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**FRIDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 2021, 7.30pm**

**THE HELIX**

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**SIBELIUS** Violin Concerto

**DVOŘÁK** Symphony No. 5

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**RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra**

Conductor **Mihhail Gerts**

**Simone Lamsma** violin

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

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**RTÉ lyric fm**

**PROGRAMME NOTES**

## **Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47**

- i. Allegro moderato*
- ii Adagio di molto*
- iii Allegro ma non tanto*

Sibelius's only concerto dates from 1903 and had its premiere in Helsinki on 8 February 1904. Originally he promised the solo part to the former leader of the Helsinki Philharmonic, Willy Burmester, then in Germany, but he was not available to play it until March 1904. He was horrified to discover Sibelius had agreed that Viktor Nováček, a far less talented violin teacher, would take on the task. Sibelius protested that monetary necessities required a speedier launch but asked that Burmester would undertake later performances. The première was set for 2 December but was postponed until February. Then it was found that Nováček was not up to the concerto's extreme demands and gave a disastrous reading. The forgiving Burmester was further shocked when he learnt that Sibelius was withdrawing the score for extensive rewriting, particularly in the first movement and then, at the prompting of his German publisher, agreed that the leader of the Berlin Orchestra, Karl Halir, would play the revision under the baton of Richard Strauss in October 1905 in Berlin. The press received the work well but it was not a popular success. In 1910 a 17-year-old Hungarian prodigy, Ferenc von Vecsey, played the work in Berlin and Vienna with some success and Sibelius dedicated the score to him, the unfortunate Burmester having been totally eradicated from the story by this time.

It was not until the 1930s, in particular through Heifetz's performances and recording, that the true magic of the score began to be understood, and today the work is one of the most popular in the concert hall and the recording studio. It was far-sighted of Sir Donald Tovey, the distinguished Scottish musicologist, to write in the 1920s: 'Perhaps the Violin Concerto of Sibelius has not yet had time to become popular; but I can see no reason why it should not take its place with the Violin Concerto of

Mendelssohn and the G Minor Concerto of Max Bruch as one of the three most attractive concertos ever written. Personally I am impelled to place it above those two famous works.' At the same time he was careful to note that he was putting the great, formal concertos of Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms in a different league.

The first movement begins with its principal theme straight away, gently played over muted strings. The soloist discusses this material and builds it into an impressive climax with a cadenza. The second theme floats in without any proper introductory material or transition, it is a dark, brooding idea, heralded by bassoons below the soloist. The violin reappears '*molto moderato e tranquillo*' and, after some ecstatic variations on this theme, slides down in typical modulations to the last group of material: an insistent theme on flutes and violins coupled to sudden outbursts on the lower strings. The second main theme is now expanded in a dramatic sequence which after extensive treatment cools down. A lengthy cadenza emerges through dialogue with the orchestra; it is no mere display piece for a virtuoso but launches the development section. This centres on the principal theme, coupled to bird-like utterings, and leads to the recapitulation. There is now a darker hue to the themes as they re-emerge and a powerful climax is built with a strong three-note motif on trombones.

After this huge movement, longer than the other two put together, Sibelius provides an elegiac, slow creation as a balance. Five bars of introduction give way to the poignant main melody. Contrasting material appears in the orchestra but the principal theme soon returns and calms everything with its lyrical magic. The finale opens with a proud and energetic idea, soon developed extensively, with plenty of opportunities for virtuoso display. The first theme Tovey rather naughtily described as 'a polonaise for polar bears'; it is presented over a sombre *moto perpetuo* figure on strings and percussion. A second melody is quickly presented by the orchestra with forceful triple notes. The violin expands the material and Sibelius introduces one of his typical running-bass lines before the first

theme returns for more elaboration. The second theme also returns in dark mutterings over the violin's harmonic soaring and is treated to further development, with the Concerto ending in an impressive flourish.

Note by Ian Fox © RTÉ

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## ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK 1841-1904

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### Symphony No. 5 in F major, Op. 76

- i. *Allegro ma non troppo*
- ii. *Andante con moto*
- iii. *Andante con moto - Allegro scherzando*
- iv. *Finale - allegro molto*

Compared to Dvořák's most celebrated symphony, the 'New World', this one is rarely performed, which is regrettable because it marks the culmination of the style he had been developing in his earlier symphonies. In fact, it is often regarded as Dvořák's first symphony, since its four predecessors were not published in his lifetime and remained almost completely unknown, remaining unpublished until the 1950s. As a result, the 'New World' symphony – in fact his ninth – was regularly referred to as Dvořák's "fifth", causing some confusion.

Dvořák and Brahms were near contemporaries, and their symphonic styles have often been compared. Perhaps because Brahms was securely based within the Germanic tradition, he was regarded as the leader, but in fact Dvořák's fifth symphony was written before Brahms's first. Nevertheless, Dvořák could never quite escape unfair comparisons: when he dedicated the score of this symphony to the great conductor of the day, Hans von Bülow, the conductor replied how thrilled he was to receive the dedication from Dvořák: "next to Brahms, the most gifted composer of today". Maybe this wasn't intended as a put-down, and certainly shouldn't be taken as such.

Composed in a mere six weeks, in the summer of 1875, when Dvořák was in his mid-thirties, and had just won a prestigious prize for composition in Austria, the fifth symphony confirms that he had found the confidence to put together a series of symphonic movements which were in harmony with each other, rather than seeming to be inconsistent. It's a case of Dvořák channelling his musical energies into the conventional symphonic form, without in any way diminishing his vision as a composer. By doing so, he was able to give the classical symphony a new sense of direction and style, without abandoning the form itself. The music is straightforward, confident and very natural-sounding. It received its premiere in Prague in 1879.

Having said that, there is, however, a contrast between the first three movements and the dramatic *Finale*. The opening *Allegro* is pastoral in character, with an appealing catchy rhythm and bird-songs heard in the clarinets. The second movement is more nocturnal, and is reminiscent of a *dumka* – a traditional Slavic musical form of which Dvořák was especially fond, and which is meditative and even melancholic – Dvořák marks the music as “expressive and sorrowful”.

At the end of the score for the second movement, Dvořák wrote: “Very brief pause and go straight on”. The following movement, a scherzo, is in the style of the Slavonic Dances he would compose three years later. Then comes the dramatic *Finale* which a London critic greeted as “a grand inspiration, written in a masterful form” when the symphony had its London premiere nearly ten years later. Its big, powerful themes and relentless onward thrust mark Dvořák's emergence as a major composer.

*Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ*