



7.30pm, Thursday 22 February



# LOVE LETTERS

**Conductor** Giordano Bellincampi  
**Violin** Veronika Eberle

**Wagner** *Siegfried Idyll*  
**R. Schumann** Violin Concerto  
**Mendelssohn** Symphony  
No.4, 'Italian'

# PROGRAMME NOTES

## **Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**

### *Siegfried Idyll*

One single movement

Duration: c.18'

Let's be honest, no one ever really knows what to get their significant other for their birthday. Keep the next one simple: write them a "symphonic birthday greeting" and organise 13 musicians to play it on the staircase of your home. Easy!

Possibly the best birthday present in history, this was what Richard Wagner came up with for his wife Cosima's 33rd birthday. The couple had only been married four months, but it had been a long road to domestic bliss. They met in 1864 while they were both married to other people. During the six years it took Cosima's husband to consent to a divorce, she gave birth to three of Wagner's children. There were professional implications too, the scandal of the union temporarily costing the composer his good standing with his most important patron, King Ludwig II.

But their devotion to one another superseded anything else, and in *Siegfried Idyll* we look through a window into a life of joy and tenderness, removed from the furore of the outside world. From the outset, the strings and woodwinds embody this coupledness, set as two separate voices that weave in and out of one another before they combine for a transcendental climax.

The principal themes correspond to several that he used in his opera *Siegfried*, which he was writing concurrently. When they occur in the opera, they each reference a crucial point in the eponymous hero and Brünnhilde's love story. The first entry of

the woodwinds is the music associated with Brünnhilde's endless sleep, from which only a hero can wake her. Later on, the music of the Forest Bird – the creature who leads Siegfried to Brünnhilde – is set in counterpoint to the horn call that later declares the triumph of their love.

But perhaps the most moving of all is the opening theme, the same music which carries Brünnhilde's first declaration of love to Siegfried: "I always was, I always am, always in sweet yearning bliss".

## **Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**

### Violin Concerto

Three movements:

- I. *In kraftigem, nicht zu schnellem Tempo*
- II. *Langsam*
- III. *Lebhaft, doch nicht schnell*

Duration: c.33'

Schumann completed his Violin Concerto in October 1853, four months before he attempted suicide. It was written at the request of celebrity violinist Joseph Joachim who, after playing it through for the composer, made the decision to never present it publicly. He did everything in his power to prevent the score from circulating.

For Joachim, the concerto was devastating evidence of the decline of the great man's creative faculties. After his death, it was agreed by him, Clara and Brahms to leave it out of the "complete" edition of his works. The score was eventually given to the Prussian State Library, with the instruction that it was not to be performed until 100 years after Schumann's death.

However, in 1933, Jelly d'Arányi, the Hungarian grand-niece of Joachim, claimed that a message telling her to perform the concerto had come to

her from the beyond during a séance. Whether it was divinely inspired or just a shrewd career move is almost immaterial. Mostly, it was a convenient piece to get back into circulation. The Nazi regime's excommunication of Mendelssohn's (all too Jewish) Violin Concerto had left a gaping hole in the repertoire, and what better way to fill it than with one of the most revered German composers? "By permission of the Führer", the headline read, "Robert Schumann has entered Valhalla."

By permission of the Führer or not, it quickly becomes clear that the Violin Concerto is something apart from the Schumann we might have expected to find. It starts out in familiar territory with a tempestuous entry from the full orchestra, but when the violin enters, it's almost as though it hasn't heard what's come before it. The writing for the solo line is tremendously demanding but remarkably unassuming for a genre that is ostentatious by nature. Rather, the soloist has to fight for their place against a raging, and at times overwhelming orchestra.

The second movement takes the mood from disconcerting to harrowing. The violin sings one of Schumann's most haunting melodies, aching the entire way through, before leading into the surreal closing polonaise whose obsessive circling gives an overwhelming feeling that there's a thought that he's desperate to get out, but just can't.

In the scheme of Schumann's other work and the musical mores of the time, the Violin Concerto is a deeply unconventional piece. However the decisions that he makes don't result in the document of incapacity that provoked Joachim's dismissal of the piece. Rather, they are the building blocks of something searingly honest, with an emotional complexity that has proved

magnetic for violinists and audiences alike. This very thing that makes the piece so compelling, though, is perhaps why those closest to him didn't want the world to see it. Perhaps, it lays his struggle all too bare.

## INTERVAL

### **Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

Symphony No.4, 'Italian'

Four movements:

- I. *Allegro vivace*
- II. *Andante con moto*
- III. *Con moto moderato*
- IV. *Saltarello: Presto*

Duration: c.27'

When Mendelssohn was 21, he was travelling around Europe – exactly what many other people his age are wont to do. However, this is where the similarities between Mendelssohn and most regular twenty-somethings end, mostly because he was already 13 years into a hugely successful career. He was the greatest musical child prodigy in history, the sophistication of his early works exceeding even that which Mozart and Beethoven had managed to achieve at corresponding ages.

Not one to rest on his laurels, however impressive, he sought to develop both his music and his reputation. He started in the British Isles, but on the advice of his friend Goethe, extended his trip and headed south to Italy. He wrote to his father that he was experiencing "the supreme joy in life", and the trip saw the genesis of his masterful 'Italian' Symphony.

The music is of Italianate spirit rather than direct imitation. It captures Mendelssohn's impressions of a place that he found wondrous in every way: the architecture, the landscapes, the lifestyle, the sun – the last

one being particularly seductive for a boy who had spent his life in Northern Germany.

The first movement immediately captures this luminosity, bounding in with optimism and abandon. But, as Mendelssohn noted in a letter to his sister, in Italy one finds “the most wonderful combination of gaiety and seriousness”, and the second movement changes the mood completely. An opening cry precedes an understated funereal march, all the more affecting in its stoicism.

The third movement eschews the more bombastic scherzos of Beethoven, harking back instead to the elegant kind of minuet we would expect from Haydn. The lull is completely broken when the fourth movement bursts forth. This sees the only adoption of Italian musical forms, because what would an Italian party be without dancing? He combines two fiery Italian dances: the Neopolitan saltarello and a tarantella, hurtling towards a thrilling finale that has you inadvertently reaching for the nearest tambourine.

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