

Britten Sinfonia: Orchestral Colours

Britten Sinfonia

Miranda Dale violin

Zoë Beyers violin, director

Richard Gowers piano

Tess Jackson conductor (for Rough Voices)

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

Rakastava, Op.14 (1912)

9'

- i. Rakastava (The lover)
- ii. Rakastetun tie (The way of the lover)
- iii. Hyvää iltaa ... Jää hyvästi (Good evening ... farewell)

Arvo Pärt (b.1935)

Tabula Rasa (1977)

26'

- i. Ludus (Game)
- ii. Silentium (Silence)

INTERVAL

Gavin Higgins (b.1983)

Rough Voices (2020)

15'

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Symphony No.39 in E flat, K.543 (1788)

29'

- i. Adagio — Allegro
- ii. Andante con moto
- iii. Menuetto (Allegretto) — Trio
- iv. Allegro

Jean Sibelius: Rakastava

Jean Sibelius espoused – and is seen as a figurehead for – the fight for Finnish cultural and political independence; for most of the 19th century, and for the first 52 years of his life, his nation was a vassal state of the Russian empire. In *Rakastava* ('The Lover'), he set village songs from the *Kantelar*, a collection of native folk poetry. The original work was written in 1894 for men's choir, but Sibelius returned to the music several times, reworking it for different forces: tonight's version is for strings and an ultra-discreet addition of percussion.

Rakastava is in three sections: a rather wistful song, a gossamer-light dance and a concluding section that reflects the sorrow of farewell. The string-writing bears the hallmarks of Sibelius' distinctive use of instrumental colour, for example in the middle movement's chuntering repeated notes that add rhythmic propulsion, and in the imaginative multi-divided strings with solo violin and cello emerging from the texture. The mood is restrained and gentle – this is intimate story-telling as befits the oral tradition from which it takes its inspiration.

Arvo Pärt: Tabula Rasa

Tabula rasa: (Latin: 'clean slate'): (1) the mind in its hypothetical primary blank or empty state before receiving outside impressions; (2) something existing in its original pristine state

—Merriam-Webster dictionary

In his early career, the Estonian Arvo Pärt had written – like many of his postwar contemporaries – in a modernist idiom dominated by serialism, the compositional method using all twelve tones of a chromatic scale. But in the early 1970s Pärt wrote almost nothing, devoting himself to the study of plainchant and early music. 'Before one says something, perhaps it is better to say nothing,' he wrote. What emerged after this period, and typified by this work for strings, two solo violins and prepared piano, is a radical new creative direction – a clean slate. His music from this point to the present day (he is 90 this year) speaks in a softer, measured voice.

In *Tabula rasa* Pärt uses a restricted thematic palette and works through his material with an inexorable logic. It's no less organised than the complexity of his early work, but demands a new style of listening: losing ourselves in the spirituality of the slow pace of change, embracing the beauty to be found in pared-back melodic gestures, the rich textures and the silence that surrounds them. Known by the crassly reductive term 'holy minimalism' by some, the composer himself describes it as 'tintinnabulation', derived from the Latin for little bells. The work falls into two large-scale sections: the first – 'Ludus' (game) begins with soft exchanges and frequent silences, as two gently sparring violins build toward a busy cadenza with the piano that is 'prepared' by adding pieces of metal and felt between the strings to restrict or alter the natural resonance. The second part 'Silentium' (silence) encapsulates Pärt's style, as leisurely, oscillating chords eventually ebb away into the barely perceptible depths.

Gavin Higgins: Rough Voices

Gavin Higgins's music can be lyrical, mischievous and urgent, and always forcefully direct. *Rough Voices* – his 2020 commission from the BBC Proms – muses on how the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately affected the vulnerable and

working class. It takes its cue from a poem by Tony Walsh ('They don't like it when rough voices start demanding better choices / But it's tough, we've had enough and we are coming'). The piece overlays and interrupts a dignified string chorale with screams ('of anger, frustration, righteous indignation', writes the composer) before the radiant consolatory chorale is finally allowed the space to bloom.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No.39 in E flat

Mozart completed his 39th Symphony in high summer in Vienna. It was the first instalment of a mighty, varied and inspired triptych – his last three symphonies – completed within the next seven weeks. All were intended for a series of Mozart's subscription concerts that were cancelled at rather short notice. This was a major contributory factor to the composer's financial ill-health towards the end of his life – typically, he tackled what must have been a sizable shortfall by borrowing more rather than spending less.

Popular myth has it these great works were never heard by the composer. That seems improbable, given Mozart lived another three years, and there are several documented concerts including his (albeit unnumbered) symphonies during that period: Mozart the impresario was unlikely to have let his astonishing summer of creativity go to waste. So pragmatism and the laws of probability win out over the romantic notion of writing for posterity, and we must put aside the image of a penniless genius dying before hearing his masterpieces performed. Regardless of their backstory, what musical treasures these three symphonies are! They show all the typically Mozartian traits of grandeur and finesse, adventure, imagination and balance.

A weighty slow introduction is unusual for Mozart, but this symphony opens with a majestic scene-setter. The stately upward flute arpeggio figures and cascading string scales are among the features recycled and reconfigured in the movement that follows. The main theme of the Allegro section enters without fuss or fanfare: its genial upward arpeggio – imitated in the horns – and falling response (copied by bassoons) is a typically exquisitely proportioned fragment of Mozartian musical architecture.

The second movement has the directive *con moto* ('with motion') which prevents it being a genuine slow movement; it's a brisk walk rather than a casual stroll. Mozart's capacity to wring endless variety from a seemingly modest source means the initial eight-bar segment provides more than enough material to sustain the entire movement. The burbling, bucolic minuet and trio is a delightful interpolation. The finale is neither the expected sonata form (built on two contrasting ideas) nor *rondo* (a revolving carousel of themes built around a recurring musical passage). It is monothematic – that is, it is a musical dish that relies on one main ingredient only. The quietly scampering string theme offers a peek under the cloche, and turns out to be the dominant flavour of the entire movement, adroitly seasoned and presented in different ways. Mozart's obsession with it even prevents a conventional ending: in place of a signposted sequence of crowd-pleasing concluding chords, Mozart the conjurer suddenly whips the tablecloth away without so much as a wobble of his musical crockery.