

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 21 January 2022 7.30pm

**Lawrence Power** viola, violin

**Matthew Hunt** clarinet

**Huw Watkins** piano

CLASSIC *f*M

Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

**Huw Watkins** (b.1976)

3 Postcards (2020)

*Slow, thoughtful • Allegro molto • Andante*

**Robert Schumann** (1810-1856)

Märchenerzählungen Op. 132 (1853)

*I. Lebhaft, nicht zu schnell • II. Lebhaft und sehr markiert •*

*III. Ruhiges Tempo, mit zartem Ausdruck • IV. Lebhaft, sehr markiert*

**Huw Watkins** (b.1976)

Dream (2006)

**Thomas Adès** (b.1971)

4 Berceuses for viola, clarinet and piano (2021) *UK première*

*I. • II. • III. Berceuse 'Leonora' • IV. Berceuse macabre*

Interval

**Huw Watkins**

5 Duos (2021)

*Allegro molto • Lento • Allegro moderato • Lento • Allegro molto*

Speak Seven Seas (2011)

**Béla Bartók** (1881-1945)

Contrasts for violin, clarinet and piano BB116 (1938)

*I. Recruiting Dance • II. Relaxation • III. Fast Dance*

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Like many pieces written during COVID-19, **Huw Watkins's** *3 Postcards* were written for solo performers, for remote rehearsal and filmed performance, here combined into a larger triptych.

The simple, songlike opening movement was written for violist Rebecca Jones, and the more propulsive second for tonight's violist Lawrence Power. The last, for Sheila Jaffé, is closer to the sweetly melancholic world of the first, and opens with similar shapes, before a folk-like rhythm guides us to a gentle close.

**Robert Schumann's** *Märchenerzählungen* ('Fairytale Narrations') was written in three days in 1853 in one of Schumann's feverish bouts of inspiration during his troubled final creative years. It turned out to be one of his last pieces – the illness, depression and hallucinations he suffered had by that point become unbearable, and four months later he threw himself into the Rhine. He was rescued, but lived out his final painful years in an asylum.

The piece doesn't often signal the composer's pain – much of the music seems unruffled, generous and charming. There is a great deal that is inscrutable behind the apparent simplicity, however: the music makes strange diagonal moves away from expected cadences or melodic arrivals, and everywhere is Schumann's extraordinary ability to combine the enigmatic with the enchanting.

Dreams: familiar images re-arranged, slightly obscured, combined in unexpected ways, such that everything is a little more strange than we remember it. Much of Huw Watkins's music does exactly this, using familiar arpeggios and melodic shapes but viewed soft-focus, rotating them slightly to make fresh juxtapositions and rich atmospheres.

In *Dream*, this is made explicit. Gentle arpeggios and lullaby-like lilting evoke the soft lull of slumber, but there are gently astringent turns – a bluesy 7th here, a major-minor clash there. As the piece progresses, more explosive outbursts break the calm, and the music urges itself on to greater virtuosity and turbulence. As the violin's soloistic contribution subsides, we end in the more drowsy world of the opening.

Sleep also preoccupies **Thomas Adès's** *4 Berceuses* – like a series of recent works, it focuses on some of the quieter moments of his third opera, *The Exterminating Angel*: moments he terms 'Berceuses' (cradle songs).

The first two rework scenes featuring lovers Eduardo and Beatriz, each employing melodic tropes of the Baroque lament: keening lines arch upwards in expressive leaps before slowly descending. The beguiling first gradually arrives on a series of inhalations and exhalations to drift away ('Come here, let's sleep,' sings Eduardo). The second is an intensified mirror of the first: it is not sleep this time, but death that the lovers embrace together. Clarinet and viola fuse together as the lovers entwine ('Fold your body into mine...') in a climactic *Liebestod*.

The last pair are from the opera's final scene, where everything has become surreal, terrifying, full of death but lacking in hope.

Firstly an uncanny, eerie incantation – all queasy slides and oleaginous writhing. Then, in the closing 'Berceuse Macabre', the clarinet's gossamer delicacy portrays Silvia, rocking a dead lamb to sleep, thinking it is her own son.

Like his *Postcards*, Watkins' *5 Duos* were written for specific performers he knew well (in this case violinist Alexandra Wood and clarinetist Katherine Spencer). They often share some of the confident, folk-like simplicity of Bartók's violin duos, and take advantage of the strikingly similar ranges of the two instruments to play Bartókian games of exchange and crosstalk. The instruments play equal roles, coming to the fore or stepping back as accompanist, or (as in the third and fifth duos) dissolving into a two-headed compound instrument. These are true 'duos', with the sense of old friends exchanging playful repartee, finishing each other's sentences, riffing on each other's jokes.

Premièred in 2011 at a hydro-electric plant at the Heimbach Festival, Watkins wanted *Speak Seven Seas* to 'describe the constant flow of water and especially how diverse water can be – how powerful, but also how gentle'. *Speak Seven Seas* certainly displays a great many varied modes: gushing torrents, glistening droplets, dancing on the surface or plunging to the depths. There is something of a three-act structure, each launched by variations of the same music – one of the instruments intoning repeated notes, with delicate sprays of notes in the piano. From the same textural starting point, each of Watkins's harmonic pools starts to simmer, boiling over into great tidal waves of sound, most intensely in the third and final act.

**Béla Bartók's** *Contrasts*, written for jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman in 1938, was originally commissioned as two dances (one on each side of a 78rpm record), in which form it was premièred. The opening *Verbunkos* (*Recruiting Dance*) sees the clarinet taking the lead, introducing the typically Hungarian dotted *verbunkos* rhythms and long virtuosic chains of notes, culminating in a short but wild cadenza.

The closing *Fast Dance*, or *Sebes*, is begun boisterously by the violinist on the open strings of a detuned instrument, launching an exhilarating, breathless rush to the finish. After a rather touching interlude of lilting lyricism, and not to be outdone by the clarinet in the first movement, the violinist seizes the reigns of the fast music's return, and launches into a cadenza of their own before the three join for an emphatic conclusion.

It is the slow central movement that Bartók added the following year, however, that despite its title (*Pihenő*, or *Relaxation*), contains the most unsettling and ominous music. The first signs of disquiet come early, with low piano rumblings threatening the simple lines of the melody instruments. As the movement progresses, the piano often answers its colleagues with melodic fragments, as if steeling itself to the uneasy atmosphere by nervously humming a half-remembered tune.

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