

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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

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.

Béla Bartók

1881–1945

Concerto for Orchestra, BB 123

40 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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