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FRIDAY 2 APRIL 2021, 7pm

National Concert Hall

GLUCK *Orfeo ed Euridice Overture*

BARBER *Adagio for Strings*

HAYDN *Symphony No. 45 in F sharp minor, 'Farewell'*

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Robert Houlihan conductor

Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm



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PROGRAMME NOTES

CHRISTOPH WILLIBALD GLUCK 1714-1787

***Orfeo ed Euridice* Overture**

The sheer prettiness of Gluck's music often detracts from his standing as one of opera's most transformative composers. In the middle of the 18th century he was in the vanguard of reforming Baroque grand opera, wresting it away from subservience to the demands of star vocalists and injecting emotional weight and dramatic body into what had become a decidedly frivolous form.

Gluck's willing ally in the enterprise, the poet Ranieri de Calzabigi, provided the libretto for *Orfeo ed Euridice* and would go on to write the same for *Alceste* and *Paride ed Elena*. The pair expanded their reformist reach into the world of ballet, with *Don Juan*. First staged in Vienna in 1762, *Orfeo ed Euridice* was the opening shot of Gluck and Calzabigi's bold new agenda, its aesthetic manifesto succinctly summed up by one commentator as 'noble simplicity'. The brief, fleet-footed and spirited Overture - a melange of traditional gavottes and minuets and quotations from the opera's set pieces, not least the symphonic heft of the 'Dance of the Furies' - is Gluck at his most succinct and concentrated. His boldest and most dramatic, too, stentorian percussion whipping high strings, woodwinds and horns into a frenzy, before early optimism is diluted by darker, more ominous hues as Orfeo prepares to enter the Underworld to be reunited with his beloved Euridice.

Programme note Michael Quinn © RTÉ

SAMUEL BARBER 1910-1981

Adagio for Strings

The Adagio for Strings is arguably the most famous piece of music to have come out of America in the last century. It has become a second national anthem or, at the very least, the funereal ode of choice on the

death of presidents and for other state occasions requiring a response that is both solemn and soothing.

Composed in 1938, its origins lie in the slow movement of a String Quartet that Barber had written two years previously and to which he returned in 1967 for his choral arrangement of the *Agnus Dei*. It had its first performance before an invited audience in New York in 1938 with Arturo Toscanini conducting (a radio broadcast recording of which still exists) with its public premiere following in South America.

Its rise to prominence in the United States began with its use on the death of Franklin D Roosevelt in 1945, its standing sealed by it also accompanying the deaths of the physicist Albert Einstein a decade later and of John F Kennedy in 1963. More recently, it was heard during memorial services and concerts for those killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York in 2001.

The *Adagio* owes much of its impact to its sheer simplicity of design and directness of expression. Barber's elder compatriot Aaron Copland described it as seeming 'to come straight from the heart, to use old-fashioned terms. The sense of continuity, the steadiness of the flow, the satisfaction of the arch that it creates from beginning to end are all very gratifying and make you believe the sincerity he obviously put into it'.

It is built on a single, tensely articulated melodic idea that is immediately heard in the first strings and subsequently taken up by other instrumental groupings. The melody, by turns, repeatedly ascends and descends through subtly shifting time signatures that compress and stretch the harmonies from luxurious introspection to taut declarations of grief. It climaxes in four heart-stopping chords before the opening theme briefly returns only to fade serenely away into silence.

Programme note Michael Quinn © RTÉ

JOSEPH HAYDN 1732-1809

Symphony No. 45 in F sharp minor, 'Farewell'

- i. *Allegro assai*
- ii. *Adagio*
- iii. *Minuet and trio - allegretto*
- iv. *Finale - presto - adagio*

It's the autumn of 1772. The hand-picked members of the court orchestra, employed by the aristocratic Hungarian patron, Prince Nicholas Esterhazy, have been working at his summer residence, the palace at Esterhaza, since May. It's not merely a palace (with 125 rooms) but has an adjoining opera house, an inn, a coffee house, and separate staff quarters for the orchestra. The only problem? Their wives and families have not been allowed to accompany them, and are lodged in Eisenstadt (a full day's journey) or even further away, in Vienna. But Prince Esterhazy has now decided (it's November) that he will remain in the palace for a further two months. Mayhem among the orchestra, who haven't seen their wives for almost six months. As Haydn later recalled, "Yes, I too was young and lustful at that time."

Such was the frustration of the musicians that they asked Haydn to intervene. Haydn's answer? A subtle way of dealing with an industrial dispute: the "Farewell" symphony. Scored for strings, two oboes, two horns and a bassoon, the symphony, which is unconventional in other ways, ends, not with a boisterous or positive finale, but – at the end of the fourth movement – suddenly there's an *adagio* – a slow movement, in the course of which the players, one by one, starting with the first oboe, snuff out the candle on their music stand and leave the platform. At the end, only Haydn himself, and his second violin, were left, playing a very quiet tune.

Prince Esterhazy got the message. "If they are all going, then so must we". And the whole court left Esterhaza the next day.

Apart from this early exercise in industrial relations, Haydn's symphony has its own intrinsic value and points of musical interest. It's the only symphony in the key of F sharp minor by any composer of the eighteenth century. One reason for this is that at that time it was difficult for the instruments to tune to this key, and in fact special adaptations had to be made to the horns to enable them to do so.

And it's a fine example of Haydn dealing with the "*Sturm und Drang*" – storm and stress – favoured by composers of the time. The opening movement is turbulent and features much contrast between the feverish strings and the chords held by the wind players. The second movement – conventionally slow – is one of Haydn's finest adagios, with the strings muted throughout. It's followed by an equally conventional minuet and trio, but one which gives us a hint of what is to follow: although it is graceful and features a beautiful Gregorian melody played by the horns, it seems to lead nowhere, with no recognisable conclusion.

Which brings us – literally – to the *pièce de résistance*, the finale which begins fast and furious and, as Prince Esterhazy must have expected, leading to a dynamic conclusion. Except that it doesn't. Suddenly, there's another slow movement. In each musician's score Haydn had written "No more!" at the point where the player was expected to stop playing, snuff out his candle, and take his leave.

The first oboe plays a short solo (as if to say "I'm off now!") and leaves. He (there were no ladies in the orchestra) is followed by the first horn, who also plays a brief "farewell" solo. Then the bassoon (who hasn't had his own tunes until now as he has been doubling the cello) plays his very own exit line, then the second oboe, and the remaining horn player. Now it's the turn of the strings: first the viola, then the double-bass who has a comic and much longer solo, and the remaining players one by one, until only the two players on the first desk of violins are left – and in those days playing by the light of their own candles meant that the stage was almost completely in the dark.