

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 2 October 2023
1.00pm

Tai Murray violin
Silke Avenhaus piano

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Myths Op. 30 (1915)

The Spring of Arethusa • Narcissus • Dryads and Pan

Derrick Skye (b.1982)

Duet for any two instruments (2017)

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Violin Sonata in E minor Op. 82 (1918)

I. Allegro • II. Romance. Andante • III. Allegro non troppo



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Szymanowski wrote *Myths* for his violinist friend Pawel Kochański in the spring of 1915, near the beginning of the most luxuriant phase of his art; the following year, also for Kochański, he composed his First Violin Concerto. He was proud of what he and Kochański had achieved in these works, and probably right that their example had been followed by other composers, perhaps most notably Prokofiev in the high-flying lyricism of his own First Concerto.

In the same way, though, Szymanowski also gained from immediate predecessors, not least Ravel in creating the water music of *The Spring of Arethusa*. According to the myth, Arethusa was a nymph of Arcadia who, bathing in a river, found herself attracting the attentions of its resident deity, Alpheus. She prayed for help to Artemis, who transformed her into a stream and had her flowing below the sea bed to emerge on the island of Ortygia, just off Sicily. Alpheus, however, being also aqueous, was able to bend his course her way and mingle his waters with hers. In Szymanowski's interpretation, tremulous exotic harmonies support a super-high violin melody, which comes down to join them.

Narcissus, of course, is again a water scene, the pool suggested at the start by a rich, immobile chord gently pulsating, awaiting the youth's gaze of rapt self-adoration to come in on the violin in a high register. Imitation from the piano produces a mirroring effect, and the image is developed towards a new music of violin double stops and then into a reprise folding everything in the movement together, up to a final lingering look. The key of B major, chromatically coloured, remembers Wagner's *Tristan*.

More active, the final piece tells a story. The violin begins, buzzing between D and a quarter-tone lowered D, and so provoking leaps and eventually bounds from the piano, surely representing the dryads (wood nymphs) Pan has his eye on. When the chase scene has come to an end, the violin is heard alone again, now playing harmonics as Pan's flute. This seduction tactic evidently works, for a love scene ensues, delicately playful but also mountingly passionate, before a return to the opening - a recollection on the way to sleep.

Derrick Skye reawakens us. A lifelong inhabitant of Southern California, Skye attended UCLA and CalArts, and took the opportunities those institutions offered to study not only composition in the western tradition but also the theory and practice of music from West Africa, Persia and Eastern Europe. There was some overlap here with the home territories of his ancestors, which include West Africa again, Great Britain, Ireland and Pre-Columbian North America. Engaging, therefore, both his training and his heritage, his music is strongly pulsed, rhythmically lively and variously modal.

His four-minute *Duet for any two instruments* is a neat example, the two instruments bouncing echoes between each other as they dart their separate but colliding ways. The melodic colour is flecked with Persian, the zip thoroughly American.

Skye already has a large output of concert works of all kinds (his orchestral piece *Nova Plexus* was introduced at the recent Proms) and has also written music for dance and simultaneous swimming.

We return to the battlesome second decade of the 20th Century for the sonata by **Elgar**. He had been ill and out of sorts, besides being much occupied with wartime trivia, but he bounced back in August 1918 when he and his wife moved into a thatched cottage on the Sussex downs, Brinkwells. Within a month he had composed his violin sonata, from which he went on immediately to a piano quintet and a string quartet. Meanwhile, about the sonata, he wrote to his friend and supporter Marie Joshua, to whom he dedicated the work: 'I fear it does not carry us any further but it is full of golden sounds and I like it, but you must not expect anything violently chromatic or cubist.' Evidently he was aware not only of the new modernist thrust in general but of Schoenberg and Stravinsky in particular, and we might think of this work as a riposte that, as ripostes often will, shows some inclinations of appreciation along the way.

For instance, if the first movement is by no means fully chromatic in the Schoenbergian sense, nor is it grandly tonal in the usual Elgarian way. We seem to be diving into a sonata in the midst of its development, with two bars of rampant A minor and only a brief turn to the notional home key before the music goes raging on, *con forza*. It settles down with the coming of its second subject, but still the harmony is mobile. When we reach the true development section, the marking is conversely *tranquillo*, the violin part all arpeggiation, until a more characteristic developmental character opens the way into a recapitulation of the stormy opening. A long coda - effectively a second development - finally comes home on a chord of E major.

The slow movement opens with fugitive gestures Lady Elgar ascribed to the 'wood magic' her husband had encountered on his walks through nearby woodland. Again, we may not be sure what key we are in, and the harmony remains on the move through the middle section, with its glorious reflective melody. Then the forest spectres return.

Beginning far more firmly and richly in E major, with a second subject introduced in dialogue, the finale declines to leave before recalling the slow movement's melody. 'Golden sounds', indeed.

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