BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

Britten Weekend 2025

Saturday 8 November 7.30pm
Snape Maltings Concert Hall

Duration: 85', including an interval of 20'

English Chamber Orchestra & Raphael Wallfisch

English Chamber Orchestra
Raphael Wallfisch cello
Łukasz Borowicz conductor

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Leonore Overture No.1, Op.138 (1807) *10'*

Arthur Bliss (1891–1975)
Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, Op.120 (1970) *28'*

i. Allegro deciso
ii. Larghetto
iii. Allegro

INTERVAL

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–1975)
Chamber Symphony in C minor, Op.110a (1960), arr. Rudolf Barshai (1924–2010) *25'*

i. Largo
ii. Allegro molto
iii. Allegretto
iv. Largo
v. Largo

This performance is kindly supported by
The Bliss Trust

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

In the catalogue of **Ludwig van Beethoven**'s published works according to opus number the *Leonore* Overture No.1, appears at the very end of the list, with the highest number of all at Op.138. This was result of Tobias Haslinger, who had purchased the manuscript in an auction shortly after Beethoven's death, failing to publish the score for a further eleven years. It is not only the overture's opus number that is misleading, however, but also the number '1'. Although originally dated to 1805 and represented as Beethoven's first attempt to begin *Fidelio,* his only opera, Alan Tyson has convincingly demonstrated that it was probably composed in 1807, after the pieces now known as *Leonore* Overtures Nos.2 and 3, for a Prague production planned for the following year, but that never took place.

Leonore – as the opera was initially named, taking its original title from the real name of its heroine – received its premiere at the Theater an der Wien in November 1805. The overture performed on that occasion was the one now numbered *Leonore* No.2, while the revised version presented four months later at the same theatre used *Leonore* No.3 – the longest and grandest overture. The final version of the opera, now renamed *Fidelio* after the pseudonym Leonore takes when disguised as a prison guard, was presented at the Kärtnertortheater in 1814 and this time performed with an entirely new 'Fidelio overture' – the only one of the four not in C major. *Leonore* No.1 is therefore the only overture not used in Beethoven's lifetime to begin a performance of the opera, perhaps contributing to its relative neglect in the concert hall. Leaving aside its complicated history and taken on its own merits, however, it is an entirely successful piece that offers fascinating insights into this crucial stage of Beethoven's career. Like the other two *Leonore* overtures, No.1 includes material based on Florestan's Act II aria, in which he laments the consequences of his imprisonment, but here the material plays a relatively incidental role in the unfolding of an essentially symphonic structure.

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When Benjamin Britten wrote to Sir **Arthur Bliss** in August 1966 to congratulate him on his 75th birthday, he recalled the older composer's early reputation as an *enfant terrible*, whose first works reflected an admiration for Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Les Six rare among his British contemporaries:

> When one is very young, tales of one's elders' youthful exploits set one's sympathy vibrating strongly … . In my boyhood you, Arthur, were the avant-gardist of Rout, Conversations and daring, possibly apocryphal Parisian exploits … For me, still, the zestful avant-gardist peeps out of the silvery halo of today. Happy you who can preserve youthful exuberance without youthful immaturity.

By this time, Bliss was into his second decade as Master of the Queen's Music, fulfilling official duties assiduously but composing only miniatures and occasional works. But Britten's conviction that this pillar of the British establishment still retained 'youthful exuberance' prompted him to encourage his friend, the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, to commission a concerto from Bliss, whose premiere Britten conducted with Rostropovich and the English Chamber Orchestra during the 1970 Aldeburgh Festival.

Rostropovich's invitation reawakened an interest in the cello that Bliss had retained since his time as a young man playing chamber repertoire with his cellist brother, Howard. At the first performance, the work was entitled 'Concertino': it was only afterwards that Britten, believing Bliss had composed a 'major work', persuaded him to change it. Bliss's initial preference for the diminutive title is perhaps surprising, since the concerto's three movements are all substantial, with a solo part that is anything but lightweight. Although it eschews overt displays of virtuosity until the finale, it is highly demanding throughout, with few opportunities for the soloist to rest. The 'concertino' designation perhaps reflects the modest size of the orchestra by 20th-century standards: 'a Mozartian orchestra, with the addition of harp and celesta', as Bliss described it.

The first movement is energetic and expansive: the soloist enters almost immediately with a theme characterised by energetic leaps, material whose potential for development Bliss rigorously explores. The Larghetto is more introverted and sometimes melancholy, with occasional echoes of Elgar, an important mentor to Bliss in his earlier career: *A Colour Symphony*, his first major orchestral work, was commissioned by the Three Choirs Festival in 1922 at Elgar's instigation. Introspection is interrupted, however, by the exuberant timpani solo that begins the finale, a quicksilver movement characterised by rapid changes of mood and metre. After a lyrical *sostenuto* interlude, the opening theme returns with still greater vigour, heralding an exhilarating conclusion to a concerto that, in Bliss's words, contains 'no problems for the listener – only for the soloist!'

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Dmitry Shostakovich's String Quartet No.8 was premiered in Leningrad on 2 October 1960, the culmination of a momentous few months for the composer: in July, he visited the ruined East German city of Dresden, composing the quartet the same month over just three days; in September, he applied to join the Communist Party after long resisting the pressure to do so; and in the same month, he travelled to London to hear Rostropovich give the UK premiere of his First Cello Concerto. There he met Britten for the first time, the two composers having admired each other's music for many years.

The Eighth Quartet is dedicated to 'the memory of victims of fascism and the war', seemingly in response to the searing experience of witnessing the destruction in Dresden, and a decision that might easily explain the quotation of the 'Jewish' theme from Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio in the Quartet's second movement, apparent imitations of the sounds of war such as the sustained *pianissimo* violin note at the beginning of the fourth movement, and the prevailing mood of lamentation. But many recent commentators have suggested that the figure the quartet truly memorialises is the

composer himself. His friend Lev Lebedinsky suggested that the work's official dedication was a 'disguise', although an apt one, since he considered himself 'the victim of a fascist regime'. 'In fact', Lebedinsky argued, the Quartet was 'his farewell to life. He associated joining the Party with a moral, as well as a physical death.' Certainly this interpretation makes sense of the quartet's extraordinary degree of self-quotation – it cites themes from the First, Fourth, Tenth and Eleventh Symphonies, the First Cello Concerto and the banned opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, as well as the Piano Trio – and the ubiquity of Shostakovich's personal motto DSCH: the four-note pattern, D – E flat (Es in German, hence 'S') – C – B (known in the German system as 'H'), with which he represented his own name.

The sense that the quartet is a raw, unfiltered account of Shostakovich's personal suffering under the Soviet regime has surely contributed to its status as one of his most frequently performed works, both in its original form and in the version heard tonight: a Chamber Symphony for string orchestra arranged by the distinguished violist and conductor, Rudolf Barshai. Shostakovich was initially sceptical when his publisher Peters commissioned Barshai to rework the piece, but once he heard the result, he declared that it 'sounds better than the quartet in the original' and approved its new name and opus number. Barshai went on to orchestrate and record four more of Shostakovich's string quartets as chamber symphonies. Shostakovich expressed his gratitude by allowing Barshai and his Moscow Chamber Orchestra to premiere his Symphony No.14 in Leningrad in 1969; the symphony's first performance outside Russia came the following year here in Snape Maltings, given by the English Chamber Orchestra under Britten, the work's dedicatee.

English Chamber Orchestra

Violin 1 Stephanie Gonley, Ofer Falk, Lucy Jeal, Daniel Meszoly, Djumash Poulsen, Elvina Auh

Violin 2 Elizabeth Wexler, Natalia Bonner, Andrew Roberts, Edward Bale, Caroline Bishop

Viola Yukiko Ogura, Ben Norris, Michael Schofield, Edward Keenan

Cello Tim Lowe, Bozidar Vukotic, Alexandra Mackenzie

Double bass Steve Williams, Joe Cowie

Flute Harry Winstanley, Hannah Grayson

Oboe Joseph Sanders, Lucy Foster

Clarinet Anthony Pike, Jill Turner

Bassoon Julie Price, Claire Webster

Horn John Thurgood, Alastair Rycroft, Jonathan Williams, David Bentley

Trumpet Neil Brough, Paul Sharp

Timpani David Corkhill

Celeste Roderick Elms

Harp Helen Tunstall

The English Chamber Orchestra has performed across the UK and globally for over 60 years and is the most recorded chamber orchestra in the world. From its origins, the ECO has worked consistently with the most significant musical figures in classical music beginning in 1960 with its first patron – Benjamin Britten.

The strong association with Britten led to the ECO performing as resident orchestra at every Aldeburgh Festival from 1961 to 1982, as well as producing numerous recordings of his works. The very last concert that Britten conducted was with the ECO at Snape Maltings on 19 June 1972, and many of his later pieces were composed with the orchestra in mind – including the premieres of *Owen Wingrave*, *Death in Venice* and *Phaedra*. Playing in the cello section for all these performances was Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, a founding member of the ECO and mother of tonight's soloist.