

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

Alan Gilbert and Isabelle Faust: Brett Dean and Schumann's Second Symphony

Thursday, June 17, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Alan Gilbert, conductor · Isabelle Faust, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEAN b. 1961 <i>The Lost Art of Letter Writing</i>	38'
2	SCHUMANN 1810–1856 <i>Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61</i>	38'
TOTAL MUSIC		76'

Brett Dean

b. 1961

The Lost Art of Letter Writing

38 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Brett Dean's violin concerto began with a worry about hand-writing. In the note he wrote for the score he observes that the art of letter writing is disappearing, and that writing by hand

may itself be an endangered skill. Watching his daughters grow up surrounded by screens persuaded him that we are losing touch with the tactile side of written communication. He cites an Australian newspaper report that personal letters had fallen from half of all the mail handled by Australia Post in 1960 to 13 per cent. We are in contact with one another more than ever, he concedes, but the nature of that contact has changed.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

‘Hamburg, 1854’. The opening bars are a murmur of rapid, oscillating notes. Dean took the figure from a brief passage in the slow movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony, an orchestral texture he says has always fascinated him. It makes a rippling background against which the violin enters like someone sitting down to write, spinning a long, passionate line to a person who cannot return the feeling. Listen also for traces of Brahms’s early Variations on a Theme of Schumann, which surface during the movement.

‘The Hague, 1882’. This is the slow movement, broad and prayer-like, and the longest stretch of calm in the piece. The violin sings over quiet, slowly shifting harmonies, the musical counterpart of van Gogh’s thought that nature stays beautiful whatever happens to the person looking at it.

‘Vienna, 1886’. A short intermezzo, and the most song-like of the four, since it began life as a setting for voice. The solo violin takes over the singer’s part.

‘Jerilderie, 1879’. The finale is a desperate perpetuum mobile: the soloist hardly stops, and the music hurtles through passages of great virtuosity. Dean notes that for all its brilliance the movement never loses the sense of approaching catastrophe that hangs over Kelly’s document.

Robert Schumann

1810–1856

Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61

38 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Schumann sketched his C major symphony in about two weeks, in the second half of December 1845. Finishing it took most of the following year. The work of orchestration was interrupted again and again by poor health, including low spirits and a ringing in his ears, and the score was not ready until October 1846. Felix Mendelssohn conducted the first performance at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 5 November. It was received coolly,

and did better when it was repeated some ten days later. Published in 1847 as Symphony No. 2, it was in fact the third symphony Schumann had completed.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Sostenuto assai. Allegro, ma non troppo. The symphony begins quietly, with a solemn call in the brass over a slowly flowing line in the strings. Keep that brass motto in your ear: it returns at key moments later on. The fast music that grows out of the introduction is restless and driven, full of sharp dotted rhythms.

Scherzo: Allegro vivace. Schumann places the scherzo second. It is a whirl of rapid violin figuration, notoriously awkward to play, relieved by two calmer trio sections. At the very end the brass motto from the opening bursts in.

Adagio espressivo. The slow movement, in C minor, is the emotional centre: a long, aching melody introduced by the strings and taken up by the woodwinds. Schumann singled out the “melancholy bassoon” here as a sign of the dark period in which he wrote. Listen also for the high violin trills and for a contrapuntal middle passage, a trace of the Bach studies.

Allegro molto vivace. The finale sets off like a march, and soon sweeps up the melody of the Adagio in its rush. Partway through, the march gives way to a new, gentler

theme, in which many listeners hear an echo of the last song of Beethoven's cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved). In the closing pages Schumann combines this song-like theme with the brass motto from the very opening, and the symphony ends in a blaze of C major.

Tonight's artists

Isabelle Faust *violin*

Isabelle Faust plays Brett Dean's concerto on 17, 18 and 19 June, in the season in which Dean is the orchestra's Composer in Residence. The orchestra quotes the composer calling it a "pretty tricky piece" and describes it as tailor-made for Faust's precision and clarity. The solo part needs more than accuracy, though: the violin has to speak as the writer of four very different letters, from the private passion of the first movement to the headlong finale.

Isabelle Faust, born in Esslingen am Neckar in 1972, is a German violinist. She had her first lessons at five and later studied with Christoph Poppen and Dénes Zsigmondy. She won the Leopold Mozart Competition in Augsburg in 1987 and the Paganini Competition in Genoa in 1993, then spent nine years in Paris, where she made her first recording, of music by Bartók. Her repertoire is unusually broad. She plays Bach and Mozart, at times on Baroque-style instruments and bows, as readily as the concertos of Brahms and Berg or the music of Ligeti and Kurtág, and she has given the first performances of works by composers including Jörg Widmann and Péter Eötvös. The pianist Alexander Melnikov is her regular recital partner, and her many recordings for Harmonia Mundi have been widely honoured. She has been a professor of violin at the Berlin University of the Arts since 2004 and plays the 'Sleeping Beauty' Stradivarius of 1704.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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