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A “virtual” Coffee Concert recorded at the Holywell Music Room, Oxford

Sunday March 28, 2021 at 11:15

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Virtual Coffee Concerts are pre-recorded at the Holywell Music Room in Oxford and are streamed from our YouTube channel at 11:15 on Sunday mornings. (These recordings are available for a limited time after release but, of course, there will be more to come.)

Alasdair Beatson (piano) and Steffan Morris (cello)

- **Schumann: Fantasiestücke, op 73**
- **Janáček: Pohádka for Cello & Piano, JW 7/5**
- **Mendelssohn: Cello Sonata no 2 in D major, op 58**

Alasdair Beatson (piano)

Scottish pianist Alasdair Beatson works prolifically as soloist and chamber musician. Despite the shadow of Covid, Alasdair has kept busy during 2020/21, playing several times at Wigmore Hall, recording multiple concerts for BBC Radio 3 alongside Alina Ibragimova, Aleksei Kiseliiov and the Nash Ensemble, and joining Royal Northern Sinfonia as concerto soloist.

Alasdair champions a wide repertoire with particular areas of interest: Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Schubert and Schumann; the solo and chamber music of Gabriel Fauré, Bartók and Janáček; concertos of Bach, Bartók, Britten, Fauré, Hindemith, Messiaen and Mozart; and contemporary works, including the piano quintet of Thomas Adès, George Benjamin's Shadowlines and Harrison Birtwistle's Harrison's Clocks. Future plans include the

first performances of a new piano concerto, written for him by Helena Winkelman.

Two new recordings are released in 2021: Three Beethoven sonatas for violin and fortepiano with Viktoria Mullova on Onyx, and a solo piano recital Aus Wien on Pentatone. These join a discography of solo and chamber recordings on BIS, Champs Hill, Claves, Evil Penguin, Pentatone and SOMM labels. As chamber musician, Alasdair's colleagues include Steven Isserlis, Pekka Kuusisto, Viktoria Mullova, Pieter Wispelwey, the Doric, Gringolts and Meta4 string quartets, and the Nash Ensemble.

Alasdair teaches at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and mentors for the London-based Chamber Studio. From 2012 to 2018 he was founder and artistic director of Musique à Marsac, and since 2019 is co-artistic director of the Swiss chamber music festival at Ernen.

More information: <https://alasdairbeatson.com>

Steffan Morris (cello)

Much in demand as a soloist, chamber and orchestral player, Welsh cellist Steffan Morris enjoys a very varied career. At 13 years old, Steffan started studying at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey with distinguished cellist, Thomas Carroll. While a student there, he performed as a soloist at many notable venues such as St David's Hall and Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff, Wigmore Hall and the Royal Albert Hall in London.

At 17 years old, Steffan won the Texaco Young Musician of Wales and in 2010 moved to Vienna to study the cello under Professor Heinrich Schiff at the University of Music and Performing Arts. He is the youngest ever guest principal cello with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra and has also been guest principal cello with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. He is now principal cellist with the Royal Northern Sinfonia.

Steffan is Creative Associate for Sinfonia Cymru and has performed with them as a soloist. He has also performed as soloist for The Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra, the Surrey Philharmonic Orchestra and The Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra amongst others. His concert and recital engagements have taken him to Japan, Holland, Germany, Italy, Russia and Austria.

Steffan is Artistic Director of the Nidum Ensemble – a dynamic, diverse and innovative group of young professional musicians who are passionate about bringing chamber music to audiences across the UK. As cellist of the Marmen Quartet, he has performed across the UK and internationally.

As a tutor, Steffan regularly teaches at the Yehudi Menuhin School, the Royal College of Music and the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama.

More information:
<http://www.harlequin-agency.co.uk>

Fantasiestücke, op 73 by Robert Schumann (1810-1853)

1. Zart mit Ausdruck; 2. Lebhaft, leicht; 3 . Rasch und mit feuer.

These three 'Fantasy Pieces' were written in 1849, when the upsurge of revolution in Central Europe which began the previous year reached Dresden, where Schumann and his wife, Clara, had been living since 1845. In spite of his republican sympathies, he felt no wish to become actively involved (unlike Wagner, who eventually had to escape to Switzerland to avoid being arrested). On the contrary, the upheavals of public life only seemed to drive him further into his private world. As Clara noted in her diary, "It seems to me extraordinary how the terrible events

without have awakened his poetic feeling in so entirely contrary a manner."

Schumann turned to the intimate, domestic field of chamber music, and for the first time began exploring the combination of a single melody instrument and piano. His intention in writing these sets of pieces is indicated by his original title for op 73, *Soiréestücke* (*Soirée Pieces*). The others are the *Adagio* and *Allegro* for horn, op 70, the *Three Romances* for oboe, op 94, and the *Five Pieces in Folk-style* for cello, op 102. In all four cases he

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indicated alternatives to the stated instrument; the *Fantasiestücke* were written originally for clarinet, but with alternative versions for violin and for cello.

Like most of the others, op 73 was designed as a unified sequence, with cross-references between themes in the three movements. This was a particular concern for Schumann throughout much of his career. So the clarinet's opening phrase in the first piece is unobtrusively absorbed into the main theme

of no 3, while that of no 2 is derived from the piano's counter-melody to the start of no 1, and is, in turn, quoted in the coda of the final piece.

The three movements are marked to be played without a break. The gently lyrical first piece ('Sweetly, with expression') is followed a scherzo and trio ('Lively, light'), ending with a coda marked 'More and more tranquil'. The coda of the final piece ('Quickly and with fire'), on the other hand, is twice marked 'quicker', bringing the *Fantasiestücke* to a vigorous and flamboyant conclusion.

Pohádka for Cello & Piano, JW 7/5
(“Fairy Tale: The Story of Tsar Berendyey”)
by Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

1. Con moto; 2. Con moto; 3. Allegro.

The manuscript of *Pohádka*, for cello and piano, is dated February 1910. According to press reports of the first performance, in March that year, Janáček stated in his spoken introduction that the work was still in progress, with further music to be added. In the event it remained in its original three-movement form, although Janáček revised it three times before it was eventually published, in 1924.

It is one of a number of works prompted by his admiration for Russia and Russian literature. It is based on an epic poem by the poet Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky: *Skazka o Tsare Berendyeye* (The Tale of Tsar Berendyey), with echoes of both *Swan Lake* and *The Firebird*. The Tsar promises his infant son Ivan as a ransom to Kashchey the Immortal, ruler of the Underworld. When the adult Ivan learns about this, he sets off to challenge

Kashchey. He meets and falls in love with Kashchey's daughter, and after several adventures they are finally able to marry. There have been various attempts to trace details of the story in the music, but *Pohádka* stands perfectly well as a short, three-movement sonata without reference to it. The first movement opens in a gentle, lyrical mood, but generates considerable force and momentum, leading to a powerful climax from which the concluding bars fall away swiftly. The start of the second movement is lively and skittish, with a more passionate central section, and a withdrawn, pensive ending.

The final movement was described by one reviewer as “composed on a Russian theme”, a statement he was forced to retract after Janáček objected. This playful, dance-like piece, like the two previous movements, ends quietly.

Cello Sonata no 2 in D major, op 58 by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

1. Allegro assai vivace; 2. Allegretto scherzando; 3. Adagio; 4. Molto allegro e vivace.

Mendelssohn wrote his Cello Sonata no 1 for his brother, Paul, but no 2 was composed for, and dedicated to, the Polish-Russian aristocrat Count Mateusz Wielhorski. A distinguished cellist, his playing was admired by Berlioz, among others. He performed alongside many prominent musicians, including Liszt, and also received the dedication of Robert Schumann's Piano Quartet.

Though Mendelssohn mentioned starting work on the Second Sonata in 1841, he did not complete it until 1843; it was given its first performance in Leipzig in November that year. It is on a bigger scale than no 1, in four movements rather than three. It opens in an ebullient frame of mind, with brilliant virtuoso writing for both instruments. Though the momentum scarcely lets up, the mood gives way to more introspective episodes later.

The second movement is not one of Mendelssohn's typically fleet-footed scherzos, which would not have offered enough contrast with the first movement. Instead, this one is measured, delicate, rather like a gavotte in style. The tone moves from playful to strenuous and back, and the moderate tempo acts as a bridge from the

first movement to the deeply contemplative third. This is one of Mendelssohn's most original conceptions. The piano begins, with a chorale-like theme in rich organ-like spread chords. The tune has not been identified as a known Lutheran hymn, so it is probably Mendelssohn's own. In between appearances of the chorale, the cello has a series of recitative-like sections marked 'passionate and animated'. Scholar John Horton suggested that the composer, a great admirer and promoter of JS Bach's music, may well have been alluding to 'Es ist vollbracht!' (It is finished!), an aria from Bach's St John Passion with a prominent obbligato part for viola da gamba. Chorale and recitative are eventually combined, as the movement comes gently to rest.

The finale follows without a break. After a tense opening, it sets off full of bubbling energy. The more lyrical central episode involves no actual slowing down, except very briefly at the end, before the earlier exuberance is recovered. The final moments involve flamboyant displays from both the cello and piano.

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