BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

Summer at Snape 2025

Sunday 27 July 5pm
Snape Maltings Concert Hall

Duration: 100', including an interval of 20'

CBSO: Elgar and Tchaikovsky

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
Maximilian Hornung cello
Thomas Søndergård conductor

Edward Elgar (1857–1934)
Cello Concerto in E minor, Op.85 (1919) *28'*

i. Adagio – Moderato
ii. Lento – Allegro molto
iii. Adagio
iv. Allegro – Moderato – Allegro, ma non troppo – Poco più lento – Adagio

INTERVAL

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)
Symphony No.5 in E minor, Op.64 (1888) *50'*

i. Andante – Allegro con anima – Molto più tranquillo
ii. Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza
iii. Valse: Allegro moderato
iv. Finale: Andante maestoso – Allegro vivace – Meno mosso

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Elgar: Cello Concerto

Given how highly-regarded Elgar's Cello Concerto has become, it is startling to discover that the critical reception after its 1919 premiere ranged from lukewarm to chilly: 'The first impression was one of disappointment,' wrote H.C. Colles in *The Musical Times*; others found it 'thin' and 'depressing'. Inadequate time for rehearsing was partly to blame, as well as – according to one reviewer – a lack of audience interest in new works. It has had, though, a major revival in the decades since, largely due to its famous championing by a young Jacqueline du Pré. Reviewers of her 1967 recording found the combination of her youth and Elgar's relative age (this was his last major work, composed when he was 62) incredibly poignant. The 'autumnal' associations of the piece, as well as its nostalgic quality, pervade today. It was indeed composed in the shattered aftermath of the First World War and could easily be an elegy for a lost world. In 1986 it was the theme tune to the ITV series *Paradise Postponed*, which was partly about regret for a vanished, specifically 'English', way of life.

However it might be interpreted, the Cello Concerto is an undeniably moving, elegantly-constructed piece, rich in themes, and with a distinctive characterisation of the solo part. Jerrold Northrop Moore describes the cellist here as a 'lonely solo spirit'. In every movement, apart from the last, the cello opens with an exploratory, sometimes tentative passage as though testing the water before diving in. Even in the boisterous finale, after the strings give a spirited introduction, the cello takes off on an improvisatory journey before joining back in. The themes are melancholy, yet stirringly beautiful, notably the rolling melody of the first movement and the richly scored theme of the Adagio. In between is a scurrying 'Allegro molto', while the energy of the finale is interrupted by a passage of extraordinary yearning. The cello looks back, briefly, to the striking opening chords before this powerfully expressive concerto draws to an emphatic close.

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No.5

Tchaikovsky was a prolific composer, possessed of a mercurial, turbulent character and often a powerful sense of self-doubt. His life was punctuated by dramatic relationships, such as his disastrous, short-lived marriage. But in the summer of 1888 he was in tentatively good spirits, embarking on his Fifth Symphony while on holiday in Frolovskoye, not far from Moscow. Despite having worried to his brother Modest that his talent was drying up, he wrote shortly afterwards to patron Nadezhda von Meck: 'I cannot tell you what a pleasure it has been to watch my flowers grow and see daily – even hourly – new blossoms coming out .... I have been working with good results, for half the symphony is now orchestrated.'

The symphony continued to bloom and grow, forming its structure and atmosphere around a dominant motif first heard at the start, then making appearances throughout. Tchaikovsky noted that the symphony's 'programme' suggested 'Complete resignation before Fate, or ... the inscrutable predestination of Providence,' and the opening theme is frequently described as the 'fate' motif. The symphony is richly abundant rich in other melodies, with four significant themes in the first movement alone, ranging from jaunty to yearning. Yet most of them bear at least some resemblance to the fate motif, either through a dotted, stuttering rhythm or a downward slope of melody. The opening movement ends not with a bang, but with an ominous, whispered descent into the depths of the orchestra.

The second movement begins with one of the most famous themes in the orchestral repertoire, initially on the solo horn (any resemblance to the famous 'Annie's Song' is – according to John Denver – entirely accidental). A clarinet joins in with a soulful counter-melody, followed by an oboe determined to cheer things up. These themes, along with a pulsing underpinning from the rest of the orchestra, lead Tchaikovsky towards the romantic territory of his *Romeo and Juliet* overture composed some eight years earlier. The 'fate' motif dramatically intrudes into atmosphere twice during the movement; the first time seeming to send the orchestra into shock before it regathers with the opening theme. The delicate, dance-like third movement borrows its melody from an Italian street-song, and the 'fate' motif takes more or less a back seat. Yet it is strongly to the fore in the finale, where it eventually transforms into a major key. For some, this is a 'triumph' over fate, the trumpets blasting heroically over the ensemble. Yet Tchaikovsky was not especially happy with the conclusion, writing that it had 'a certain excess of gaudiness and insincerity'. Yet, perhaps with ears attuned to ironic overstatement (such as at the end of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony some years later), we might feel those final E major chords have a darkly sinister rather than 'gaudy' edge.

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