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FRIDAY 19 MARCH 2021, 7pm
National Concert Hall

JOSEPH BOLOGNE	Symphony No. 1 in G
BRAHMS	Serenade No. 1 in D

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra
Jaime Martín conductor
Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm

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PROGRAMME NOTES

JOSEPH BOLOGNE, CHEVALIER DE SAINT-GEORGES 1745-99

Symphony No. 1 in G

i. Allegro
ii. Andante
iii. Allegro assai

Despite his many accomplishments, history until recently has tended to overlook Joseph Bologne, relegating his identity to his royally appointed title, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, or, more condescendingly, to his exotic and exaggerated designation as the 'Black Mozart'.

Born in 1745 on the island of Basse-Terre in the French-administered Caribbean archipelago of Guadeloupe, he was the illegitimate son of George Bologne de Saint-Georges, a wealthy planter, and his wife's African slave, Anne Nanon. Educated in Paris, he attracted early attention for his prowess in shooting, horse-riding and fencing – Louis XV anointing him 'Chevalier' in recognition of his excellence – and on the dance floors of the French capital's more select gatherings.

During the French Revolution, he distinguished himself as Colonel of Europe's first all-black regiment, one that quickly took its popular name, the pro-Republican Légion de St.-Georges, from him.

Of his early musical training little is known, but by the time he left his teenage years behind his abilities as a violinist were attracting new works composed especially for him. Aged 26, he was appointed concertmaster and conductor of François-Joseph Gossec's Le Concert de Amateurs, then considered the finest orchestra in Paris, if not the whole of France.

Chief among his output as a composer were 14 violin concertos, six operas (1777's now lost *Ernestine* performed before Marie-Antoinette) and two symphonies alongside much chamber music and some songs.

His First Symphony is a work of enormous charm, vitality and elegance that was said to have influenced Haydn and Mozart as much as his own music was influenced by his illustrious peers. By turns engaging and warm, serenely beautiful and cheerfully brisk, its three movements are the work of a composer of considerable ability and flair that favourably stands comparison with his more famous *confrères*.

Marked by two principal themes, the first somewhat whimsical, the second more lyrical and rhythmically alert, the *Allegro* first movement is as brisk as its marking suggests, scurrying strings gathering pace and momentum even as the writing for violins becomes ever more intricate. The delicately nimble *Andante* middle movement has a decidedly Mozartian grace and gloss, its employment of only strings lending its lyricism a sweetly romantic quality.

Elaborating on a single theme, the swift, short *Allegro assai* finale carries itself with an Haydnesque brio that makes much of twin horns and oboes to ink in a sense of pastoral play, one raised to rhythmic exuberance by excitable strings invoking all the carefree jollity and joy of an Irish jig.

JOHANNES BRAHMS 1833-97

Serenade No. 1 in D, Op. 11

i. Allegro molto
ii. Scherzo. Allegro non troppo - Trio. Poco più moto
iii. Adagio non troppo
iv. Menuetto I & II
v. Scherzo. Allegro
vi. Rondo. Allegro

By the age of 20, Brahms had won the admiration of Joseph Joachim, the greatest violinist of the day, and was hailed by fellow-composer Robert Schumann as being 'fated to give expression to the times in

the highest and most ideal manner'. He was later to be lionised by the conductor Hans von Bülow as one of music's immortal 'Three "B"s' – Bach and Beethoven his alliterative *compagnons d'honneur*.

Yet Brahms spent much of his life afflicted by self-doubt and was forever intimidated by the long, imposing shadow cast by his immediate predecessor, Beethoven. An early ambition to compose nine symphonies – a deferential nod to Beethoven – failed to reach half-way to its target, largely due to Brahms's prevarication. Although begun in 1854, his First Symphony was not completed until more than 20 years later, by when Brahms was 43.

The prolonged gestation of the symphony was riven by Brahms's paralysing reluctance to risk being seen to compete with Beethoven, whose *Eroica, Pastoral* and *Choral* symphonies remained the abiding totems by which the early 19th-century symphony was judged.

As if to test the water, he committed himself to his first completed work for 'large orchestra', the Serenade No. 1 (simultaneously composed alongside his First Piano Concerto) in 1858. Originally scored for wind and string octet, it was subsequently expanded into a chamber nonet and, by the end of the following year, a version for orchestra.

Cast in six movements, its symphonic scale and ambition are tempered by its striking blending of ebullience and melancholy, respectively borrowed from Mozart and Beethoven, to revel in a profusion of attractive themes underpinned by pastoral delicacy and bound together by a bewitching lyricism. No wonder the eminent critic Eduard Hanslick declared it 'the playground of idyllic dreams, of beloved thoughts, of lightness and gaiety. It is the symphony of tranquility'.

The Serenade begins in surprisingly jovial mood, a bucolic-sounding horn answered by lyrical strings in its *Allegro molto* opening, both soon egging the other on with support from eager woodwinds and enthusiastic

percussion. Its onward drive is punctuated by moments of sylvan stillness in which the horn casts an evocative, hypnotic spell. With foregrounded woodwind solos, held aloft by washes of strings, glancing back to the pristine glories of the Classical era, the Scherzo that follows is a pure romantic fantasy to compare with Mendelssohn, one marked by complex rhythms and harmonies that could only belong to the Romantic era.

Infused with a rather stately quality, listen out for characterful solo contributions by clarinet, flute, oboe bassoon (and their various combinations) in dialogue with the orchestra in the extended serenade-like *Adagio non troppo* third movement.

The pair of Minuets that follow – contrasted in G major and G minor – act as a sort of palette cleanser. The First is an unassuming but pleasing trio for clarinets and bubbling bassoon, the Second a becoming, string-accented exercise in Mozartian grace.

A second Scherzo, markedly more aroused and fleeter than the first, again gives prominence to the solo horn, initially with cello accompaniment before the full orchestra adds its muscle and weight to inject a driving urgency to proceedings.

The concluding Rondo starts at a brisk gallop as if the hunt has finally found its scent. Reprising and accelerating the dotted rhythmic pulse of the *Adagio,* it soon finds the orchestra relishing the adrenalized excitement of a pursuit, pushing ever onwards, pausing occasionally to determine its next move before racing headlong towards a final flourish of exultant brass and thunderous percussion.

Programme notes by Michael Quinn © RTÉ