programme note © Gerald Larner

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Lachrymae Op.48a

Reflections on a song of John Dowland for viola and strings


The Elizabethan composer John Dowland has always been best known for his Lachrymae lute pavan and its counterpart in song, “Flow my tears”. Confusingly, Britten’s Lachrymae, “Reflections on a song of John Dowland”, is actually based on a quite different Dowland song. The somewhat perversely chosen title is, however, characteristic of Britten’s strategy in the work as a whole. While it is actually focused on “If my complaints could passions move”, the precise identity of the source of much of its melodic and harmonic inspiration remains a secret until just before the end.

In a sense, like Britten’s other Dowland “reflections”, the Nocturnal for guitar Op.70, Lachrymae is the reverse of a theme-and-variations construction. The mysteriously scored opening Lento does not introduce the theme but offers — in the short rising motif carried by muted viola from the bottom to the top of its range and in a more extended melody picked out on the lower orchestral strings — thematic hints which are developed during the course of the work and finally clarified into the song they derive from. Beautifully written for the solo instrument, the following ten “reflections” draw on a variety of viola colours — pizzicato in the Animato, for example, double stops in the Tranquillo — while retaining its characteristic introverted, plangent personality. So it’s quite natural for the viola to turn in the sixth reflection to Dowland’s Lachrymae song “Flow my tears”, misleading though that allusion is from the long-term thematic point of view. In the end — after a limping waltz, an eerily scored (sul ponticello) march, a mysterious episode in harmonics, and a sustained period of preparation — the true source of inspiration, “If my complaints could passions move”, emerges on viola with its original harmonies on the accompanying strings.

Originally written for viola and piano and first performed at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1950 by its dedicatee William Primrose with Britten at the piano, Lachrymae was arranged by the composer for viola and strings for another distinguished British violinist, Cecil Aronowitz, 25 years later.

Programme note © Paul Griffiths
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
Symphony No.5 in D minor, Op.47

Moderato
Allegretto
Largo
Allegro non troppo

Political and artistic pressures coincided many times in the course of Shostakovich’s career, but never more intensely than in the year 1937, when the Fifth Symphony was composed. Early in 1936 his opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk and the ballet The Limpid Stream had been officially condemned, and in consequence he felt obliged to withdraw his Fourth Symphony before its scheduled premiere. These works, full of a wayward, dissonant genius, made no concession to the official doctrine of Socialist Realism, and the bleak endings of both opera and symphony directly contradicted the optimism then expected from Soviet artists.

The crisis Shostakovich faced was far more than a question of musical style, it was literally a matter of life or death. By the mid-1930s any enthusiasm remaining from the early revolutionary years was destroyed as the mechanism of Stalin’s Great Terror lurched into motion, with show trials, denunciations and disappearances. Few Russians remained untouched, particularly in the composer’s own city of Leningrad. Shostakovich himself lost relatives, friends and colleagues. A particularly serious blow was the arrest and execution in June 1937 of his highly-placed protector Marshal Tukhachevsky; association with such an “enemy of the people” put him in a highly dangerous position.

It was in this nightmare atmosphere that Shostakovich composed the Fifth Symphony, between April and July 1937. A conscious bid for rehabilitation, intended to re-establish his credentials as a Soviet composer, it represents a well-calculated combination of true expression with the demands of the State. Shostakovich calculated well. The premiere, given by the Leningrad Philharmonic under the relatively unknown Yevgeniy Mravinsky on 21 November 1937, was an unqualified triumph, with scenes of wild enthusiasm which were repeated at the Moscow premiere the following January. The first performance outside Russia took place in Paris that June, and before long it had been performed all over the world and was being held up as a model of what Soviet music could and should be.

The Symphony certainly represents a break with Shostakovich’s unruly musical past, for here the language is simplified, with few of the eccentricities that had made him such a great satirist in the first decade of his career. The level of dissonance is lower and the music is contained within a clear formal plan. There is not, however, any radical change of style. Shostakovich’s unmistakable fingerprints – unexpected twists in melody and harmony, strange scoring, sometimes weird or shrill, with writing in the extremely high or low registers – are all present, but now absorbed into a traditional four-movement symphonic structure of great clarity and power.

As he would later do in the first movements of his Eighth and Tenth Symphonies, Shostakovich immediately creates a sense of enormous space, both brooding and desolate, with a masterly control of slow pacing and pared-down orchestral textures. The first movement’s climax, reached after a remorseless build-up of tension (from the moment the piano enters), bursts out into a grotesque march, followed by a sense of numb shock. The second movement, a type of sardonic scherzo, preserves some of the qualities of the earlier Shostakovich in its shrill scoring, use of wry parody and vulgar march and dance elements, an important part of his inheritance from Mahler.

The brooding Largo is the expressive heart of the symphony. Listeners who had until then known only the witty or irreverent side of Shostakovich would have been surprised by the depth of feeling here: many at the premiere were reduced to tears by its controlled anguish. Much of the emotional power is due to the long, sustained melodic lines and restrained instrumentation. All the brass instruments are silent, even the quietly sustaining horns.

An essential part of Shostakovich’s rehabilitation as a good Soviet composer was an optimistic finale. Most of the controversy surrounding the Fifth Symphony is concerned with the real significance of its finale and particularly of its last few minutes, blatant with D major brass fanfares and battering drums. There’s no doubt about the overwhelming sense of musical resolution here, but most verbal commentary has done little but confuse the issue. A constant problem with Shostakovich is that his own remarks should never be taken too seriously, for he notoriously said what people wanted to hear. The façade he presented was that of a cool professional, an efficient servant of the Soviet State, and on the occasion of the Moscow premiere he quoted an unnamed Soviet critic to the effect that his Fifth Symphony was “the practical creative answer of a Soviet artist to just criticism”, a phrase that was for many years accepted in the West as the composer’s own subtitle.

The main outline of the post-Beethoven romantic symphony, opening in conflict and arriving at a triumphant apotheosis, certainly allows an orthodox interpretation of the Symphony as a description of the creation of Soviet Man, and it was in these terms that Shostakovich spoke of it at the time:

“I saw man with all his experiences in the centre of the composition… In the finale, the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements are resolved in optimism and joy of living.”

But in Testimony, the reminiscences attributed by Solomon Volkov to the sick and embittered composer towards the end of his life, this is all turned upside-down.

“I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth… it's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying ‘Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing’, and you rise, shakily, and go off muttering ‘Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing’.”

Shostakovich’s music is full of ambiguity, paradox and contradiction. Whatever we read into it, though, we must remember that the Fifth Symphony is a musical work, and not some coded message to be deciphered. It can, however, invite interpretation on many levels, challenging listeners to question their own first reactions and reflect on them from different and often contradictory perspectives.
Nicholas Collon
Conductor

British conductor Nicholas Collon is Founder and Principal Conductor of the groundbreaking Aurora Orchestra, Principal Guest Conductor of the Guerzenich Orchester in Cologne, and Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor of the Residentie Orkest in The Hague until 2021, when he takes up the reins as Chief Conductor of the Finnish Radio Symphony – the first non-Finnish conductor ever to hold this post.

His elegant conducting style, searching musical intellect and inspirational musicmaking have prompted guest invitations from orchestras such as the DSO Berlin, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Danish National Symphony, Oslo Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France, Toronto Symphony and many of the leading British orchestras including the Philharmonia Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Hallé, also with chamber orchestras such as Ensemble intercontemporain, Les Siècles and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe.

Collon and his Aurora Orchestra have been an annual fixture at the BBC Proms since 2010, hugely popular for their staged and memorised performances – and are one of the few orchestras to appear live in the Proms’ truncated 2020 season. They have also become regular visitors to leading European venues such as the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and Cologne Philharmonie, also touring to the Bremen, Rheingau and Gstaad festivals. Aurora Orchestra is Resident Orchestra at Kings Place and Associate Orchestra at the Southbank Centre, where they have reinvented the concert format with their ‘Orchestral Theatre’ Series.

In August 2020 Deutsche Grammophon released Aurora’s Music of the Spheres recording of Mozart, Adès and Max Richter. This followed two critically-acclaimed recordings for Warner Classics: Road Trip featuring music by Ives, Copland, Adams and Nico Muhly (winning the prestigious 2015 Echo Klassik Award for ‘Klassik Ohne Grenzen’) and Insomnia with music by Britten, Brett Dean, Ligeti, Gurney and Lennon & McCartney. He has also recorded Haydn and Ligeti with the Danish Radio Symphony, Britten and Delius with the Philharmonia Orchestra, and several discs of contemporary repertoire with the Hallé. He has conducted over 200 new works, including the UK or world premieres of works by Unsuk Chin, Philip Glass, Colin Matthews, Nico Muhly, Olivier Messiaen, Krzysztof Penderecki and Judith Weir, and this season features works by Thomas Adès and Brett Dean.

Opera productions have included Peter Grimes and Don Giovanni for Oper Köln, The Magic Flute at English National Opera, Jonathan Harvey’s Wagner Dream at Welsh National Opera, The Rape of Lucretia for Glyndebourne Touring Opera, and The Turn of the Screw at the Aldeburgh Festival with Aurora Orchestra.

Born in London, Nicholas is a violinist, pianist and organist by training, and studied as Organ Scholar at Clare College, Cambridge.

Lawrence Power
Viola

Lawrence Power has advanced the cause of the viola both through the excellence of his performances, whether in recitals, chamber music or concerts, and his passionate advocacy for new music, which has led to a substantial body of fresh repertoire for the instrument by today’s finest composers.

To this end, he set up the Viola Commissioning Circle, which is supporting his new Lockdown Commissions, an artistic response to the coronavirus crisis. He has commissioned short solo works from colleagues such as Huw Watkins, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Cassandra Miller and Erkki-Sven Tüür. As part of his vision for this innovative project, he is filming his performances in unused venues across the UK, such as Royal Festival Hall and St John’s Smith Square, and releasing them on social media. The Viola Commissioning Circle has already funded a concerto by Gerald Barry, and future works by Anders Hillborg, Lena Auérbach and Magnus Lindberg, among others. Power has also given the world premieres of many scores written for him, including Esa-Pekka Salonen’s Pentatonic Étude, Mark-Anthony Turnage’s Power Play, Julian Anderson’s Prayer, Alexander Goehr’s Hymn to Night, James MacMillan’s Viola Concerto and Huw Watkins’ Fantasy.

In concerto repertoire, Power has worked with leading orchestras from Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Boston Symphony Orchestra to Royal Concertgebouw and Bayerischer Rundfunk. He is familiar to audiences around the UK and has made 12 BBC Proms appearances, with the Walton Viola Concerto, Mark-Anthony Turnage’s On Opened Ground and Olga Neuwirth’s Remnants of Songs ... an Amphigory, among other works.

He enjoys play-directing orchestras from both violin and viola, most recently at the Australian National Academy of Music and with Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. He also leads his own orchestra, Collegium, made up of young musicians from across Europe.

He is on the faculty at Zurich’s Hochschule der Kunst and gives masterclasses around the world, including at the Verbier Festival. With his intelligent approach to programming, he is often invited to work with venues and festivals as curator. He has enjoyed residencies at Turner Sims Southampton and with Aalborg Symphony Orchestra, served as Artistic Director with the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra and curated a concert series at Kings Place. He founded and serves as Artistic Director of West Wycombe Chamber Music Festival, which celebrates its tenth anniversary in 2021.

As a chamber musician Power is a member of the Nash Ensemble, performs with the world’s finest players at leading festivals, and regularly collaborates with players including Steven Isserlis, Nicholas Alsteadt, Simon Crawford-Phillips, Vilde Frang, Maxim Vengerov and Joshua Bell. He plays a viola made in Bologna in 1590 by Antonio Brescianini.

Power was honoured with the 2020 RPS Instrumentalist Award, made for the outstanding quality and scope of the performances and work in any context of a solo performer on any instrument in the UK.
CITY OF BIRMINGHAM SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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

Based in Symphony Hall, Birmingham, in a normal year the orchestra performs 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 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 Weeldon, 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 CBSO 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 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 CBE – is famous in its own right. The CBSO Children’s Chorus and Youth Chorus showcase singers as young as six. Through its unauditioned community choir – CBSO SO Vocal in Selly Oak – the CBSO shares its knowledge 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. Having recently enjoyed it’s 100th birthday, the CBSO, more than ever, remains the beating heart of musical life in the UK’s Second City.
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