

HEBRIDES ENSEMBLE EAST WEST

1pm Monday 13 March 2017

Yann Ghire - Clarinet

William Conway - Cello

Philip Moore - Piano

Kenneth Leighton *Fantasy on an American Hymn Tune* (11 mins)

Claude Debussy *Première Rhapsodie* for clarinet and piano (18 mins)

Isang Yun *Espace I* for cello and piano (8 mins)

Francis Poulenc *Trio* for clarinet, cello and piano (14 mins)

Kenneth Leighton (1929-1988) *Fantasy on an American Hymn Tune* (1974)

Though Leighton spent much of his life in Edinburgh, where he was Reid Professor of Music at the university from 1970 until his death in 1988, it was to his hometown of Wakefield in Yorkshire that he felt he owed his inspiration. 'I like to think that my music has the characteristic Yorkshire qualities', he said, 'which have been described as vigour, forthrightness and emotionalism tempered with common sense'. It was at Wakefield Cathedral that Leighton, a chorister, grew to love the liturgical repertory, soaking up the powerful 'emotionalism' of singing together and developing a love for music governed by melody. 'All my days are spent trying to find a good tune', he later admitted.

All this comes together in his free fantasy on the American melody, 'At the River', a hymn first written by the Rev. Robert Lowry in 1865 and since arranged by countless other composers (Ives, Rubbra and Copland, to name a few). Its powerful melodic line and life-affirming words make it, for Leighton, 'one of the most perfect examples of the union of words and music'. His instrumental adaptation for clarinet, cello and piano takes the form of a series of variation-like fragments, each flowing freely into the next, passing through jazz, improvisatory and dense chromatic treatments along the way. When the *Fantasy* begins there is little evidence of the hymn at all, and in subsequent sections we hear only glimpses of Lowry's original beneath Leighton's bubbling textures. It is not until the expansive final section that the full hymn tune is heard in its entirety, where it is painted with broad brushstrokes by the cello and piano in a heartfelt closing gesture.

Further listening...

Second Symphony (Leighton)

Old American Songs (Aaron Copland)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) *Première Rhapsodie* for clarinet and piano (1909-10)

Debussy was just 10 years old when he was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire on the basis of his exceptional talent, but his 11 years there were not without their troubles. In piano lessons he proved to be an exceptional pupil but he was more problematic as a student of composition. Apparently argumentative and single-minded, Debussy refused to obey the rigid teaching rules of the Conservatoire, instead favouring a more experimental approach to his writing. When he presented his works to his professor of composition he was met with the words: 'I am not saying that what you do isn't beautiful, but it is theoretically absurd.' Even when Debussy found widespread public success in the years that followed, he and the Conservatoire never saw eye-to-eye and Debussy felt continually sidelined from the Parisian musical establishment.

So it came as a huge surprise to him when in 1909 Gabriel Fauré invited Debussy to join the Conservatoire's advisory board. His first task was to compose two new works – one as a showpiece, the other as a test of sight-reading – for the Conservatoire's annual clarinet competition. For the showpiece, Debussy responded with the *Première Rhapsodie* for clarinet and piano – a work he deemed one of the most pleasing he had ever composed and later transformed into a work for clarinet and orchestra. Though it begins softly, marked 'sweet and expressive', there is no mistaking that this is work to test the performer's virtuosity. The languid introduction soon gives way to a spiky *scherzando* and if Debussy is not testing dexterity then he tests breath control, pacing, tone and dynamic range. At the same time, this free-flowing *Rhapsodie* manages to hang together as an inspired piece of instrumental writing – as captivating for the listener as it is challenging for the performers.

Further listening...

Prelude de l'après-midi d'un faune (Debussy)

La Mer (Debussy)

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Isang Yun (1917-1995) *Espace I* for cello and piano (1992)

Still little-known by the wider public a century after his birth, the music of Isang Yun is as remarkable as his extraordinary life. Born in what is now South Korea in 1917, Yun studied music in Japan before returning to Korea and joining an underground movement opposing the Japanese occupation of his homeland – a move which led to his imprisonment by the Japanese authorities in 1943. In the late 1950s Yun travelled to Europe and later settled in West Berlin, but was kidnapped by the South Korean secret service on suspicion of espionage, tortured and sentenced to death (later commuted to life imprisonment). His release was only made possible by a worldwide petition signed by artistic luminaries including Stockhausen, Stravinsky, Ligeti and Dallapiccola. A second kidnap attempt was thwarted by his bodyguards during a trip to Japan in 1976.

While Yun's political goal was to see peace within Korea and its freedom from the Japanese, his musical goals were more westward-looking. Through combining western musical practices with traditional Korean techniques, he hoped to create a new musical synthesis, one that brought Korean music to international attention while broadening the scope of western music practices. Hence twelve-tone serialism meets heavy ornamentation and exotic performance techniques blend with western forms in his highly distinctive, compelling soundworld. *Espace I* for cello and piano was written during Yun's final years when he turned to a softer, less acerbic form of expression. Though the work is governed by a strong rhythmic impulse and features highly-charged contrasts of pitch and dynamics, it is expansive too – finding a sense of stillness and space in the frequent hiatuses, their effect only heightened by the sharp sense of extremes.

Further listening...

Bara (Yun)

And then I knew 'twas Wind... (Tōru Takemitsu)

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) *Trio* arranged for clarinet, cello and piano (1926)

Aside from early piano lessons from his mother, an amateur pianist, Poulenc received no formal musical training until he had already established himself as a composer. By then, he had found fame with a group of like-minded French composers including Milhaud and Honegger, and he had found for himself a distinctive musical voice that was both witty and lyrical. Unfortunately, it was not to everyone's tastes and it was not enough to get him into the Paris Conservatoire. 'Your work stinks, it's inept, infamous balls', the composition teacher Paul Vidal remarked. 'Ah! I see you're a follower of the Stravinsky and Erik Satie gang. Well, goodbye!'. Only then did Poulenc begin to feel the lack of a proper musical education, eventually seeking guidance from Charles Koechlin, with whom he studied for the next four years. Renowned more for his teaching skills than as a composer, Koechlin soon recognised Poulenc's strengths and encouraged him to develop his talent for harmonic colour, breathing new life into Poulenc's already vibrant palette.

The Trio for oboe, bassoon and piano – which is performed today in its arrangement for clarinet, cello and piano – was written in 1926, shortly after his lessons with Koechlin. Clean, lyrical and full of humour, it is characteristic of his newly-honed style. The work opens with a deliberately over-dramatic introduction in which each of the three instruments is introduced in turn before a series of pauses leads us into the brisk, bubbling *Allegro* of the main section. The slow movement, meanwhile, shows Poulenc at his most indulgent, with soaring, lyrical melodies that are passed around between the trio, sumptuous harmonies and passages of rich, unabashed passion. But the finale is quick to wipe this indulgence clean away, exploding into a joyful frenzy of playful melodies and irregular time signatures – so much so that it is not uncommon to hear audiences laugh out loud at some of Poulenc's ostentatious musical jokes.

Further listening...

Trio for oboe, bassoon and piano (Poulenc)

Sonata for clarinet and bassoon (Poulenc)

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