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UNIVERSITY PHILHARMONIA

Saturday 29 November, 7pm
Great Hall, Trent Building, University Park

Harry Lai, Conductor
Chiara Ponticos, Violin

PROGRAMME

Overture in C

Fanny Mendelssohn

Violin Concerto No.1 in A, Op.20

Camille Saint-Saëns

Interval

Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op.11

Felix Mendelssohn

Please ensure all mobile phones are switched off. Photographs and videos of the performance are not permitted.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Overture in C

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847)

Fanny Mendelssohn was a pianist and choral conductor as well as a composer; after marrying the painter Wilhelm Hensel, she preferred to be known as Fanny Hensel, and she is often referred to by this name today. Her output includes choral works – some with orchestra, some unaccompanied – solo songs and pieces for vocal ensemble, several solo piano pieces, and a number of chamber works, including her Piano Trio in D minor and String Quartet in E flat, which are coming to be recognised as major contributions to the early nineteenth-century chamber music repertoire.

The Overture in C is her only work for orchestra without voices. It appears to date from the spring of 1832, though some authorities suggest that it was begun two years earlier. It was a period when she was not only composing prolifically, but was also taken up with heavy family responsibilities. The Overture was given its first performance in 1834, at one of the fortnightly Sunday music gatherings she hosted in her Berlin home, maintaining a tradition started by her parents in 1823. It was played by the orchestra of the Königstadtische (Royal City) Theater, Berlin, whose conductor insisted on stepping aside, for Fanny to conduct the performance herself. The score was first published only in 1994.

This is a concert overture – not an introduction to an opera or stage play, but intended purely as a concert item. And unlike, say, Felix's overtures such as *The Hebrides*, *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, or *A Midsummernight's Dream*, it doesn't have a specific visual or literary basis. It is in two main sections, which play continuously. The moderately slow introduction is dominated by a gradually unfolding theme begun by the strings. The two sections are linked by a short flute solo, which emerges from the orchestra, and is then cut short by a full-orchestra chord. The violins launch the fast second section of the work with a line that dips and rises again. Horns and trumpets add a crisp rhythmic figure, and a swift build-up brings in the energetic main theme, marked *con fuoco* (fiery). A quieter episode produces a more song-like theme (violins echoed by solo flute). The main theme's bustling energy is rarely absent for long, however, eventually driving the music to its emphatic conclusion.

Violin Concerto No.1 in A, Op.20

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Allegro – Andante espressivo – Tempo primo

Saint-Saëns' Violin Concerto No.1 is the first of three works he composed for the Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate, one of the outstanding soloists of his day. Already a graduate from the Paris Conservatoire at the age of fifteen, he turned up at Saint-Saëns' house one day with the sole purpose of asking him for a concerto. Saint-Saëns later said that he was "flattered and charmed to the highest degree" by the request, and wrote his Violin Concerto No.1 in response (actually his second in order of composition; the one known as No.2 was composed the year before, but published later). It was followed, in 1863, by Saint-Saëns' *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, and, after a gap of some 17 years, by his Third Violin Concerto. No.1 is said to have remained his favourite of the three concertos.

Less than 15 minutes long (approximately half the length of Saint-Saëns' other two violin concertos), it is remarkably compact. It can be heard as either a single continuous movement divided into three contrasting sections, or as three short movements, played without a break (they are not separately numbered in the score).

Punctuated by crisp interjections from the orchestra, it begins with an assertive idea for the soloist, comprising strenuous quadruple-stopped chords (using all four strings) and a simple rising and falling phrase. Saint-Saëns draws on both of these elements extensively throughout. To begin with, they are taken up and extended by the orchestra, leading to the first of two new themes for the soloist, graceful and full of running figures. As the initial surge of energy dies down, we hear the second, dipping and rising, and marked 'cantabile' (song-like). Momentum gradually rebuilds, culminating in the return of the opening idea on the orchestra. Out of the resulting climax comes a short cadenza for the soloist, leading into the second movement, or the central section, if you prefer.

Following a chain of soft trills, to be played as quietly as possible, the soloist settles into another song-like theme, with an added line for the cellos. This section of the concerto is, in effect, one long melodic line for the soloist, with another brief trill taking us into the final section/movement.

This is a re-composed version of the opening, beginning with the soloist's dipping and rising theme. An unmistakable return of the very opening provides a central climax, before the music quietens down, and we hear echoes of the soloist's earlier running figures. A final build-up leads to the succinct conclusion, with the woodwind reminding us of the soloist's initial quadruple-stopped chords.

Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op.11

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

1. *Allegro di molto;*
2. *Andante;*
3. *Menuetto. Allegro molto;*
4. *Allegro con fuoco.*

Mendelssohn's C minor Symphony, completed at the end of March 1824, was his first work for full orchestra. He conducted a performance in London in May 1829, at a concert organised by the Philharmonic Society. It was such a success that he presented the autograph score to the Society, and in response he was made an honorary member. For this occasion he replaced the existing third movement with an orchestral version of the scherzo from his String Octet. It was in this form that the symphony was published in London in 1830, in a transcription for violin, cello and piano duet, but when a set of orchestral parts was issued in Berlin four years later, Mendelssohn reverted to the original third movement.

Precociously talented as he was, Mendelssohn at fifteen was naturally still absorbing influences from other composers. Beethoven is an obvious model, while Weber is a strong presence in the first movement, and the third has echoes of the minuet from Mozart's Symphony No 40 in G minor. But there are also many passages that unmistakably reflect Mendelssohn's distinctive musical voice.

The first movement is full of stormy, driving energy. A soft descending phrase for woodwind, heard twice, heralds a contrasting second theme, a graceful, lyrical idea passed from first violins to oboe to flute. Mendelssohn continues to explore his material's potential in the substantial coda that rounds off the movement.

The is mainly elegant and flowing, though passages of off-the-beat writing for the upper strings suggest a faint restlessness beneath the music's poise. Although headed 'Minuet', the third movement, a re-working of the second movement of the Viola Sonata Mendelssohn composed about the same time, returns to the fiery mood of the opening. The central trio section, by contrast, is a moment of calm, with a slowly moving woodwind theme over soft arpeggio figures on the strings, though the lead back to the repeat of the minuet takes the music to somewhere more remote and mysterious.

After the finale's turbulent opening, an abrupt change of mood brings an extended passage of soft pizzicato accompaniment for the strings. For a while there is no theme for them to accompany, but eventually a solo clarinet floats a long, arching melody over the top. When the agitation returns, it culminates in the first violins leading a vigorous fugue, a product of Mendelssohn's keen interest in the music of JS Bach. After a climax, the fugue starts again, and with a change from C minor to C major, and an increase in speed, the music moves into its exuberant final bars.

HARRY LAI – CONDUCTOR

Coming from Hong Kong, Harry Lai is a graduate of the Orchestral Conducting Masters programme at the Royal Northern College of Music with distinction under the tutelage of Prof. Mark Heron and Prof. Clark Rundell.

Over the past summer, Harry has made his BBC Proms debut as the offstage conductor at the production of Lady Macbeth, a production in association with BBC Philharmonic and English National Opera. This Summer, he is one of the participants at the highly selective Domaine Forget Conductors' Academy, collaborating with L'Orchestre Métropolitain and Les Violons du Roy, mentored with Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Kenosha Watanabe. Adding on to the list, Harry was chosen as one of three conductors at the inaugural masterclass with Daniele Gatti and the Hong Kong Philharmonic.

Harry worked as the assistant conductor of the Birmingham Opera Company with Alpesh Chauhan and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO). In addition, he has collaborated with orchestras across UK, Germany, Canada, Hong Kong, Bulgaria amongst others.

Harry frequently assists BBC Philharmonic and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, with recent highlights working closely with John Storgårds, Domingo Hindoyan, Mark Wigglesworth, Eva Ollikainen amongst others. In his conducting studies, he also received lessons and mentoring from Sir Mark Elder, Ed Gardner, Nicolás Pasquet, Martyn Brabbins, Ludovic Morlot, Baldur Bronnimann, Anthony Hermus amongst others. His studies are generously supported by the Waverley Trust and Dorothy Smith Scholarship.

CHIARA PONTICOS – VIOLIN

Chiara is a second-year Liberal Arts student at the University of Nottingham. Chiara first started learning the violin at three years old with the Suzuki method. Throughout her musical career, Chiara has developed extensive orchestral and solo experience. At thirteen, she was a soloist with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. At sixteen, she then transferred to the Royal College of Music Junior Department, studying violin and voice as joint first studies which opened doors to perform at multiple venues, including St James's Palace and the Elgar Room at the Royal Albert Hall. Chiara is honoured to play Saint-Saëns' Violin Concerto No.1 with her friends from University Philharmonia.

UNIVERSITY PHILHARMONIA

Harry Lai, Conductor

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Emily Cooper
Madeleine Bonicel

Oboe

Ailish Gray

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Olivia Daren
Lauren Phillips

Bassoon

Melanie Godfrey
Callum Plews

Horn

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Ian Burton*

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Seohyeon Baek
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Vlad Tuparov
Zoe Lam
Sapphire Houston-Bell
Natasha Roberts
Gabriela Delgado

Viola

Kyle Ko

Cello

Ariella King-Cline
Tom Lewington
Charlotte Robinson
Anoushka Kamath
Elisa Empringham

Double Bass

Naomi Turner*

*guest musician