
Aurora Orchestra: Light and Motion

BBC Singers
Britten Pears Chamber Choir
Aurora Orchestra
Nicholas McCarthy piano
Nicholas Collon conductor

Singers from the
Britten Pears Young Artist Programme:
Ceferina Penny soprano
Jonathan Evers baritone

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)

Requiem in D minor, Op.48 (1887–90, rev. 1900)

35'

Introit et Kyrie

Offertoire

Sanctus

Pie Jesu

Agnus Dei

Libera me, Domine

In paradisum deducant angeli

INTERVAL

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Piano Concerto in D for the Left Hand, Op.63 (1929–30)

20'

John Adams (b.1947)

Short Ride in a Fast Machine (1986)

5'

Ravel

Boléro (1928)

16'

Gabriel Fauré: Requiem in D minor

Fauré told a friend that he composed his setting of the Requiem Mass 'for no particular reason, other than for the sheer pleasure of it'. This is a Requiem of serenity, not fear; of consolation not desolation, all the more affecting for its nobility and restraint. It begins with a solemn Introit et Kyrie: whispered pleas for eternal rest (*requiem aeternam*), the instruments descending, voices rising in expectation of eternal light (*lux perpetua*). A melody emerges, embroidered by violas; a luminous, upper voices chorale acts as counterweight (*Te decet hymnus ... exaudi orationem meam* – A hymn befits you ... hear my prayer). The first melody returns, this time to the opening words of the Latin mass (*Kyrie eleison* – Lord have mercy). Voices now move downwards, and the orchestra ascend in sinuous, chromatic lines. The Offertoire opens with choral uncertainty, veiled divided violas and cellos offering their richly textured response. But it modulates into a major key, plainchant-like baritone solo (*Hostias et preces tibi, Domine, laudis offerimus* – We offer prayers and sacrifices of praise to you, Lord). The opening doubts return before a pivotal key-change transforms minor to radiant major, the orchestra dropping away leaving *pianissimo* voices with organ alone in a sumptuous final 'Amen'.

Enter the harp, as female and male voices exchange the simple rising and falling Sanctus melody. Horns lead majestic 'Hosannas' before the movement subsides. The soprano solo Pie Jesu is an innocently child-like hope of peace for the departed. Agnus Dei ('Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, give them eternal rest') has a viola introduction that both prefaces and accompanies the choral tenors' fervent prayer. A dramatic intervention from horns and organ heralds a return to the Introit's unison opening, which in turn dissolves into this movement's viola introduction; we have come full circle. The baritone's plea for deliverance, Libera Me (Release me), includes a segment of the *Dies irae* (Day of wrath) – the text for the Day of Judgement. Fauré the consoler is, however, selective in his choice of words, omitting battle cry and trumpet's blast. What fear and trembling there may be is banished by a quietly rapt vision of eternal life, In Paradisum ('May the angels lead you into paradise'). It radiates Fauré's unshakeable confidence in the hereafter, in what he called his 'lullaby of death'.

Maurice Ravel: Piano Concerto in D for the Left Hand

Pianist Paul Wittgenstein – brother of philosopher Ludwig – commissioned Ravel (along with Korngold, Britten, Prokofiev and Richard Strauss) as he rebuilt his career after losing his right arm in action in the Great War. It's a piece that has to be seen to be believed, such is the level of virtuosity required from only one hand; it provides melody, countermelody, texture, colour and bravura flourishes across the whole range of the keyboard. It may seem an antidote to the G-major two-handed concerto that Ravel was writing at the same time – the darkness to the latter's light. But there is kinship too: its compact form, Ravel's love of jazz, a vivid colour palette, piano writing that encompasses everything from brittle to robust, to softly sung passages of great tenderness. It is in essence a slow movement and a scherzo – or perhaps a stately Sarabande and a vigorous Tarantella. It begins in barely audible gloom; a contrabassoon solo starts the ascent toward the light over the rumble of divided double basses, low harp, and bass drum.

A substantial piano solo gives us the complete Sarabande heard earlier only in fragments. A thunderous orchestral reprise leads to a melancholy little second theme shared by piano and cor anglais. The tempo is lifted and with a crash the spiky Tarantella is upon us, and a lonely bassoon sings the blues. The music has a tension, even menace about it, with shades of *Boléro's* inexorable propulsion even down to the rickety-tikkity percussion rhythms. But it becomes increasingly delirious, as though the Sorcerer's Apprentice had wandered into a raucous jazz dive. A final piano cadenza looks back on all that has gone before, with a brief but boisterous orchestral coda.

John Adams: Short Ride in a Fast Machine

Adams' late 20th-century classic is a perfect distillation of the composer's unique take on minimalism; harmonies largely avoid harsh dissonances, and find no conventional resolution until the final bar, but the driving, subtly interlocking rhythms provide an irresistible momentum. A bravura *fortissimo* woodblock sets the piece in motion (beating out an insistent pulse like a stray percussionist from a Latin-jazz band), before chuntering cross rhythms and Copland-esque fanfares develop. It is, as the evocative title demands, thrilling. Or, as Adams puts it – 'a bright, happy piece of music – very difficult to play but quite a bit of fun'.

Ravel: Boléro

Ravel was in a hurry. His plan to orchestrate piano pieces from *Ibéria* by Albéniz (in response to a commission from Russian ballerina Ida Rubinstein) had been thwarted by another composer securing the rights. He turned instead to the slow seductive dance, the *boléro*. Cuban in origin, it is largely associated with southern Spain, and the stylised flourishes of a matador (with whose short, tailored jacket it shares a name). In truth, he focussed on only one aspect of a what is multi-sectioned dance. And how he focussed! Without hesitation or deviation, this is an exercise in repetition (barring a short, but dramatic, excursion into E major – the entire piece is in the white key of C major). Ravel, in a typically self-effacing remark, wrote to fellow composer Arthur Honegger 'I have written only one masterpiece – *Boléro*. Unfortunately, there's no music in it.' There's plenty of music in it of course – a mesmeric mix of the ancient (a centuries-old dance) and modern (to some it's an 'ahead-of-its-time' orchestral piece of 1960s American minimalism). It's a super-extended orchestral crescendo, an experiment in accrued tension (that surge into E major just seconds from the end is a thrilling release from the C major barrage). It's also a masterpiece of orchestration. Ravel revels in sheer sonic strangeness. He welcomes exotic outsiders (oboe d'amore, soprano and tenor saxophone) into the fold. The solos from flute and tiny E-flat clarinet are so low in their range, and the bassoon and trombone so high they sound like very distant cousins of their real selves. The instrumental doublings range from the conventionally imaginative (flute and muted trumpet) to the slightly unhinged – the bitonal passage where horn and celeste, and a pair of piccolos play the melody at the same time but in different keys has us wondering what weird hybrid instrument we've just heard. Much imitated, often bowdlerised, at nearly 100 years old it remains a unique, virtuosic demonstration of the variety and transfixing power of a symphony orchestra.