

scottish ensemble

Re-defining the string orchestra

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

'Where Shall I Fly' from *Hercules* (1744)

'Scherza infida' from *Ariodante* (1735)

'Crude furie' from *Serse* (1738)

The grief and madness of frustrated love are the themes of these three vividly dramatic arias from Handel operas. **'Where Shall I Fly?'** comes from Handel's opera *Hercules*, and is sung by the title character's wife, Dejanira. Afraid of losing the love of her husband, she has sent him a magic cloak to rekindle his affections towards her – a cloak, however, that is poisoned, and kills him. This fizzing mad scene contrasts a stark recitative with frightening, furious aria sections.

'Scherza infida' is a beautiful slow aria, full of sadness, from *Ariodante*, Handel's first opera for Covent Garden. Believing his fiancée Ginevra has betrayed him with the scheming Polinesso, the title character vows to kill himself and haunt Ginevra as a ghost.

Serse was one of the composer's worst commercial failures as an opera, but it's now recognised as one of his finest stage works. **'Crude furie'** is sung by the title character in a furious outburst, when he realises his plans to steal his brother's intended have been thwarted since the couple have already married. A dazzling, surging orchestral accompaniment is the backdrop for an urgent, fiery vocal line.

Pavel Haas (1899-1944)

Study for Strings (1943)

From the turmoil of love to the darkness of war – but with determinedly life-affirming music. Terezín (or Theresienstadt) was a Nazi concentration camp situated midway between Prague and Dresden, and it held the elite of the Jewish intelligentsia – artists, writers, composers, philosophers. Conditions there were admittedly less harsh than in other concentration camps, and many of the artists confined were able to continue their work. Moravian-born Pavel Haas had been the foremost pupil of Janáček, and he was one of several Czech-Jewish composers held at Terezín. He produced eight works in the camp, only three of which survive – including the *Study for Strings*, which was premiered in Terezín by an orchestra conducted by Karel Ančerl.

The *Study* opens with restless running figures in dynamic cross-rhythms before breaking into a flying violin melody, distinctively folk-tinged, which is later cast

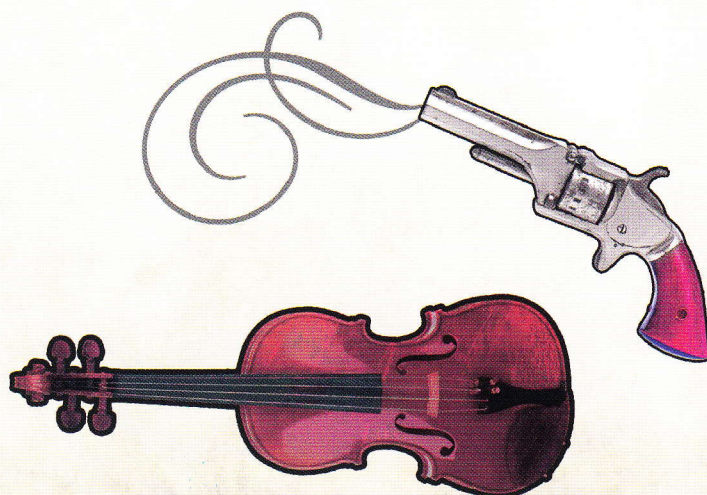
in a contrapuntal fugue-like texture. After a slower, more introspective middle section, the piece ends with bright, confident music exploiting the full range of the string orchestra's textures, with rich harmonies and foot-tapping rhythms.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Love Songs, Op. 83 (1865/1888, arranged for voice and string orchestra by David Matthews in 2008)

This set of eight short, beautifully crafted love songs went through a complicated genesis before ending up in the form performed this evening. Dvořák first set a selection of poems by Gustav Pflieger-Moravsky in 1865 for voice and piano – their theme of unrequited love no doubt chimed with his own infatuation with the actress Josefina Čermáková, who did not return his affections (he later married her sister Anna). He later made a singerless version of 12 of these songs for string quartet, published in 1887 as *Cypresses*. He revised eight of the original versions for voice and piano in 1888, publishing them with the simple title of *Love Songs*, and British composer David Matthews made this version for voice and string orchestra in 2008.

In any case, this is music whose Romantic lyricism and subtleties are ideally suited to a string ensemble. The first song, **'Ó, naši lásce'**, expresses a fear of love perishing, with richly chromatic harmonies and rolling triplets; the second, **'V tak mnohém'**, is a touching meditation on death. **'Kol domu se ted' potácím'**, the third, portrays the melancholy of separated lovers with a folksy melodic line, and the fourth, **'Já vím, že v sladké naději'**, deals with fate keeping the lovers apart. In the deceptively lyrical fifth song, **'Nad krajem vévodí lehký spánek'**, the singer is in torment at the beauty of the world destroyed by an absence of love, and the sixth, **'Zde v lese u potoka já'**, is a pensive contemplation of a forest brook. In the passionate penultimate song, **'V té sladké moci očí tvých'**, the singer imagines being roused from death by her lover's regard, and the cycle ends with the simple beauty of rippling, cascading figures in **'Ó, duše drahá, jedinká'**, in which the singer declares eternal passion for her beloved.



Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber (1644-1704)

Battalia (1673)

- 1 *Sonata*
- 2 *Die liederliche Gesellschaft von allerley Humor*
- 3 *Presto*
- 4 *Der Mars*
- 5 *Presto*
- 6 *Aria: Die Schlacht*
- 7 *Lamento der Verwundten Musquetirer*

There are few more vivid musical depictions of war than the rich and strange *Battalia* by German Baroque composer Heinrich Biber. He was also one of his era's outstanding violinists – and, more relevantly, pushed string music into unusual, exploratory worlds that anticipate the music of our own times.

His *Battalia* depicts the preparations and aftermath of battle in a kaleidoscope of unusual effects, and it's thought to be the composer's response to the Thirty Years War (1618–48). The opening **Sonata** describes a gathering of troops, its military-style music even requiring the string players to slap their instruments to evoke the sound of drums. '**Die liederliche Gesellschaft von allerley Humor**' (The Profligate Society of Common Humour) is a remarkable, cacophonous movement in which eight drunken musketeers come together to sing songs from their homelands – in eight different keys simultaneously. The following **Presto** depicts a fencing match, and '**Der Mars**' (The March) uses a 'prepared' double bass, a sheet of paper stuck between its strings to imitate the sound of a marching drum.

After another **Presto** movement, this time illustrating horse riding, a soldier bids farewell to his family in a tender **Aria**. '**Die Schlacht**' (The Battle) is a vivid musical depiction of the sounds and furious activity of war, with heavily snapped pizzicatos representing artillery. The slowly descending chromatic lines of the concluding '**Lamento der Verwundten Musquetirer**' (Lament of the Wounded Musketeer) symbolise the soldier's life gradually ebbing away.

Josef Suk (1874-1935)

Serenade for Strings (1892)

- 1 *Andante con moto*
- 2 *Allegro man non troppo e grazioso*
- 3 *Adagio*
- 4 *Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo presto*

Josef Suk was the favourite pupil of Antonín Dvořák at the Prague Conservatoire in the 1890s – and their relationship only became closer when Suk fell in love with and later married Dvořák's daughter Otilka. But the older composer was clearly concerned by the seriousness of the young musician's music. Dismissing his composition class at the end of the 1892 summer term, he told the 18-year-old Suk: 'It's summertime now, so go and make something

lively for a change, to compensate for all those pomposities in the minor.'

Suk duly obliged, in one of his sunniest, most confident and most lyrical pieces. The first movement opens with a gently lyrical melody in the first violins, which slowly builds in intensity until a soaring restatement high up on first and second violins. The second theme is similarly lyrical, if touched by a sense of poignant introspection, and the music winds down for a rich, radiant ending in slow-moving chords.

The second movement is a graceful waltz, whose stuttering theme and cross-rhythms play tricks on the ear. The slow third movement is the closest the *Serenade* gets to melancholy: there's something wistful about its opening cello melody, soon passed to violins. Suk's energetic finale has a folk-inspired melody, passed around the orchestra against a drone-like accompaniment from the bass. A religious-sounding chordal passage threatens to bring things to a halt, but the music soon hurtles towards a resonant conclusion in a sparkling coda.

Programme notes by David Kettle

Sophie Harmsen, mezzo soprano

Born in Canada and raised in South Africa, Sophie Harmsen studied in Cape Town graduating cum laude. During her time there she was member of the Cape Town Opera Studio. In 2007 she moved to Germany, studied with Prof. Dr. Edith Wiens, graduating in 2009.

At the Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg she debuted in the role of Dorabella in *Così fan tutte*. In the 2012 season she was heard in the same role at the Opéra de Dijon under the baton of Christophe Rousset. In 2013 she was guest at the opera houses of Prague, Caen, Dijon and Luxembourg together with Collegium 1704 and Vaclav Luks in Mysliveček's *L'Olimpiade*. In 2014 she can be heard once more in the role of Cherubino in *Mozart's Le Nozze di Figaro* in Dijon. In November 2014 she will sing the same role in a co-production of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence in Bahrain.

As a concert singer she debuted with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and Helmuth Rilling. She has performed with the Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart, Helsinki Philharmonic, Musikpodium Stuttgart, Kammerakademie Potsdam, Lahti Symphony Orchestra, Kölner Kammerorchester, Anima Eterna, Dresdner Kreuzchor and with the orchestra of the Oregon Bach Festival. Upcoming projects include concerts with the RIAS Kammerchor and the Münchener Kammerorchester and again tours with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, and with the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart.