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FRIDAY 21 MAY 2021, 7pm

National Concert Hall

WAGNER *Siegfried Idyll*

BIZET Symphony No. 1 in C

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Killian Farrell conductor

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



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PROGRAMME NOTES

RICHARD WAGNER 1813–1883

Siegfried Idyll

Franz Liszt caused quite a scandal in Paris when he and the Countess d'Agoult ran away from French society to spend a number of happy years together in Switzerland and Italy. In the Autumn of 1837 they settled in Como for some months where their first child, Cosima, was born at 2pm on Christmas Eve.

She was to become one of the most remarkable women in nineteenth-century music. She married the distinguished conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow who became closely associated with the music of Wagner. The marriage was not a success and when her husband began to work frequently with Wagner, preparing for the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde*, which he conducted, the admiration turned to passion and she soon moved into Wagner's home. The following year they took a delightful house on the lakeside at Lucerne – 'Tribschen' – which was to be their base for a number of years; it was where Wagner wrote much of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and the four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Their son Siegfried was born there in 1869 and finally the couple were married in August 1870, following Cosima's divorce. Strangely, Bülow continued to be an active champion of Wagner's music. Cosima long outlived both men, becoming the much feared guardian of the composer's work and tradition at Bayreuth until 1930.

It was at Tribschen, now a Wagner museum, at 7am on Christmas Day 1870 that the composer awoke his wife to the strains of music being played on the staircase by fifteen musicians. He had taken themes from *Siegfried*, the third of the *Ring* cycle operas, and woven them into a fantasy as a special birthday-cum-Christmas present. He conducted the first public performance of the *Tribschen Idyll* in Mannheim the following December, but for eight years resisted publication of the work, only selling the rights when, as so often was the case, he needed the money. 'The *Idyll* is going off today', Cosima wrote in her diary, 'My secret

treasure is becoming common property. May the joy it will give mankind be commensurate with the sacrifice that I am making.'

The music starts with the theme from Brünnhilde's awakening, which is soothingly expanded. The oboe introduces a traditional German lullaby, 'Schlaf' mein Kind, schlaf' ein', the only theme not taken from the opera, and the flute adds Brünnhilde's slumber' motif. A version of the love theme follows and later Siegfried's own motif is introduced and interwoven with the birdsong from the 'forest murmurs' scene. The music softly sinks away as it began with Brünnhilde's first theme.

Programme note Ian Fox © RTÉ

GEORGES BIZET 1838-1875

Symphony in C major

- i. *Allegro vivo*
- ii. *Adagio*
- iii. *Allegro vivace*
- iv. *Finale. Allegro vivace*

Would that all student assignments were as accomplished as the Symphony in C major Georges Bizet wrote towards the end of his studies at the Paris Conservatoire in late 1855. All the more remarkable is that Bizet had barely turned 17 when he composed it. And that he completed the vivacious, yearning, invigorating four-movement work in less than a month.

What was to be Bizet's only symphony was never published or performed in the composer's lifetime. It stretches a point to say that the symphony was forgotten – it never having been known in the first place – but the manuscript lay ignored, save for some cannibalising of its material for later works, for nearly 80 years.

Having been bequeathed by Bizet's widow, Geneviève, a well-known society hostess and daughter of the composer Jacques-Fromental Halévy, to the Venezuelan-born, French-domiciled composer Reynaldo Hahn, he, in turn, gifted it to the Paris Conservatoire where it lay gathering dust until 1933.

Sifting through over-looked collections in the Conservatoire library's archives, its then secretary general, Jean Chantavoine, discovered Bizet's manuscript. Brought to the attention of Bizet's first biographer, Douglas Charles Parker, he showed it to the conductor Felix Weingartner who duly led its first performance in Basel, Switzerland in 1935.

Its belated premiere earned it favourable comparisons with Mendelssohn, who had been a similar age to Bizet when he composed his *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*, and its swift adoption into the orchestral repertoire. Others have likened the Symphony's flowing melodic writing to a French version of Schubert. But it is to Bizet's sometime teacher, Charles Gounod, that the Symphony, composed under his tutorship, owes the greatest debt.

Much has been written about the connections between the Symphony and Gounod's First Symphony, a transcription of which for two pianos Bizet had recently been commissioned to produce. Although the imprint of the master is everywhere to be found in his young student's work, what Bizet produced proved that, in this instance, the pupil had exceeded anything learned from his master.

Although Bizet would attempt and thrice deny a second symphony, opera seduced him away from the concert platform with the success of *The Pearl Fishers* in 1863, his signature masterpiece, *Carmen*, following in 1875. Bizet died shortly after its disappointing premiere at the age of 36 and before its triumphant revival.

Cast in the conventional Classical structure of four movements – an unconscious nod, perhaps, to Gounod's own models from the era:

Haydn and early Beethoven – the Symphony announces itself with all the ardent excitability and brio of youth in its pomp in a scintillating *Allegro vivo* statement of Mozartian exuberance and unabashed intent.

But it is the lithe, suavely dispatched second theme of the movement, heard on oboes, that points to an unexpected emotional maturity and technical sophistication to match the precociously bold self-confidence of the orchestral fireworks preceding it.

The oboe also voices the darkly plaintive, sinuously searching main theme of the *Adagio* second movement which conjures something of the exotic pictorialism of Bizet's *L'Arlésienne*. The thumbprint of Gounod's Symphony can be felt in the fugal development section, though here the device is described with a diaphanous transparency more eloquent and becoming than its model.

The ensuing *Allegro vivace* is a brisk, fleet-footed scherzo in all but name and again echoes Gounod in its trio section and its re-working of the main theme in woodwinds and strings. The cheeky 'pedal-point' employment of a sustained tone in lower voices has the tang of a now lively, now lilting Gaelic dance about it.

The fleet rhythms, bright dynamics and fluid energy of the Finale, again voiced *Allegro vivace*, attract obvious comparison with Mendelssohn's quicksilver Shakespeare setting. But Bizet takes the achievements of that earlier work to a new level of unfettered inspiration.

Two principal themes are heard – the first later borrowed for the cavorting street urchins in *Carmen*; the second floating, light and lyrical – in a movement that teems with vigorously expressed ideas dispatched with all the brimming self-confidence of a 17-year-old whose precociously secure grasp of structure and harmonic flexibility leads to a conclusion of becoming vitality, charm and brilliantly executed *chutzpah*.

Programme note Michael Quinn © RTÉ