

scottish ensemble

Re-defining the string orchestra

PHAEDRA

USA Tour Homecoming Concert

Wednesday 24 April 2013, 7.30pm

City Halls, Glasgow

Handel *Concerto grosso in B flat major, op.6 no.7*
Purcell *'Dido's Lament'; 'Hark! the echoing air'*
Handel *'Ah! mio cor!' (From Alcina)*
Biber *Battalia*
Purcell *Dance of the Furies ; Chacony in G minor ; Fantasia Upon One Note*
Britten *Phaedra*
Soprano: *Jane Irwin*

Director *Jonathan Morton*
Violin1 *Cheryl Crockett, Tristan Gurney, Sophie Mather*
Violin 2 *Xander van Vliet, Laura Ghiro, Alastair Savage, James Toll*
Viola *Catherine Marwood, Andrew Berridge, Zoe Matthews*
Cello *Alison Lawrance, Naomi Pavri*
Double Bass *Diane Clark, Tom Berry*
Harpichord *Jan Waterfield*
Timpani *Tom Hunter*
Percussion *Heather Corbett, Stuart Semple*



PHAEDRA

Part of the Scottish Orchestras'
Britten Fortnight



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George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Concerto grosso in B flat major, op.6 no.7 (1739)

1. Largo
2. Allegro
3. Largo e piano
4. Andante
5. Hornpipe

'Twelve Grand Concertos' was an alternative published title for Handel's op.6 set of concerti grossi. And grand the twelve pieces certainly are, as the composer seems intent on showing off his skills across the broadest range of contemporary musical styles both high and low. Handel wrote the concertos in London in the space of just five weeks in September and October 1739. No.7 is the only one of the set to dispense with solo episodes, using the full orchestra throughout. It's also one of the most extrovert of the twelve, in five brief movements.

The sonorous opening Largo is very short – just ten bars long – and serves as a powerful introduction to the Allegro, a witty fugue on a single note (repeated 14 times in the movement's memorable theme). The Largo e piano is an expressive movement in G minor with a winding, chromatic melody, and it leads into the stately Andante, a slow march full of Handel's trademark dotted rhythms. The piece ends in high spirits with a lively Hornpipe, full of foot-tapping syncopation.

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Dido's Lament ('When I am laid in earth') from *Dido and Aeneas* (1688) 'Hark! the echoing air' from *The Fairy-Queen* (1692)

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

'Ah! mio cor!' from *Alcina* (1735)

Two Baroque arias of grief and rage bookend a bright song of celebration in this contrasting trio. 'When I am laid in earth' (often known as Dido's Lament) is one of Purcell's most poignant creations, sung near the end of his opera *Dido and Aeneas*, when Carthaginian Queen Dido is preparing to end her life after having been abandoned by the Trojan Aeneas. The song's distinctive chromatic bassline, repeated 11 times, comes to symbolise the inexorable fate that awaits the Queen, and her increasingly desperate pleas to

'Remember me' rise ever higher in her voice.

*When I am laid in earth,
May my wrongs create
No trouble in thy breast;
Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.*

In contrast, the sparkling 'Hark! the echoing air' celebrates the double wedding of Hermia and Lysander, and Helena and Demetrius in *The Fairy-Queen*, Purcell's Restoration spectacular based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The aria's first section has an elaborate, florid vocal line, but its second is more lilting and chromatic.

*Hark, the echoing air a triumph sings
And all around pleased Cupids clap their wings.*

'Ah! mio cor!' takes us back to a world of sorrow and anger. It's heard in Act II of Handel's opera *Alcina*, when the sorceress of the opera's title wails her distress to the gods after discovering that her captive, the crusader Ruggiero, has escaped her clutches. The opening lament symbolises Alcina's grief in uneasy, detached string chords, and her initial entry is aching alone. In the brisker middle section, Alcina's fury is conveyed in the scurrying violin line and a declamatory vocal style.

*Ah! mio cor! schernito sei!
Stelle! Dei!
Nume d'amore!
Traditore!
T'amo tanto;
Puoi lasciarmi sola in pianto,
Oh Dei! Perché?
Ma che fa gemendo Alcina?
Son regina, è tempo ancora:
Resti o mora,
Peni sempre, o torni a me.*

*Ah, my heart, you are spurned!
You stars! You gods!
God of love!
Traitor!
I love you so much;
How can you leave me, alone and in tears?
Oh gods! Why?
But what is Alcina doing complaining?
I am queen, and there is still time.
Stay here or die,
Suffer for ever, or return to me!*

Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber (1644-1704) *Battalia* (1673)

Considered one of the most influential German composers of the middle Baroque period, Heinrich Biber was also one of its outstanding violinists – and,

more relevantly, pushed string music into strange, 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.

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Dance of the Furies from Dioclesian (1690)

Chacony in G minor (1680)

Fantasia Upon One Note (1680)

Three short instrumental pieces demonstrate the breadth and skill of Purcell's string music. The brief yet stormy 'Dance of the Furies' comes from Purcell's 1690 semi-opera *Dioclesian*, when the prophetess Delphia sends a tempest and a monster to disrupt Dioclesian's wedding. The restrained, stately Chacony in G minor is built over an eight-bar bass repeated 20 times, and the piece conjures a remarkable variety of texture as it steadily grows in harmonic and rhythmic complexity. The *Fantasia Upon One Note*'s 'one note' is a single C, held immovably in the tenor part throughout the piece. It's been suggested that Purcell wrote the *Fantasia* for a friend who couldn't play an instrument but nevertheless wanted to take part in a performance.

Benjamin Britten (1913-76)

Phaedra (1975)

It was the voice of celebrated mezzo-soprano Janet Baker that inspired Britten's dramatic cantata *Phaedra*, one of the composer's very last pieces.

Baker and Britten knew each other well: Baker had a long history of performing Britten's music with the English Opera Group, and it was her powerful 1975 Aldeburgh performance of Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été* that convinced him to write a work specially for her.

Britten, however, was in a poor state of health. Following a heart operation two years earlier, the composer found composing physically uncomfortable and emotionally demanding, so a large-scale work was out of the question. Instead, it's as if he boiled down all his operatic expertise into this remarkably concentrated 15-minute monologue that puts its soloist's vocal and dramatic skills firmly in the spotlight.

Using a text taken from US poet Robert Lowell's translation of Racine's 18th-century verse tragedy *Phèdre*, Britten's cantata is a compelling portrait of a tormented woman. On the day of her marriage to Theseus, king of Athens, Phaedra becomes infatuated with his son Hippolytus. When she declares her love and is rejected, in guilt and shame she poisons herself. It's hard not to see the piece as a continuation of Britten's obsession – explored in many of his operatic works, from *Peter Grimes* to *Death in Venice* – with the twin themes of forbidden (and often tragic) love, and of an outsider at odds with society. Britten modelled *Phaedra* on the Italian cantatas of Handel – like that earlier composer, he restricts himself to a string orchestra, with a 'continuo' of harpsichord and cello, adding a small percussion section to conjure a stark, stylised sound world. Also like Handel, Britten structures the work as a sequence of recitatives and arias. It falls into five main sections that run without a pause.

In the opening Prologue ('In May, in brilliant Athens...'), luminous string textures evoke the Athenian sunshine, and a cascading string melody tumbles from on high to the depths of the cellos to trigger military-sounding timpani and cymbals. In the subsequent Recitative ('My lost and dazzled eyes...'), Phaedra abandons herself to her passion.

The whirling lines of the following Presto section ('You monster!') depict Phaedra's frenzied state of mind, and in a second Recitative ('Oh Gods of wrath...'), Phaedra resolves to take her own life. The concluding Adagio ('My time's too short, your highness...') depicts Phaedra's death in noble, sonorous string harmonies, with chords rising ever higher as the poison takes effect.

David Kettle