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FRIDAY 9 APRIL 2021, 7pm

National Concert Hall

ELAINE AGNEW *Strings A-stray*
STRAVINSKY Eight Instrumental Miniatures
STRAVINSKY Danses Concertantes
STRAVINSKY Concerto in E-flat (Dumbarton Oaks)

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

David Brophy conductor

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



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PROGRAMME NOTES

ELAINE AGNEW b. 1967

Strings A-stray

Each of the four continuous movements of *Strings A-stray* has its own strong dance characteristic. In the opening *Mr Mani*, four pitches, comprising of a specific intervallic shape, are juggled with irregular rhythmic combinations associated with South Indian percussion music. This slowly melts into the following *Sway*, whose expansive phrases allows the music to quietly breathe. A *Mazurka* features familiar rhythmic and phrasal shapes which play around with the mis-placing of accents and the juxtaposition of previously heard material while the final *Bouree* provides contrast with its smooth and pulsating manner and restricts itself to the earlier four-note mode. This pulse travels through varying textures, solo lines and noticeable quotes before building up energy prior to an abrupt end.

Strings A-stray was commissioned by the Irish Chamber Orchestra and since its premiere at the 1994 Two Cathedrals Festival in Derry it has enjoyed numerous performances around the world and is recorded by Black Box Music. It has been performed by the Ulster Orchestra with conductor Ken Montgomery during the BBC Radio 3 Invitation Series at the Ulster Hall and broadcast on BBC Radio 3. More recently it has been performed by the Ivernia Orchestra in Manchester Cathedral, RTÉ Concert Orchestra in Liberty Hall and by the Australian Monash University Chamber Orchestra.

Programme note © Elaine Agnew

IGOR STRAVINSKY 1882-1971

Eight Instrumental Miniatures

- i. *Andantino*
- ii. *Vivace*
- iii. *Lento*
- iv. *Allegretto*
- v. *Moderato*
- vi. *Tempo di marcia*
- vii. *Larghetto*
- viii. *Tempo di tango*

This very short work (each “miniature” lasting only a minute) was originally written in 1921 for piano as a “five-finger exercise” to flex the fingers of the right hand. Stravinsky described the work as “very easy melodies where the five fingers of the right hand, once placed on the keys, no longer move during a period or an entire piece, while the left hand, intended to accompany the melody, provides a harmonic design of the greatest simplicity. It was a rather amusing little job where, with the most limited means, I wanted to awaken in the child a taste for melody in its possible combinations with a rudimentary accompaniment.”

The third movement, *Lento*, has hints of Stravinsky’s ballet “Petrouchka” (1911) while the fourth, *Allegretto*, has echoes of his “Soldier’s Tale” of 1918. The last piece, in “tango-time”, Stravinsky nicknamed “Tijuana Blues” after it had first been performed in its orchestral version in Mexico City in 1961.

In orchestrating the “five finger pieces”, Stravinsky had the opportunity to make the arrangements far more subtle, distributing the principal melodies between the various instruments and using them to provide the “left hand” accompaniment in a variety of ways.

After his early iconoclastic phase, which features such outstanding works as the “Firebird” suite (1910) and “The Rite of Spring” (1913), Stravinsky

moved into a longer phase of “neo-Classical” works, from around 1920, and the original *“Les Cinqs Doigts”* [the five fingers] was part of this shift in his musical interests. This period would see the “Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments” (1923) and the “Symphony of Psalms” (1930). He later developed into his “serial” period – adopting the musical ideas of Schoenberg, and at this time he began an association with Lawrence Morton, a personal friend who included many of the composer’s works in the “Monday Evening Concerts” which he directed at the Los Angeles County Auditorium in West Hollywood Park. The very first concert, on 20 September 1954, was dedicated to the memory of Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) and featured the first performance of a new work in Thomas’s memory by Stravinsky: “In Memoriam Dylan Thomas”, one of the first works of his “serial” period. “Monday Evening Concerts” in fact premiered nearly twenty of Stravinsky’s own smaller works, including new and reworked pieces.

Stravinsky first orchestrated four of the pieces, and, in 1962, the complete set, dedicating it to Lawrence Morton. The orchestration consists of two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, violins, violas and cellos, and a single horn, which are introduced in various combinations in each of the eight movements. The “tango” is the only one to feature all fifteen players at the one time. The size of the orchestra indicates the way Stravinsky’s music had concentrated from the lush, “neo-romantic” days of his large-scale compositions.

Although small-scale, “Eight Instrumental Miniatures” displays many of Stravinsky’s unique qualities as a composer. His need for order is shown by his adherence to classical structures which have been moulded to accommodate his musical style. He took the small pedagogical keyboard work and made it into an intimate orchestral one. In both versions he demonstrates an uncanny ability to introduce the twelve-tone dissonance he had adopted from Schoenberg, without offending the ear.

The dedicatee, Lawrence Morton, wrote in his memoirs that “it may seem trivial to remember him with such a small work as the Miniatures. In those days he was in his prime — his prime lasted long, and I try to remember him that way. When the eight pieces were completed, he dedicated the set to me. That dedication is my passport to immortality (if there is any). Besides, I like the music.”

Programme note Richard Pine © RTÉ

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Danses concertantes for chamber orchestra

- i. *Marche - introduction*
- ii. *Pas d'action - con moto*
- iii. *Thème varié - lento/allegretto/Scherzando/andantino/
coda, tempo giusto*
- iv. *Pa de deux - risoluto - andante sostenuto*
- v. *Marche - conclusion*

Described as an “abstract ballet”, these dances were not originally intended for dance performance, although they have been choreographed several times, for example by George Balanchine and Kenneth MacMillan. They were commissioned in 1941 by the Werner Janssen Orchestra of Los Angeles, where Stravinsky had just come to live.

He had suffered a series of personal misfortunes in these years, including the deaths of his first wife, his daughter and his mother, and had been dislocated by the onset of the Second World War, which evicted him from his home in France and brought him to the USA. The “Danses concertantes” was his first major work after settling in Hollywood/Los Angeles.

At the time, Stravinsky was working on a number of ideas, and these dances reflect some of the musical motifs from his “Jeu de cartes” of 1937 and the “Symphony in C” (1939). More significantly, they also provide an echo of the concerto “Dumbarton Oaks” of 1938, and have been “twinned” with “Dumbarton Oaks” and nicknamed “Stravinsky’s Brandenburgs”.

“Dances concertantes” belongs to Stravinsky’s “neo-classical” period and is characteristically brief in statement and humorous in intention.

The work opens and closes with a “march” in strict tempo, but the inner sections are more idiosyncratic in form: the second, with the title “*pas d’action*”, refers to the ensemble that would be undertaken by a dance troupe, while the fourth, the “*pas de deux*”, again suggests a movement involving two “dancers” – in this case, the oboe and the clarinet. The central movement is a series of variations and is the longest and most abstract, taking the “theme” (presented first by the woodwinds) in different musical directions.

Stravinsky himself conducted the Werner Janssen Orchestra in the première on 8 February 1942.

Programme note Richard Pine © RTÉ

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Concerto in E flat, “Dumbarton Oaks”

i. *Tempo giusto*

ii. *Allegretto*

iii. *Con moto*

(played without a break)

This work is almost always referred to by its nickname. This is due partly to an error, since it was at Dumbarton Oaks that an important conference was held in during the Second World War at which the foundation of the

United Nations was laid. However, the house to which it refers was the home of Robert and Mildred Bliss and it was for their thirtieth wedding anniversary in 1938 that the concerto was commissioned.

The Bliss couple were renowned collectors of antiques and pre-Columbian art, for which their house in Washington DC (which they eventually donated to Harvard University) was a beautiful setting. Robert Bliss had been a distinguished US diplomat, as ambassador in both Sweden and Argentina as well as serving in St Petersburg and Paris, and he and his wife frequently hosted social and political events. Stravinsky visited the house in 1937, and found the beautiful gardens inspirational – not least perhaps because he was suffering at the time from tuberculosis which was to kill his wife and daughter within a year.

It has been compared with Bach's six "Brandenburg" concertos and there are in fact brief quotations from Bach embedded in this piece, as well as a strong Baroque flavour which, as with all Stravinsky's work, encounters and merges with his own style. He acknowledged his indebtedness to Bach, saying "I do not think Bach would have begrudged me the loan of these ideas". He had played Bach a lot during the composition of the concerto, partly to console himself for his daughter's impending death. It was the last work he completed in Europe, before his forced emigration to the USA.

Nevertheless the music is lively in the opening movement, lyrical in the second and jaunty in the final part.

The premiere took place at a private function at Dumbarton Oaks in May 1938, on the Bliss's wedding anniversary. Stravinsky, still suffering from tuberculosis, was unable to attend, and the work was conducted by his friend, the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger who was in the USA as a guest conductor at the Boston Symphony. Stravinsky himself conducted the public première in Paris the following month.