

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra/Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate end time: 9.40pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Edward Elgar Violin Concerto

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Allegro molto

Sergei Prokofiev *Romeo and Juliet*

Montagues and Capulets – Dance of the Knights
Juliet as a Young Girl
Masks
Romeo and Juliet (Balcony Scene)
Death of Tybalt
Friar Laurence
Dance of the Five Couples
Dance of the Antilles Girls
Romeo at the Grave of Juliet
The Death of Juliet

The CBSO and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla present two masterpieces of the 20th century, one a rapturous violin concerto, the other hewn under the pressure of Stalinist Russia.

When Edward Elgar wrote his Violin Concerto in 1909–10 his reputation was at its peak, with a decade of spectacular artistic successes behind him. But nothing was ever straightforward with this complicated man: elation and terrible self-doubt would alternate as he composed and, after the initial satisfaction at finishing a score, he would often react harshly against it.

But the Violin Concerto was a different matter. As one friend recalled: 'I have never heard Elgar speak of the personal note in his music except in regard to the concerto, and of it I heard him say more than once, "I love it".' Elgar said more about that 'personal note' to his close friend Alice Stuart-Wortley, whom he nicknamed 'Windflower', grouping the concerto with his Second Symphony (1911) and his choral ode, *The Music Makers* (1912): 'I have written out my soul in the concerto, Sym. II and the Ode and you know it ... in these three works I have "shewn" myself.' At the head of the concerto's score Elgar placed a quotation from the novel *Gil Blas* by the 18th-century writer Alain-Rene Lesage: 'Aqui esta encerrada el alma de' ('Here is enshrined the soul of'). The five dots appear to stand for Alice's full initials, ASCS-W. Was Elgar in love with her? Certainly he found her fey beauty, her intelligence and her devotion to his work inspiring, but if she was ever more to him than a muse, we'll probably never know.

If we can for a moment accept conventional Edwardian notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine', we can hear how muscular masculine ideas and more delicate, feminine 'Windflower' motifs alternate throughout the concerto's long first movement. The striding opening theme suggests a self-portrait: Elgar the bluff, self-styled Edwardian man of action. But the violin's entry takes us into a new world: meditative, soulful, subtly fluid in tempo and character. One striking detail: the violin never plays the concerto's first theme (Elgar himself?) in its original form, instead responding to it, extending it lyrically or developing it with virtuoso fireworks.

It's tempting to hear the Andante that follows as an imaginary love-scene. Now the feminine themes initiate, but intimate or dramatic conversation between these and the masculine element is just as crucial as in the first movement. The closing pages have a rapt, sensuous beauty unusual even by Elgar's standards. The man of action takes the lead again in the finale, but memories of the slow movement grow stronger as the movement unfolds. Eventually, a ghostly return of the first-movement theme introduces the most original passage in the whole concerto: a dream-like accompanied cadenza full of longing, during which the strings strum their instruments like guitars.

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Eventually the first theme rouses soloist and orchestra again, leading to an exultant major-key conclusion; all the same, it may well be the unearthly vision of that haunting cadenza which lingers longest in the memory.

Passion and tenderness, joy and pain, abound in Sergei Prokofiev's ballet score *Romeo and Juliet*, emotions often thrown into relief by his playful sense of humour. But whose passion and tenderness are we hearing? Unlike Elgar, Prokofiev was not the kind of man to 'shew' himself in his music. Instead there is a remarkable empathy with Shakespeare's characters, plus a feeling that the playwright's ripely beautiful poetry is being transformed into music of equal richness and poignancy.

Prokofiev completed the original score in 1935, while he was in still in the process of returning to his Russian homeland – he finally took up Soviet citizenship in 1936. In this early version the story had a happy outcome, but for the 1940 premiere at the Kirov Ballet it was much revised, and Shakespeare's tragic ending was restored. It was a huge success, both in the USSR and across the world, and has never lost that popularity. The fact that music written for a Communist ballet theatre could become famous as the theme for a TV show celebrating capitalist enterprise (*The Apprentice*) would no doubt have appealed to Prokofiev's ironic sense of humour.

Prokofiev extracted three orchestral suites from the ballet, in which the ordering of the movements had more to do with musical balance than with Shakespeare's plot. But tonight we hear a selection of movements from these suites arranged so they reflect the unfolding of the tragedy. The enmity of the two rival families is presented with grim force in 'Montagues and Capulets' and we sense their determination to maintain the feud in 'Dance of the Knights'. After being introduced to Juliet, we are spectators at the ball ('Masks') where the lovers meet for the first time.

The famous Balcony Scene is portrayed gorgeously, then comes maximum contrast as we watch the lightning swordplay of Mercutio and Tybalt, witness Tybalt's death agonies, then follow his funeral cortege. Next we meet the ambiguous Friar Laurence – wise counsellor or agent of the lovers' downfall? Prokofiev's sense of irony is very much to the fore here. Two colourful dance sequences lead to the full-on emotional catharsis of the last two numbers, in which Romeo, believing Juliet dead, kills himself, and the revived Juliet then discovers her lover's body and follows him into the arms of death.

It may be easy to mock the absurd elements in Shakespeare's dramatic showdown, but not when you hear Prokofiev's musical response, in which his gift for long-arching, viscerally stirring melody is displayed at its finest, leading to an ending that's touching in its simplicity.

Performers

Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla conductor

Vilde Frang violin

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

violin I

Nathaniel Anderson-Frank
Jonathan Martindale
Philip Brett
Peter Liang
Jane Wright
Steven Proctor
Kirsty Lovie
Mark Robinson
Colette Overdijk
Victoria Gill
Stefano Mengoli
Catherine Chambers
Katharine Gittings
Wendy Quirk
Robert Bilson
Amanda Woods

violin II

Lowri Porter
Moritz Pfister
Catherine Arlidge
Amy Jones
Cassi Hamilton
Bryony Morrison
Gabriel Dyker
Bethan Allmand
Georgia Hannant
Lara Sullivan
Agnieszka Gesler
Adam Hill
Henry Salmon
Barbara Zdziarska

viola

Adam Romer
Steven Burnard
David BaMaung
Michael Jenkinson
Catherine Bower
Sarah Malcolm
Amy Thomas
Mabon Rhyd
Jessica Tickle
Helen Roberts
Joe Ichinose
Henrietta Ridgeon

cello

Eduardo Vassallo
Charles-Antoine Archambault
Arthur Boutillier
David Powell
Miguel Fernandes
Helen Edgar
Sarah Berger
Joss Brookes
Abigail Hyde-Smith
Lucy Hoile

double bass

Anthony Alcock
Julian Atkinson
Jeremy Watt
Julian Walters
Aisling Reilly
Mark Goodchild
David Burndrett
Lowri Morgan

flute

Marie-Christine Zupancic
Veronika Klirova

piccolo

Helen Benson

oboe

Alex Hilton
Emmet Byrne

cor anglais

Rachael Pankhurst

clarinet

Oliver Janes
Joanna Patton

bass clarinet

Mark O'Brien

saxophone

Kyle Horch
bassoon
Nikolaj Henriques
Benjamin Hudson

contrabassoon

Margaret Cookhorn

horn

Christopher Gough
Jeremy Bushell
Mark Phillips
Flora Bain
Olivia Gandee

trumpet

Jason Lewis
Robert Johnston
Jonathan Quirk

trombone

Richard Watkin
Anthony Howe

bass trombone

David Vines

tuba

Adrian Miotti

timpani

Matthew Hardy

percussion

Adrian Spillett
Andrew Herbert
Toby Kearney
Sophie Hastings
Mark Norman

harp

Katherine Thomas

piano/celesta

James Keefe

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