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**FRIDAY 2 JULY 2021, 7pm**

National Concert Hall

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**GOUNOD**

Petite symphonie

**IBERT**

Concerto for Cello  
and Wind Instruments

**RICHARD STRAUSS** Serenade in E flat

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**RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra**

**Gavin Maloney** conductor

**Martin Johnson** cello

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**PROGRAMME NOTES**

## CHARLES GOUNOD 1818–1893

### Petite symphonie in B flat

- i. *Adagio – allegretto*
- ii. *Andante cantabile (quasi adagio)*
- iii. *Scherzo, allegro moderato*
- iv. *Finale, allegretto*

This “little symphony” for nine wind players dates from 1885, and was commissioned by the Paris-based wind ensemble, the *Société de musique pour instruments à vent*. It is scored for flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two horns and two bassoons.

Gounod had previously composed two symphonies for full orchestra (in the 1850s) but was more interested in work for the stage, inspired by his friendship with the great mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, which led to his major operatic triumphs, *Faust* (1859) and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867). In later life he concentrated on small-scale works.

The origins of this “little symphony” lie in Gounod’s friendship with the flautist Paul Taffanel, who is respected as the founder of the French style of flute playing. Taffanel was a member of the orchestras of both the *Concerts du Conservatoire* and the *Paris Opéra*. It also owes something to the fact that at this period Theobald Boehm was developing the capabilities of woodwind instruments, allowing them a greater technical range as well as enhancing their acoustic impact.

Taffanel’s *Société* presented a concert series each year from 1879 to 1893 and Gounod’s *Petite symphonie* was not only the highlight of the 1885 season but featured each year thereafter – and, indeed, was one of the few works commissioned by the group to retain its place in the repertoire. In the 1885 premiere it concluded a programme which also included Mozart’s quintet for piano and winds and a Romance for flute and piano by Saint-Säens.

Gounod's previous symphonies (now, regrettably, seldom performed) had had a classical character, and in this nonet for wind he adopted the same style, reminiscent of Haydn: it's "easy listening", but shows off the tonal resources of each instrument, not surprisingly making the flute the most prominent.

A vibrant opening *Allegretto* is followed by an extended *Andante* which features the flute in what could be described as an operatic aria, with a lilting melody floating above the other eight instruments. This is followed by a brisk *Scherzo* featuring the horns and an equally lively *Finale* in which each instrument is allowed to shine.

*Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ*

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## JACQUES IBERT 1890-1962

### Concerto for Cello and Winds

- i. *Pastorale: allant*
- ii. *Romance: souple*
- iii. *Gigue: animé*

Jacques Ibert was a talented and versatile composer, working both in the opera house and with small-scale ensembles, parallel to his career, first as director of the *Académie de France* based in Rome and, after the Second World War, in charge of the Paris *Opéra* and *Opéra-Comique*.

Ibert can't be "labelled" as belonging to any one style or school of composition. His operas, from *Persée et Andromède* (1921) to *Barbe-bleue* (1943) demonstrate a range of styles, and the same can be said of his small-scale work for orchestra, which began with his 1920 work based on Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, proceeded to what is probably his most renowned work today, his *Divertissement* of 1929 and four concertos, for flute, alto saxophone, oboe, and the work we are to hear this evening, for cello and wind instruments, dating from 1925.

The work is scored for solo cello with two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two bassoons, two clarinets, one trumpet and one horn. It's unusual in that there are very few concertos for a solo stringed instrument with winds. This one may have been inspired by Ibert hearing Kurt Weill's Violin Concerto, premiered in Paris earlier that year, but it also has features in common with Martinu's cello concerto of 1924, which also has a dialogue between the soloist and the small instrumental group.

Strictly speaking, Ibert's work is more of a "concertino" than a full-scale concerto, as it's comparatively short and does not feature any elaborate development of its themes.

In the opening *Pastorale* the woodwind set a country scene which the cello then takes up before the horn interrupts and unsettles the rustic calm. The "souple" of the second movement, "Romance" suggests the lithesome quality of the cello's long melody, again interrupted by a discussion with the other instruments. There's a Scottish feel about the "animated" Gigue leading to a brief cadenza for the cello and a lively conclusion.

*Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ*

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## **RICHARD STRAUSS** 1864-1949

### **Serenade in E flat, Op. 7**

This brief serenade for thirteen wind instruments (two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, one contrabassoon (or tuba) and four horns) is one of the earliest surviving works by Richard Strauss, composed when he was only seventeen.

Strauss's father Franz was principal horn player in the Munich court orchestra and influenced his son's musical development. His personal favourites were Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven but his love of

Beethoven did not extend to the later, iconoclastic works: he was a classicist and a conservative, although he did also admire the early Romantic composers such as Mendelssohn; his musical tastes are reflected in this work which gives prominence to the horn.

Franz Strauss would, however, have disavowed the influence of Wagner which his son would display in later works like the tone poems of the next decade – such as *Death and Transfiguration* or *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. In fact the young Strauss had been forced to read the score of Wagner's *Tristan und Iseult* secretly, for fear his father would discover his new passion. It's extraordinary that Franz Strauss could play Wagner's music exquisitely, even though he detested it.

The Serenade does indeed remind us of Mozart (who also wrote a Serenade for thirteen instruments) and with a dash of Mendelssohn but it also shows us that the young Strauss was already thinking along original lines that would eventually give rise to his major operatic and symphonic works such as *Der Rosenkavalier*.

The Serenade is in one movement, mostly *andante*. It's melodic and written to bring out the full rich sound of each instrument, especially the horns which have a long lyrical passage in the middle of the work, before coming to a gentle close with the flutes.

*Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ*