

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Mitsuko Uchida & Mahler Chamber Orchestra

Wednesday 1 February 2023, 7.30pm
Royal Festival Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Concerto No.25 in C, K.503 32'

Arnold Schoenberg

Chamber Symphony No.1 in E, Op.9 21'

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Concerto No.27 in B flat, K.595 31'

Performers

Mahler Chamber Orchestra

Mitsuko Uchida *director and piano*

José Maria Blumenschein *concertmaster and leader*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91)

Piano Concerto No.25 in C, K.503

Allegro maestoso

Andante

Allegretto

This evening's two Mozart piano concertos both exhibit spaciousness, to which quality K.503 adds splendour, enough to evoke comparisons with other works unfolding grandly in C major: Mozart's own *Jupiter* Symphony would be an example. However, the stately opening, in march time and boasting trumpets and timpani, soon shows a shadow side in an expressive venture into the minor by woodwinds. Magniloquence and pathos both are then undercut by elements suggesting – as so often in Mozart's concertos – the world of comic opera: notably, banter on a motif kicked off

by three repeated notes (it is a motif that could have stuck in Beethoven's mind, to take on a wholly other tone in his Fifth Symphony). The piano, when it enters, adds more comedy in its inquisitive smile and in its resistance to the orchestra's pomp when that returns. It also leads more excursions into the minor, proves its learning in counterpoint, and turns the repeated-note motif into charm and delight.

A more serious swivel into the minor, prompted by that motif now almost pre-empting Beethoven, opens the development. The stateliness then returns to wrap things up, and, when the piano surprisingly takes part in it, one might wonder whether grandeur, too, is not part of the comedy.

Mozart did not leave a cadenza for this opening movement. He completed the concerto in December 1786, shortly before leaving Vienna for the first performance of *Don Giovanni* in Prague, though perhaps the opera closest to this music, with its emotional playfulness and playful emotionality, is *Così fan tutte* – again a work in C major.

The conventional turn a fifth down makes for a slow movement in F, which, by another convention, was a key associated with pastoral. Mozart toys with this echo from the countryside, in his unison opening and in woodwind features, but the music is also soon remembering the comedy and the repeated notes of the first movement – the comedy especially in the descending staccato second subject. The piano comes in for an elaborated repeat and adds new material, including reaches into the upper register suggesting aspiration. Recapitulation follows.

The concerto ends with more comedy, and more tenderness, framed by a bouncy rondo theme taken from the ballet Mozart appended to his *Idomeneo*, which he had revived earlier the same year. At the centre of this movement lies the concerto's great treasure: a melody in two floating phrases, each sung by the piano and repeated by the woodwinds. Another composer might have made such a find the highpoint of an opera; Mozart tosses it in and goes on. There would always be more where that came from.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

Chamber Symphony No.1 in E, Op.9

Schoenberg completed this work in July 1906, when he was living in Vienna, surrounded by his first and most loyal generation of pupils, among them Alban Berg and Anton Webern. His style was developing rapidly, with a speed and a tumult that are written into the music. The massiveness of *Gurrelieder* and of his tone poem *Pelleas und Melisande*, two scores from only a few years before, had been left far behind. To write a symphony now for just 15 musicians was – against that background of orchestral opulence, and at the time when Mahler was writing his ‘symphony of a thousand’ – to make a radical assertion of independence, of willingness to swim against the tide, and again the music conveys the resolute, contrary spirit in which it was conceived.

The work pursues an ideal of single-movement symphonic form that stayed with Schoenberg all his life, and that here is played out exhaustively. The normal four movements of a symphony are all present, as periods within a gigantic opening movement – gigantic in volume and variety of material, rather than in length, since Schoenberg’s habitual impatience with unchanged repetition is joined by an often vertiginous speed to create music compressed in its dimensions as much as in its scoring. After the brief slow introduction – where a gesture in rising fourths announces harmonic problems to come – the symphony begins its rapid exposition, the themes tumbling over one another in polyphony. A secondary group of ideas interposes a slower tempo, but soon the music is off again, moving towards the ‘second movement’, a scherzo with the usual intercalated trio, after which comes the slow movement, followed by the finale, still all within an unbroken continuity not only of substance but of thought, where musical development is not a partitioned stage of a form but perpetual. Only a small extra push would be needed – it happened within less than two years – to break the sound barrier and reach atonality.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Concerto No.27 in B flat, K.595

I. Allegro

II. Larghetto

III. Allegro

Like the C major concerto we heard at the start of the concert, this companion in B flat sets out a great variety of material, ranging from minor-key shadows to laughter in the same

breath. Now, however, initiation comes from a gentle melody (albeit with rather comical echoes from woodwinds and horns) whose gentleness pervades the music, up to and through the beautiful theme brought in shortly before the exposition’s close. Giving everything a reprise, the piano ups the comedy but also the expressiveness. Again the development takes some of the ideas into uncharted territory. For the end of the recapitulation, Mozart this time supplies a cadenza, one that brings everything back to the opening.

The slow movement once more takes the customary step down a fifth, but this time the responsibility is assumed by the piano alone, answered by the orchestra. There is grace in the music, but perhaps also a sense that this condition will not last. Indeed, it does not. The minor shows its hand decisively before the first section comes to an end. There is then a middle section, with more minor-key darkness, coming to a close signalled by piano trills and followed by a reprise.

If a certain ominous calm hangs over this concerto, it is not too much displaced by the finale. The rondo theme is another that you could whistle, but you might feel dampness at the back of your eyes. So too in the episodes. The cadenza is again Mozart’s own.

It is sometimes tempting to understand the piano in Mozart’s piano concertos as the conveyer of wordless autobiography, and certainly the intelligence, the playfulness and the full emotional life we find in both this evening’s works accord with what we know of Mozart as a person. We might need to be cautious, though, in finding resignation and awareness of death in everything from his final year – particularly here, in a work that might not be. Though he entered this concerto into his catalogue in January 1791, there is a chance he wrote it two years earlier. There is some doubt, too, about the first performance, one possibility being that he introduced it himself at the last concert in which he took part, in March 1791.

Programme note © Paul Griffiths, 2023

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