

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 27 April 2022 7.30pm

Nicholas Daniel oboe

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Adam Walker flute

Ben Goldscheider horn

Isang Enders cello

CLASSIC *f*M

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



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Sonata for oboe, horn and harpsichord *reconstructed by Kenneth Cooper*

I. Prélude - La boîte à joujoux • II. Scherzando - Etude pour les notes répétées • III. Mouvement - Images I

Kaija Saariaho (b.1952)

Mirrors (1997)

Elliott Carter (1908-2012)

Sonata for flute, oboe, cello and harpsichord (1952)

I. Risoluto • II. Lento • III. Allegro

Interval

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

Air for solo horn (2005)

Thomas Adès (b.1971)

Sonata da Caccia Op. 11 (1993)

I. Gravement • II. Gayement • III. Naïvement • IV. Galament

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In July 1915, **Claude Debussy**, while staying in Pourville on the Normandy coast, announced that he was going to write six sonatas 'for various instruments'. Within three months he had composed his Cello Sonata and the Sonata for flute, viola and harp, as well as his *12 Etudes* for piano. Later that year the composer underwent a colostomy as treatment for cancer, and he only completed one more sonata – for violin and piano – before his death in 1918. For the three remaining sonatas, only the instrumentations were indicated. The fourth sonata was to be for oboe, horn and harpsichord, and in 2011 American harpsichordist Kenneth Cooper arranged three existing Debussy pieces for these instruments, to produce the Sonata 'No. 4'.

The first movement is formed from the *Prélude* and first tableau from the children's ballet *La boîte à joujoux* ('The Toybox'). The *Prélude* sets the scene of a toybox of figurines in the shop. The oboe's first two entries are associated respectively with the girl (a waltz theme) and the soldier (a march-like tune) that we are about to see. In the first tableau, the toys come to life, including an elephant, who dances to an exotic oboe tune that Debussy claimed was 'an old Hindu tune used to this day to tame elephants'.

The second and third movements continue in a playful spirit, the former an arrangement of the piano étude designed to test the pianist's execution of rapidly repeated notes (*Pour les notes répétées*), the latter (complete with horn swoops) recasting the brilliant, energetic finale from the first set of *Images* for piano.

Finnish composer **Kaija Saariaho's** *Mirrors* for flute and cello was originally written for the now obsolete interactive CD-ROM medium. Comprising a series of 24 musical fragments each for flute and cello, the user was able to assemble them in an order of their own choosing – composing the piece from Saariaho's musical tool kit. In concert, performers can play the composer's own published assembly of the fragments, as tonight, or create their own. The idea is that the instruments throughout mirror each other in one or more of the musical dimensions of pitch, rhythm, timbre or gesture.

A distinctive feature of **Elliott Carter's** chamber music is the natural way the instruments interact in dialogue, even though the rhythms are often highly complex and precisely notated. This is true of his early Sonata for flute, oboe, cello and harpsichord, composed in 1952, in between his stay in the remote Lower Sonoran Desert in Arizona, where he wrote his radical String Quartet No. 1, and his first period in Rome as a fellow at the American Academy, where he wrote his *Variations for Orchestra*. 'My idea,' he wrote, 'was to stress as much as possible the vast and wonderful array of tone-colours available on the modern harpsichord ... It seemed very important to have the harpsichord speak in a new voice.' Carter sought to break the instrument's ties from its Baroque roots and focus instead on its colouristic

properties. He offered the following description of the sonata's three movements: 'The music starts, *Risoluta*, with a splashing dramatic gesture whose subsiding ripples for the rest of the movement. The *Lento* is an expressive dialogue between the harpsichord and the others with an undercurrent of fast music that bursts out briefly near the end. The *Allegro*, with its gondolier's dance fading into other dance movements, is cross-cut like a movie – at times it superimposes one dance on another.'

Despite what it says on the tin, **Jörg Widmann's** *Air* 'for solo horn' (2005) – like Berio's *Sequenza X* for trumpet over 30 years before it – isn't strictly for a solo instrument. Both pieces call for a playerless grand piano whose sustaining pedal is depressed throughout, allowing its strings to resonate in sympathy with the sounds of the main instrument. In Berio's piece the trumpeter turns around occasionally to play into the piano; Widmann's *Air* exploits the physiology of the horn, whose bell naturally faces backwards and into the piano's cavity. There are some passages using the natural harmonic series of notes – the only notes available before the introduction of valved keys in the 19th Century, some of which sound out of tune. Among the many other techniques used are rapid changes of open and stopped notes (the stopped ones produced by pushing the hand further up the bell), lip trills, depressing the levers only halfway, and at one point vocalising (quasi singing) as well as blowing down the mouthpiece.

Tonight's programme comes full circle with **Thomas Adès's** *Sonata da Caccia*, composed for the instrumental grouping Debussy intended for his fourth sonata. Adès was a fan of the Baroque composer François Couperin at the time he composed the piece in his early 20s, soon after graduating from King's College, Cambridge. 'So it's half in his language,' Adès has said, 'and half in my language, which I was inventing at the time.' In the first movement, *Gravement*, a doleful operatic lament seems trapped in the wrong century, and the highly decorative ornamentation brings another flavour of the Baroque. Following without a break, *Gayément* begins with a fast harpsichord tremolo and a falling horn call (to return in various guises); the title refers mostly to the harpsichord, which goes on its own musical spree, occasionally turning the better-behaved other instruments to its disorderly way. Decorum is partially restored as the horn breaks into a lilting dance, the oboe then adding its own. *Naïvement* begins with a twinkling pastoral dance on the harpsichord, accompanied by gently unsettling held notes on oboe and horn. Then comes a passage of sheer beauty where any sense of parody falls away. The brief fourth movement, *Galament*, begins as an elegant gavotte, even if the horn appears to lose its way and the thing descends into chaos.

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