Alderley Edge Symphony Orchestra

Programme Notes

Saturday 7th November 2026

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897): Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a (1873)

Theme: Chorale St. Antoni – Andante
Variations I–VIII
Finale: Andante

The most famous image of Brahms as the rotund, grey-bearded elder statesman of symphonic music belies the second most familiar image of the German composer, in which a fresher face stares thoughtfully into the distance. This duality between conservative and progressive is a repeated theme in biographies of Brahms. Nonetheless, it is the former which remains inescapably the most familiar image: the final heir to a symphonic tradition passed from Haydn to Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. At the same time, his unwavering respect for 'pure' or 'absolute' music put him at odds with the likes of Liszt and Wagner, whose radical new soundworlds seemed always to have some deeper meaning or subject matter. Despite this, Brahms was not wholly opposed to 'new' music. He was conflicted in his opposition to and simultaneous admiration of Wagner, and treasured his manuscript score of *Tannhäuser*.

Brahms' reputation as the guardian of the classical tradition was reinforced by his formidable knowledge of music history. He collected manuscripts and early editions, studied the works of composers from Bach and Handel to the Renaissance masters, and was fascinated by older musical forms. Nowhere is this marriage of historical reverence and compositional ingenuity more apparent than in his *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, a work which takes a seemingly unremarkable eighteenth-century melody and transforms it into one of the most sophisticated orchestral variation sets ever written.

There is, however, one small problem with the title: the theme was almost certainly not written by Haydn. In 1870, Brahms' friend Carl Ferdinand Pohl, a music historian and librarian of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, showed him a collection of wind divertimentos attributed to Haydn. One of these contained a stately melody entitled *Chorale St. Antoni*, which immediately caught Brahms' attention. He copied the theme into his notebook, and three years later, while spending the summer at Tutzing on the shores of Lake Starnberg in Bavaria, developed it into a set of eight variations and a finale.

Subsequent scholarship has cast considerable doubt on Haydn's authorship of the original divertimento. His pupil Ignaz Pleyel has been proposed as a possible composer, though the matter remains unresolved, and the origin of the chorale melody itself is equally uncertain. We are therefore left with the pleasing irony that one of Brahms' most celebrated tributes to his great predecessor may have no direct connection to Haydn at all.

The work was composed in two versions, one for two pianos and the other for full orchestra, and the orchestral version was premiered in Vienna in November 1873 under Brahms' own baton. Its immediate success was particularly welcome to a composer who had spent much of his career

labouring under the formidable shadow of Beethoven. Brahms was then forty years old and had yet to complete his First Symphony, whose notoriously prolonged gestation would continue for another three years. The *Haydn Variations* therefore represent an important milestone in Brahms' development as a symphonic composer, demonstrating his growing mastery of orchestral colour and large-scale musical structure.

The theme itself is first announced by the woodwinds, accompanied by understated pizzicato strings, in a scoring which deliberately recalls the original wind ensemble. Its most curious feature is its irregular phrasing. Rather than conforming to the neat four- or eight-bar phrases which characterise much classical music, the melody unfolds in five-bar units, lending it a slightly lopsided, processional quality. Brahms preserves this unusual framework through the ensuing variations, finding an astonishing variety of ways to transform the same basic material.

The eight variations are a masterclass in orchestral invention. The first clothes the chorale in flowing, interweaving lines, while the second introduces an abrupt change of temperament with an energetic minor key transformation. The third restores a more lyrical atmosphere, followed by a wistful fourth variation in which the melody seems to float between the instruments. The fifth is a fleeting scherzo, its playful rhythmic displacements giving way to the exuberant hunting horn character of the sixth. The seventh, marked *Grazioso*, is an elegant, gently lilting Siciliana, before the eighth retreats into a hushed and mysterious soundworld of muted strings and delicate woodwind figures.

The finale is the work's crowning achievement. Here Brahms turns to the *passacaglia*, an ancient form particularly associated with the Baroque, in which a recurring bass line provides the foundation for an increasingly elaborate series of variations. Taking the first five bars of the original chorale as his bass theme, Brahms builds an extraordinary edifice of accumulating counterpoint and orchestral colour. The music grows steadily in grandeur until the original *St Anthony Chorale* returns in a resplendent statement from the full orchestra, bringing this remarkable synthesis of musical conservatism and innovation to a triumphant close.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904): Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104 (1894–95)

1. Allegro
2. Adagio, ma non troppo
3. Finale: Allegro moderato — Andante — Allegro vivo

Dvořák was a relatively late developer as a composer. His early musical career was spent as a piano teacher and principal violist in the dance orchestra which went on to become the National Theatre Orchestra of Prague, in which he played under the likes of Smetana and Wagner. The dawn of his compositional success came when, as an impoverished music teacher from the Bohemian provinces, he submitted a portfolio of some fifteen works for the Austrian State Prize for composition. The jury, among them Brahms and the stern critic Eduard Hanslick, was impressed, Brahms so ‘visibly overcome’ that he recommended Dvořák to his own publisher Simrock, affording the younger composer the financial security to focus on composition alone.

For such a consummate symphonic writer, it is a little surprising that Dvořák only wrote three and a half concertos in addition to his 9 symphonies, 5 tone poems, the opera Rusalka and a large amount of chamber and choral work. Of these concertos, those for piano and violin are infrequently heard, and early sketches for a youthful first cello concerto in A major were wholly disowned and abandoned. What we therefore describe as the Dvořák cello concerto, in the definite article, is in fact technically his second, and is one of the greatest of all works for the

instrument. This in itself is remarkable, as some years earlier Dvořák had opined that although the cello was adequate for orchestral and chamber use, it was not a suitable vessel for a concerto, its top range too nasal (or squeaky, or whiny, depending on translation) and its lower register too grumbly.

After putting aside the early A major cello concerto, Dvořák's friend, the cellist Hanuš Wihan, had repeatedly requested a new concerto for the instrument. The spark came when, while director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, he attended the premiere of a new cello concerto by his teaching colleague, Victor Herbert. Herbert was principal cellist in the Metropolitan Opera orchestra, and had also led the section at the premiere of the New World symphony in 1893, and so held some influence in inspiring Dvořák to write for the instrument. Work on the new concerto began in November 1894 and was complete by the following February. Dvořák relied heavily on Wihan for technical advice in writing for the cello, though Dvořák was aghast at his friend's suggestion of finishing the piece with a big, virtuosic cadenza, so much so that Wihan was dropped as soloist for the concerto's premiere, and in selling the score to Simrock, he stipulated that it was not to be tampered with in any, least of all by Wihan.

The pair ultimately reconciled, and the concerto was an immediate success. Brahms quipped that if he had only known that such a piece was possible, he would have written it long ago. Dvořák might have thought his work on the concerto was finished, but he made key revisions later in 1895. Some three decades previously, he had harboured affections for his piano student, Josefina Kaunitzová. Josefina did not return his feelings, though the pair remained friends after Dvořák married her elder sister, Anna. When word reached the composer in America that Josefina was gravely unwell with a heart condition, he reworked the second movement of his cello concerto to quote heavily from the first of his Four Songs, Opus 82, entitled *Kez Duch Muj San* ('Leave me alone'), of which Josefina was especially fond. A month after Dvořák returned home later in the year, Josefina died, prompting further revisions to the score with a further, wistful quotation from the song in the concerto's penultimate paragraph.

The work is written in classical three-movement form, though is not without its surprises. The first movement begins with a low, brooding theme for woodwinds, followed shortly by an astonishingly songful major-key theme for solo horn, which the great musicologist Sir Donald Tovey calls 'one of the most beautiful passages ever written'. Dvořák knew a good tune when he wrote one, and so it is this second theme, rather than the conventional first, which is recapitulated joyfully by the whole orchestra after being developed by the soloist.

The woodwinds also open the slow movement, now with a tranquil, meditative theme which is echoed soon after by the soloist. Stormclouds gather, though, amid a sudden moment of tutti orchestral strife, heralding the central section which quotes elegantly from *Kez Duch Muj San* (in itself well worth listening to). The finale snaps abruptly out of the reverie into a brisk march like figure. The movement steadily gains momentum, flying through a heady duet for solo violin and cello. Just when we seem to be reaching the kind of triumphant, firework laden conclusion which Wihan had impertinently suggested, Dvořák instead presents an elongated coda which returns to the mesmeric stillness of the slow movement. Josefina, now dead, is acknowledged once more with a refrain of her favourite song, and though the last page of the concerto finishes with a flourish, it is this elegiac sigh which leaves the deepest impression.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847): Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 107, *Reformation* (1830)

1. Andante – Allegro con fuoco
2. Allegro vivace
3. Andante
4. Andante con moto – Allegro vivace – Allegro maestoso

Mendelssohn rivalled even Mozart and Schubert for compositional precocity. Breaking the mould of composers born poor and dying poorer, his privileged upbringing in the family mansion exposed him to Berlin's artists and intelligentsia from an early age. By the age of sixteen, he had written twelve string symphonies, several youthful operas and his extraordinary String Octet, and at his premature death aged just 38, he had achieved remarkable fame and wealth as a composer, conductor and director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Mendelssohn's prodigious talents extended well beyond music. He was an accomplished painter, a gifted linguist and a keen traveller, though his greatest contribution to musical history was perhaps not a composition of his own. In 1829, at the age of twenty, he conducted a landmark performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in Berlin, the first since Bach's death in 1750. The performance was instrumental in the nineteenth-century revival of interest in Bach, whose music was then far less familiar to audiences than it is today. Bach's influence on Mendelssohn was profound, not least in the composer's lifelong fascination with counterpoint and the Protestant chorale, both of which feature prominently in tonight's symphony.

The *Reformation* Symphony was composed the following year, to commemorate the three-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession of 1530, one of the founding documents of Lutheran Protestantism. The occasion had considerable personal significance for Mendelssohn. Born into a prominent Jewish family (his grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was one of the great philosophers of the Jewish Enlightenment), Felix and his siblings were baptised into the Lutheran Church as children. His own religious identity was complex, but Protestant sacred music remained a particular source of inspiration throughout his life.

The symphony's numbering is a little misleading. Although known as the Fifth, it was actually Mendelssohn's second full orchestral symphony to be composed, preceding both the *Italian* and *Scottish* symphonies. Nor did the work enjoy the success its composer had hoped for. Plans for a performance during the anniversary celebrations came to nothing, and a proposed performance in Paris was abandoned. Its eventual premiere took place in Berlin in November 1832, conducted by Mendelssohn himself. He subsequently became deeply dissatisfied with the piece, describing it as a youthful failure and expressing the wish that it should never be published. His wishes were respected until 1868, some twenty years after his death, when the symphony finally appeared in print, acquiring its misleadingly high opus number and position as Symphony No. 5.

For all Mendelssohn's misgivings, the symphony contains some of his most arresting orchestral writing. More unusually, it follows a recognisable narrative of religious struggle and eventual triumph, standing somewhere between a conventional symphony and the programme music which was later to become associated with Liszt and Wagner.

The solemn introduction to the first movement begins with an almost ecclesiastical atmosphere, as wind and brass exchange phrases suggestive of a church service. Twice the strings introduce a quietly luminous rising figure known as the *Dresden Amen*, a liturgical response which would

later be immortalised by Wagner in his opera *Parsifal*. This moment of stillness is shattered by the turbulent Allegro con fuoco, whose restless strings and vehement orchestral outbursts evoke a sense of conflict. Whether Mendelssohn intended a literal depiction of the Reformation's religious struggles is uncertain, but the contrast between the music's sombre, archaic opening and its dramatic development is unmistakable.

After this weighty opening, the second movement provides a welcome change of mood. A buoyant, almost mischievous scherzo, it has all the lightness of touch familiar from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, with an elegant, pastoral central section. The brief third movement, a melancholy Andante led principally by the strings, is rather like one of Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* transposed to the orchestra. Its gentle conclusion leads without a break into the finale, the culmination of the symphony's religious narrative.

A solo flute introduces the unmistakable melody of Martin Luther's chorale *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* ('A Mighty Fortress Is Our God'), a hymn which became something of an anthem of the Protestant Reformation. Gradually the theme gathers strength, giving way to an energetic Allegro in which Mendelssohn's admiration for Bach is evident in the intricate contrapuntal writing. The music presses onwards towards a magnificent final statement of Luther's chorale, now proclaimed by the full orchestra in D major. The darkness and conflict of the opening movement have been swept aside, replaced by an exuberant affirmation of faith.

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