SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Daniel Barenboim & West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

Monday 4 November 2024, 7.30pm

Royal Festival Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

However you choose to experience the endlessly inventive world of classical music, we're so glad that you're doing it here with us. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2024/25.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Mendelssohn Symphony No.4 in A (Italian) 30'

Interval

Brahms Symphony No.4 in E minor 45'

Performers

West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

Daniel Barenboim *conductor*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes. There is a 20-minute interval.

Statement of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

'As we witness and mourn tens of thousands of lives destroyed and communities shattered while political courage remains absent, we, the musicians of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, are horrified and deeply saddened by the extreme escalation of violence in the Middle East, which continues to intensify daily.

'The profound humanistic commitment of Maestro Daniel Barenboim and the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said stands at the core of our orchestra. In and through our music we seek to model a life of mutual recognition between equals.

'We call on the local and the international communities and their leaders to stop procrastinating and put an end to the cycle of violence by effecting a permanent cease-fire, ensuring the safe return of all hostages and unlawfully held detainees. It is imperative to work toward a long-lasting peaceful resolution grounded in equality.'

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47)

Symphony No.4 in A (Italian) (1833)

1 Allegro vivace
2 Andante con moto
3 Con moto moderato
4 Saltarello: Presto

Felix Mendelssohn's grandfather was Moses Mendelssohn, one of Germany's most influential Enlightenment thinkers. The composer's father, Abraham, was one of Berlin's most successful bankers. As a child, the young Felix mingled with Europe's cultural and intellectual elite at the family house in central Berlin. It is perhaps hardly surprising, then, that Felix Mendelssohn was something of a child prodigy, a gifted artist, linguist, pianist and, of course, composer (who had written 13 string symphonies by the time he was 14, and his glorious string Octet at just 16).

Nor is it surprising, perhaps, that Felix should want to spread his wings a few years later as what we might now term a gap-year traveller. In his case, it was more like three gap years, off and on between 1829 and 1831, and it's probably fairer to describe his travels as excursions in the tradition of a Grand Tour, in which a wealthy young man deepened his education by ticking off the cultural highlights of Europe.

Mendelssohn began – unconventionally, and typically idiosyncratically – with a three-week visit to Scotland in 1829, which inspired both his *Hebrides* Overture and his *Scottish* Symphony. But, encouraged by the eminent writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (who Mendelssohn counted as a friend) and his composition teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter, he set off for the more traditional destination of Italy in October 1830. He spent ten months in the country, making his way from Venice to Naples via Bologna, Florence and Rome, then back home again through Genoa and Milan.

If his earlier Scottish trip had been about brooding landscapes, swirling mists and blood-soaked history, his Italian trip, as

he wrote home to his parents, was about light, sunshine and happiness: 'This is Italy! And now has begun what I have always thought to be the supreme joy in life. And I am loving it.'

He devoted time during his travels to planning what he called 'the jolliest piece I have ever done' in a letter to his sister Fanny, completing his *Italian* Symphony back home in Berlin on 13 March 1833. It was an immediate success at its premiere in London two months later.

Mendelssohn described the Symphony as 'blue sky in A major', and it's an bright optimism that's encapsulated in the first movement's bounding opening theme, though the movement's central development section brings in somewhat darker, more impish material. The slow second movement was inspired by religious processions that Mendelssohn watched in Rome: it contrasts a noble melody in the woodwind and violas with a plodding bassline, slipping away at its conclusion as if the procession has moved into the distance.

Following an elegant third-movement minuet (complete with distant horn calls in its gently martial trio section), Mendelssohn closes with a finale that blends two breathless Italian dances: the Roman saltarello (which gives the movement its name) and the Neapolitan tarantella. The *Italian* is one of very few symphonies in the repertoire that begins in the bright positivity of the major and ends in the more serious minor (more often the journey is the other way round: just think of Beethoven's Fifth). The finale's whirling energy, alongside a melancholy memory of the Symphony's opening melody just before the end, ensures a propulsive, somewhat delirious conclusion.

Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

Symphony No.4 in E minor (1885)

1 Allegro non troppo

2 Andante moderato

3 Allegro giocoso

4 Allegro energico e passionato

From Mendelssohn's youthful enthusiasm for Mediterranean light and culture, we turn to a very different symphony. Johannes Brahms was 52 when he completed his fourth and final symphony in the summer of 1885, and by that time was widely seen as Germany's leading composer. That hardly calmed his notorious self-doubt, however – and nor did an early reaction to the Fourth Symphony, from the influential critic (and keen supporter of the composer) Eduard Hanslick at a private two-piano play-through for friends, confidants and collaborators. 'I had the feeling that I was being given a beating by two incredibly intelligent people,' Hanslick famously blurted after hearing just the first movement. The following day, another friend – writer Max Kalbeck – visited Brahms to advise him privately not to allow the Symphony out as it then stood.

Though undoubtedly shaken, Brahms resolved to let the Symphony live in precisely the form he had intended it – and it was a huge success at its premiere in Meiningen on 25 October 1885 (thought slightly less acclaimed at its Viennese premiere just a few months later).

It's now one of the most deeply loved of all symphonies, and unquestioningly adored by listeners from newcomers to aficionados. So what was all the fuss about? Perhaps it comes down to the Symphony's uncompromising intellectual complexity, and to the profound ideas and emotions it dares to contemplate – even if Brahms clothes his densely wrought arguments and philosophical ruminations in some of the richest, most gloriously melodic music he wrote. Or perhaps it comes down to the Symphony's overall trajectory. If Mendelssohn's tribute to Italian sunshine unexpectedly closed a giddily major-key piece with a soberer minor-key movement, then Brahms' Fourth arguably charts a whole journey – albeit a deeply cathartic one – from vigour and optimism to fate-filled doom. Brahms had long laced a dark thread of melancholy through his music, and it has been speculated that immersing himself in ancient Greek tragedies before he began work on the Symphony may have brought ideas of fate more keenly into his thinking. There's further evidence in a somewhat despairing letter he sent to his publisher around the same time: 'In [Austria], where everything … tumbles downhill, you can't expect music to fare better. Really it's a pity and a crying shame, not only for music but for the whole beautiful land and the beautiful, marvellous people. I still think catastrophe is coming.'

Nonetheless, Brahms offsets his profound contemplations with music that's richly coloured and finely wrought. The flowing melody that opens his first movement in fact serves to map out the main harmonic areas that the Symphony will explore. It's followed by a more lyrical theme first heard in the cellos, then a second, far brighter melody in the woodwind – all of which undergo substantial transformations as they return throughout the movement.

His slower, calmer second movement pits an archaic-sounding woodwind melody against gently tick-tocking pizzicato string accompaniment, with a central section that's initially stormier before calming to something far more sweetly lyrical. The third movement contains arguably the most exuberant, outward-looking music in all of Brahms' symphonies, with even a triangle adding a gentle sparkle.

After the boisterous energy of the third movement, the austere seriousness of the fourth might come as something of a shock. Here, Brahms revisits the ancient form of a passacaglia, in which a bassline repeats again and again, with increasingly complex, intricate music on top of it. In this case, Brahms' repeating idea is a series of harmonies derived from a section of Bach's Cantata No.150, using which he conjures a remarkable set of 30 variations that generate immense cumulative power. A slower, quieter central collection of variations provides contrast, before the opening music returns more vehemently than ever.

Despite Brahms' apparently limitless creativity in spinning fresh contexts and treatments for his recurring theme, there's an almost spiritual profundity in encountering what's essentially the same music over and over again, and yet observing it from ever shifting perspectives. It would prove to be the last of his music that Brahms would hear, when he attended a performance of the Fourth Symphony at Vienna's Musikverein just a month before his death in April 1897. The ailing Brahms, visibly suffering from the effects of the liver cancer that would shortly kill him, was reportedly moved to tears by the ovation he received after each of the Symphony's movements.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2024

Find out more

- West-Eastern Divan Orchestra
- Daniel Barenboim
- southbankcentre.co.uk