

Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, and Isabelle Faust in Brett Dean

Thursday, February 11, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Maxime Pascal, conductor · Isabelle Faust, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEAN b. 1961 <i>The Lost Art of Letter Writing</i>	38'
2	BARTÓK 1881–1945 <i>Concerto for Orchestra, BB 123</i>	40'
TOTAL MUSIC		78'

Brett Dean

b. 1961

The Lost Art of Letter Writing

THE COMPOSER

Brett Dean is an Australian composer, violist and conductor, born in Brisbane in 1961. After studying in Australia he moved to Germany, and from 1985 to 1999 he played the viola in the Berliner Philharmoniker. He began composing in 1988, at first as an arranger and through improvised work for radio and film projects, and his reputation grew with the ballet *One of a Kind* for the Nederlands Dans Theater and the clarinet concerto *Ariel's Music*. Since 2000 he has worked as a freelance composer. His best-known pieces include *Carlo* for strings and sampler, which takes the music of Carlo Gesualdo as its starting point, the orchestral work *Beggars and Angels*, the violin concerto *The Lost Art of Letter Writing* and the opera *Hamlet*. Many of his scores respond to literature or to visual art, among it the paintings of his wife, Heather Betts. He continues to perform as a violist and conducts his own music.

ABOUT THE WORK

Brett Dean's violin concerto began with a worry about handwriting. 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

38 minutes

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.

The concerto, completed in 2006, was commissioned jointly by the Cologne Philharmonie and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra for Frank Peter Zimmermann, to whom it is dedicated. Zimmermann gave the first performance in Cologne on 8 March 2007 with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. In 2009 the piece won the Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition, awarded by the University of Louisville.

Each of its four movements is headed by a few lines from a nineteenth-century letter, and each title gives the place and year in which that letter was written. The letters range from private declarations to a public manifesto. Dean explains that the violin acts as both writer and recipient, and that the solo part is meant above all to catch the mood of each letter.

‘Hamburg, 1854’ draws on what Dean calls one of the great secret romances of classical music: Johannes Brahms writing to Clara Schumann. ‘The Hague, 1882’ comes from Vincent van Gogh, who tells a fellow painter that the lasting beauty of nature is the one constant in his troubled and unsettled life. ‘Vienna, 1886’ quotes the composer Hugo Wolf, in a frank outpouring of feeling to someone close to him. ‘Jerilderie, 1879’ takes its cue from the Jerilderie Letter of Ned Kelly, the Australian outlaw, who set down in that small country town a public statement pleading the innocence of his family and of other poor Irish settlers in north-eastern Victoria, and demanding justice.

Two of the four correspondents were composers, and Dean lets their music into his own. The first movement borrows a texture from Brahms and threads part of one of his early works through the orchestra. The third grew out of a movement of Dean’s song cycle *Wolf-Lieder*, in which he had set the same passage from Wolf’s letter.

The piece is a full-scale concerto of more than half an hour, with a large orchestra that includes four percussionists, harp and two pianos, one of them prepared.

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.

Béla Bartók

40 minutes

1881–1945

Concerto for Orchestra, BB 123

THE COMPOSER

Béla Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, then in the Kingdom of Hungary (today Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), and grew up to become one of the towering figures of twentieth-century music, and one of its great explorers. Trained as a pianist and composer at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, he was a formidable virtuoso who might have made his career at the keyboard alone. Instead, in the first decade of the century, he turned to the villages of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, later reaching as far as Algeria, recording peasant songs on wax cylinders and laying, with his friend Zoltán Kodály, the foundations of modern ethnomusicology. That fieldwork was not antiquarianism: the irregular metres, modal scales, and percussive vitality of the music he gathered passed directly into his own language, giving it a flinty rhythmic drive and an earthy modernity unlike anything in the Austro-German tradition he otherwise revered. Bartók loathed fascism: after 1933 he refused to give concerts in Nazi Germany and broke with his publisher there. As Hungary slid toward alliance with Hitler, he emigrated to the United States in 1940, settling in New York. The American years were hard, with failing health, financial anxiety and a sense of exile, yet they produced the radiant Concerto for Orchestra (1943) and the Third Piano Concerto heard tonight. He died of complications of leukaemia in New York on 26 September 1945, his Third Piano Concerto all but finished on his desk.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Concerto for Orchestra is the work that returned Bartók to composition after a silence of several years, and it has become the most widely played of all his orchestral scores. He had left Hungary for the United States in 1940, as the war closed in, and exile went badly. He was homesick, short of money and little performed, and his health was failing; the illness was later identified as leukaemia. Since the Sixth String Quartet of 1939 he had completed no major original work.

In 1943 the conductor Serge Koussevitzky came to see him in hospital in New York with a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation: an orchestral work in memory of the conductor's wife, Natalie, who had died the previous year. The violinist Joseph Szigeti, a friend and fellow Hungarian, had been among those urging Koussevitzky to help. The effect on Bartók was remarkable. He wrote the whole score in under eight weeks, between 15 August and 8 October 1943.

Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra gave the first performance in Symphony Hall on 1 December 1944, and the piece was an immediate success, something Bartók had rarely enjoyed. He afterwards wrote a second, longer ending, the one usually played today. He died in New York in September 1945, less than a year after the premiere.

The title sounds like a contradiction, since a concerto normally has a soloist. Bartók's point was that the orchestra's own instruments and sections are treated as soloists in turn, and the piece was designed for an ensemble of virtuosos. In scale and seriousness it is really a symphony in five movements, arranged symmetrically around a slow central elegy, with a playful movement on either side and large, fast movements at the two ends.

Listeners who feared Bartók as a difficult modernist found this score surprisingly approachable. The mellowing was real, but he had not changed his language. The melodies still grow from the folk music of Hungary and its neighbours that he had spent decades collecting, the counterpoint is as tight as ever, and the central movement belongs to the eerie 'night music' he had been writing since the 1920s.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Introduzione. A slow introduction rises from the cellos and basses in bare fourths, an interval that matters throughout the work, with shivering strings and flute above. The tempo quickens until the Allegro bursts out with a leaping, angular theme. A

gentler idea for the oboe, rocking between two neighbouring notes, provides contrast, and in the middle the brass launch a blazing fugue.

Presentando le coppie (Presentation of the Couples). A side drum, snares off, taps out the rhythm that starts and ends this movement. The wind instruments then come forward two by two, each pair moving at its own fixed distance: bassoons in sixths, oboes in thirds, clarinets in sevenths, flutes in fifths and muted trumpets in seconds. A soft brass chorale forms the middle section, and then the pairs return with extra companions.

Elegia. The emotional centre of the work. Harp glissandos, rippling flute and clarinet and quiet timpani rolls create a nocturnal stillness, which is broken by an anguished outcry from the full orchestra, built on a theme from the first movement's introduction. The calm returns only slowly, and the movement fades out with soft piping from the piccolo.

Intermezzo interrotto (Interrupted Intermezzo). An oboe plays a wistful, folk-like tune in constantly changing metre, and the violas answer with a broad, nostalgic melody. The interruption is a banal little march on the clarinet, a tune that recalls both a song from Lehár's *The Merry Widow* and the 'invasion' theme of Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*. The orchestra greets it with raspberries from the trombones and shrieks of woodwind laughter before the noble viola melody comes back.

Finale. A horn call sets off a whirl of rushing strings, a perpetual motion that draws on the energy of folk dance. A trumpet tune becomes the subject of an elaborate fugue, and in the last pages that same subject returns in the full brass, broad and triumphant, while strings and woodwind race up and down around it.

Tonight's artists

Isabelle Faust *violin*

Isabelle Faust plays Brett Dean's concerto as part of her residency at the Barbican this season. It is a natural piece for her: she is as much at home in new music as in Brahms, whose shadow falls across the first movement, and the solo part asks for a player who can speak quietly and personally as well as race through the finale. She appears here with Maxime Pascal, a conductor who has made much of his career in the music of the last hundred years.

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.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Béla Bartók**

David Cooper, Yale University Press 2018

A recent single-volume life that follows Bartók from his folk-song collecting to the American exile in which the Concerto for Orchestra was written, with clear accounts of the music.

ACCESSIBLE **Béla Bartók: The American Years**

Agatha Fassett, Dover Publications 1970

A friend's close-up memoir of Bartók's last five years in the United States: the homesickness, the illness and the summer in which the commission brought him back to composing.

DEEPER **Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra**

David Cooper, Cambridge University Press 1996

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to this one score: the commission, the folk sources, a movement-by-movement analysis and the work's reception.

SOURCES

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3. The lost art of letter writing: for violin and orchestra, by Brett Dean, Australian Music Centre. <https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/product/the-lost-art-of-letter-writing-for-violin-and-orchestra>
4. Brett Dean wins 2009 Grawemeyer Award, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/news/Brett-Dean-wins-2009-Grawemeyer-Award/11711>
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11. Béla Bartók, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300234374>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-02-11-pascal>

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