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FRIDAY 18 JUNE 2021, 7pm

National Concert Hall

COPLAND

Fanfare for the Common Man

STRAVINSKY

Symphonies of Wind Instruments

[Revised 1947]

DVOŘÁK

Serenade for Wind Instruments

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

John Finucane conductor



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PROGRAMME NOTES

AARON COPLAND 1900–1990

Fanfare for the Common Man

Aaron Copland, one of the most significant American composers of the last century, worked in a wide range of forms that included symphonies, concertos, chamber music, choral music and opera. He composed *Fanfare for the Common Man* in 1942 for Eugene Goossens and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra as part of a tribute to the American Armed Forces participating in World War Two. ‘The challenge’, according to Copland, ‘was to compose a traditional fanfare, direct and powerful, yet with a contemporary sound.’ He was so pleased with the end product that he eventually used the fanfare as the basis of the last movement of his third symphony, composed between 1944 and 1946.

Note by John Allen © RTE

IGOR STRAVINSKY 1882–1971

Symphonies of Wind Instruments [Revised 1947]

Stravinsky’s own signature on the score of this work reads: “*Fragments des Symphonies pour instruments à vents à la mémoire de Claude Achille Debussy*”.

Debussy died in 1918, and the day after his death Stravinsky jotted down a motif in his memory, intended as a piece for piano, but which eventually became the chorale with which this short work closes.

Following Debussy’s death the Paris journal *La Revue musicale* invited several composers, including Ravel, Falla, Bartók and Stravinsky, to contribute a musical item to its “Tombeau de Claude Debussy”. Stravinsky’s tribute was published in 1920, at which stage he decided to extend the tribute into a longer work.

Two factors in this composition are of equal importance: the first is Stravinsky's intention in using the term "symphonies". He didn't mean a "symphony" in either the singular or plural sense that we understand it today but in the literal sense of the 5 original Greek words: *sim* or *sin* meaning "with" or "together" and *fonos* meaning "sound". So "symphony" means "sounding together", and the "symphonies of wind instruments" was Stravinsky's way of signalling his idea that wind instruments literally took a "back seat" in the orchestra and deserved recognition in their own right.

Stravinsky was also insistent that "the point of the music lies in the juxtaposition of three different symphonies" - a reference to the different groupings of instruments within the piece.

Secondly, Stravinsky's relationship with Debussy was, at best, ambivalent on both sides. While Stravinsky revered the French composer and had written in his style in his earlier works, he was now composing much more in his own idiom and doubted that Debussy would have approved of this work. For his part Debussy, while publicly acknowledging Stravinsky's achievement in "enlarging the boundaries of the permissible in the Empire of Sound" (as he wrote to him) was privately depressed by the fact that his own powers were waning while Stravinsky's star was in the ascendant. In fact he disliked Stravinsky's manner, writing to a friend that Stravinsky was "a spoiled child, a young man who wears flashy ties and treads on women's toes while kissing their hand".

Nevertheless, there was sufficient musical rapport between them for Stravinsky to write this "in memoriam" piece. In Stravinsky's words, it is "an austere ritual which is unfolded in terms of short litanies between different groups of homogeneous instruments" (the "symphonies").

Although it's very short, it is in four distinct sections: the opening is based on two Russian folk melodies, followed by a Pastorale. The third section is a vigorous dance, announced by sharp fortissimo chords,

leading into the chorale (the original Tombeau), scored for brass alone right up to the close where they are joined by the woodwind.

The première in London in 1921, conducted by Serge Koussevitsky, was a difficult affair, with laughter breaking out in the audience during the passage given to the bassoon. The soon-to-be-great pianist Arthur Rubinstein accompanied Stravinsky to the concert and recorded that “instead of stopping the performance and addressing the audience with a few words, the conductor smiled maliciously and even had a twinkle in his eye as he looked over his shoulder at the laughing audience”. The poet and aesthete Sacheverell Sitwell compared the opening to the braying of a donkey.

Stravinsky’s response was characteristic: “The audience didn’t hiss enough”, he commented. “They should have been much angrier.” Although he acknowledged that some of the writing was inept, he claimed that “It represents my most serious reflections and aims”.

He was more sorrowful than annoyed that “the public was simply unable to understand the music at a first hearing”: the controversial author of *The Rite of Spring* still found it difficult to communicate his radical newness to the musical public.

Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ

ANTONIN DVOŘÁK 1841-1904

Serenade for Wind Instruments, Cello and Double Bass in D minor, Op. 44

- i. *Moderato, quasi marcia*
- ii. *Minuetto*
- iii. *Andante con moto*
- iv. *Finale, allegro molto*

Dvořák wrote this Serenade in January 1878, having recently composed his better-known Serenade for Strings, and followed it very quickly with his *Slavonic Dances* with which this Serenade has much in common.

Dvořák had recently been an applicant for an Austrian state prize, for which one of the judges was Brahms. Brahms was so impressed with Dvořák's work that he recommended him to the influential Berlin publisher Simrock, resulting in a contract which included Dvořák's fifth symphony, the two serenades and the *Slavonic Dances* which have some affinity with the *Hungarian Dances* which Brahms had just published.

The orchestration of the wind serenade is similar to that of Brahms's Serenade in A Op. 16: pairs of oboes, clarinets and bassoons and three horns. The obvious omission is the lightest and brightest of the wind family, the flute, suggesting that the music might have a darker character; but Dvořák achieves a rich sonority without impairing the overall tone. To add some stability to the bass line, Dvořák adds a cello and a double bass.

The opening "march" sounds rather pompous, but we soon realise that it is a musical joke on Dvořák's part: it's a form of homage to Mozart, whose serenades usually begin with a march, but in this case Dvořák gives it the character of a middle-European wind-band with its traditional "Harmoniemusik" with humorous undertones.

The second section is unrepentantly Czech in flavour, featuring the “sousedska” (the traditional “neighbour’s dance”) and a vivacious “furiant”. The third again evokes the elegance of Mozart with variations on a romantic theme, while the finale is a zesty polka, briefly interrupted by a return of the pompous March, only to be swept aside by the insistence of the polka.

Brahms was so impressed by the Serenade that he recommended it to his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim: “It would be difficult to discover a finer, more refreshing impression of really abundant and charming creative talent”. Dvořák himself conducted the premiere in a concert consisting exclusively of his own works in Prague in November 1878.

Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ