



# Thames Youth Orchestra

Simon Ferris, conductor  
Patrick Milne, piano

## Concert

Saturday July 17<sup>th</sup> 2010  
7.30pm

All Saints Kingston



# Programme

## George Gershwin (1898-1937), Cuban Overture

*Cuban Overture*, Gershwin's last major concert work, was also the first fruit of the composer's association with Joseph Schillinger, a Russian émigré teacher of analysis and composition whose pedagogical system involved, by all accounts, mathematical description and plenty of graph paper.

That Gershwin was eager to underpin his copious musical imagination with a more formal understanding (he later asked Schoenberg for composition lessons, a relationship we are perhaps lucky never came to fruition) and that he was ambitious of moving from the dance club to the concert hall is both well-known and frequently misunderstood. Gershwin was not only an imaginative but also a shrewd and strong-willed musician. His desire to understand how to write large-scale works was not (primarily) an indication of musical self-consciousness, but rather part of a larger exploration of the possibilities of American popular music in general, and dance music in particular – an exploration that was going on, in fact, on both sides of the Atlantic, but in America can be seen not only in the music of Gershwin but also, for instance, in the large scale movie extravaganzas and set-pieces of, for instance, Busby Berkeley, or in the increasingly sophisticated dance band composition of Duke Ellington.

*Cuban Overture* is not therefore an attempt to transform Cuban dance music into something more respectable, but an attempt to draw it within Gershwin's own particular idiom – the extended fantasia for dance band. It was always a work of popular music. It premiered at Lewisohn stadium in the first All-Gershwin concert (which was to become an annual event) in front of an audience of nearly 18000, (with, as Gershwin noted with satisfaction, 5000 turned away at the gates).

Gershwin conceived *Rumba* (as it was originally entitled) on a holiday taken with friends in Havana in January 1932, “two hysterical weeks,” he wrote, “where no sleep was had”. Gershwin was particularly impressed by a 16-piece rumba band he heard, and by the range of percussion instruments it routinely deployed. The rumba rhythm was to form the basis of his overture (the Cuban rumba, it should be noted, is a quicker paced dance to the one familiar from ballroom dance competitions), with four percussion instruments – claves, bongos, maracas and a gourd - deployed to provide colour.

The overture is in a simple ternary form, but within each section there is a juxtaposition of contrasting musical zones, like tableaux, which give the work the balletic feel familiar from, for example, *An American in Paris* (1928). Unifying these tableaux is not just the rumba

rhythm and the texture of the percussion, but a series of more formal tools – such as motivic integration – which Gershwin proudly deployed. For instance, the two themes in the opening section are linked by what Gershwin in his own programme note described as a “three-part contrapuntal episode” – evidence, perhaps, of a more analytical approach to description, if not composition.

The middle section is slower, with a bluesy violin line riding over a wind and percussion driven nocturne; once again, different themes or motifs ride up against each other, in seemingly episodic or fragmentary fashion, an approach to composition of which the young Schoenberg, if not necessarily Schillinger, might have approved.

## **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), Piano Concerto in G major**

1. Allegramente
2. Adagio assai
3. Presto

Ravel worked on his two piano concertos (in G major, and in D major for the left hand) simultaneously between 1929 and 1930. They were the last major orchestral works that he was able to complete before his death from a suspected brain tumour in 1937.

While the D major concerto, written to a commission from the pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm in the Great War, is a work of dark and disturbed energy, Ravel characterised his G major concerto as follows:

"[it is]...a concerto in the true sense of the word. I mean that it is written very much in the same spirit as those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. The music of a concerto, in my opinion, should be light-hearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects. It has been said that the concertos of some great classical composers, far from being written *for* the piano, have been written *against* it. And I think this criticism is quite justified."

This is a side-swipe at Ravel's great musical anti-hero, Beethoven, for whom music in its highest expressive form was a dramatised struggle and whose own concertos (notably the fourth) are frequently characterised by an adversarial relationship between piano and orchestra.

Ravel may have felt somewhat defensive precisely because the other concerto on which he was working was conceived very much in the Beethovenian mould of music as psychological and also physical struggle. His comments on the G major therefore have something of the force of an apologetic. However it is also undeniable that of the two, the G major concerto is

in fact closest to Ravel's core classicizing aesthetic, which has often (like much neo-classicism of the twentieth century) been characterised as cool and unemotional.

And it is true that from its opening gesture – the snap of a whip – there is something of the unfolding of a mechanism about the first movement in particular, a clockwork matter of wheels and escapes (Ravel's father was Swiss engineer, so it is an easy parallel to draw). However, the whip-crack has also been likened to the whip of a circus ringmaster, and the fragmentary juxtaposition of different worlds – circus, vaudeville, jazz, and so on – which characterise the outer movements, and in which the piano plays a co-ordinating rather than dominating role, perhaps suggests that what we have here is a conscious counter-aesthetic to the Romantic struggle of the isolated individual, one in which profundity is achieved not through dramatic struggle, but through a characteristically Mozartian emotional (and musical) quickening.

This is especially notable in the Adagio. This movement, Ravel confessed, cost him more trouble than anything else in the G major or D major concertos. He wrote it, he claimed, at the rate of two bars a day, and with constant recourse to Mozart's Clarinet Quintet. Aesthetic control, he seems to say, comes harder than dramatic struggle.

The melody is underpinned by a simple three in a bar accompaniment, both stated first by solo piano; but it is the pulse of that accompaniment, the way that pulse plays against the brisker movement of the melody, and the progressive breaking of the melodic line into smaller and smaller rhythmic units (quaver, semi-quaver, demi-semi-quaver), which is most reminiscent of Mozart's handling of, in particular, the variation form of his own slow movements.

As the movement progresses, the soloist is gradually displaced from the melody, the theme being handed between the woodwind and ultimately to the cor anglais (and only in the coda to the strings), and it is through this displacement that the work contrasts most strikingly with the almost thundering certainty and centrality of the solo voice in the D major concerto.

In the outer movements too, the piano is frequently a player in the orchestra, providing texture and accompaniment, co-ordinating rather than controlling. The first movement opens with the piano playing a scurrying figure under a half-melody reminiscent of the Basque tunes which Ravel's mother sang to her infant son. This little figure is contrasted with a blues-infused second theme which is framed by Ravel's version of dance band orchestration, and the sense of pastiche is complete when, into this predominantly whirring scuttling movement Ravel also managed to open a space for his other version of post-romantic profundity, the dream-like night-music, in this case an episode underpinned by harp glissandi and string harmonics which becomes a sort of summer night city nocturne.

The finale is brisk and short, and once again the piano works a scampering accompaniment over which the orchestral instruments make shrill conversational interjections; melody emerges here and there from the piano's energetic line, frequently in the form of fanfare, but the point at which accompaniment becomes melody and vice versa is always ambiguous.

Ravel was tempted to call the work a *divertissement*. However, the concerto as a whole demonstrates a profound understanding of the classical style and method; and taken together with the D major concerto, provides an interesting gloss to Andre Gide's comment that at the heart of every classical work is a romantic work struggling to get out.

### *Interval (20 minutes)*

## **Leonard Bernstein (1918 – 1990), Symphonic Dances from 'West Side Story'**

*Prologue/Somewhere/Scherzo/Mambo: the dance at the gym/Cha-cha: the lovers meet/Cool: fugue - the Jets anticipate a fight/Rumble: the fight/Finale*

The eclecticism of European twentieth century neo-classicism as typified by, for example, Ravel found a natural counterpart in American music – both art music and popular music – of the same period; and in Leonard Bernstein it found a particularly well-adapted champion.

In one sense an eclectic approach might seem to indicate diffuseness – so, Bernstein's musical attention drifted from his role as principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic to his composition of art music (three symphonies), opera (*Candide*) and straight-up musical theatre (*On The Town*, *Wonderful Town*), and film scores (*On the Waterfront*). He was also a teacher and pianist. And there may be some truth in the suggestion that his psychological make-up – tending, indisputably, to narcissism – meant that he would always be restless within the confines of the art music establishment, where the sign of authenticity is so often (eccentric) self-effacement.

However, by another reading, eclectic artistic personalities are simply good at turning aesthetic objects around in their hands; noticing that, for instance, musical theatre might lie close to opera and ballet; that the dance form is common to Bach and Cuban nightclubs. Bernstein, by this reckoning, merely found the bridging of the gap between art music and popular music simple, instinctive and interesting, so when he came to arrange some of the numbers from *West Side Story* into a suite of dances for the concert hall it was inevitable that it would become in its more concentrated form something rather different.

The musical is itself highly balletic. One of its progenitors, Jerome Robbins, was a choreographer, and the street realism of the musical's setting disguises the ritual feel of many of its numbers. For instance, the dance at the gym (*Mambo*) prefigures the inter-gang violence as a sort of adolescent tribal dance-off, so that when the violence actually arrives (*Rumble*) it again feels like what it perhaps really is, a tribal rite of passage, violent, shocking, but contained within the acknowledged social frameworks.

In the same way the meeting of Tony and Maria is framed against a dance, a lilting cha-cha-cha, which is the sort of acceptable social form through which young people might meet under the approving eye of their elders; but in this case the dance is an ironic counterpoint to their own violent and irrepressible love; Tony and Maria pointedly do not dance because their love – which we of course approve - is socially unacceptable.

The through-composed numbers of the suite do not follow the order of the musical, which allows Bernstein to meditate on musical rather than dramatic commonalities, in particular the tritone familiar as the first three notes of the song *Maria* (C-F sharp-G). Bernstein himself said (talking of the suite of dances) “The three notes pervade the whole piece, inverted, done backwards. I didn't do all this on purpose. It seemed to come out in *Cool* and as the gang whistle [in the Prologue]. The same three notes.”

The *Symphonic Dances* date from early 1961 at about the time Bernstein was overseeing the preparation of the musical for the movie. Both the movie soundtrack and the symphonic dances were in fact orchestrated by Sid Ramin (to whom the suite is dedicated) and Irwin Kostal, under Bernstein's supervision.

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## Friends of TYO

The purpose of the Friends' Association is to provide financial support to the orchestra to help offset the significant expenses of running a full-scale symphonic ensemble. These costs include music, venue and instrument hire, staffing, performing rights, publicity, transport, maintaining a web presence, catering – the list goes on.

The cost of membership of the friends' scheme is £15 per annum for an individual subscription, £25 for family membership and £40 for corporate members. The benefits are as follows:

- Reduced ticket prices for concerts and events
- Members' names listed in concert programmes

- Receipt of a regular email newsletter

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For further details, or to apply for membership, please contact Friends Coordinator, Miranda Fagandini:  
[friends@thamesyouthorchestra.co.uk](mailto:friends@thamesyouthorchestra.co.uk)

## TYO Staff

Musical Director – Simon Ferris  
Executive Director – Rebecca Lacey  
Violins Coach – Adrian Charlesworth  
Cellos Coach – Sarah Hedley-Miller  
Lower Strings Coach – Pippa Hyde  
Brass Coach – Ian Stott  
Wind Coach – Andrew Watson  
Percussion Coach – Ben Porter  
Treasurer – Lisa Hawkins  
Friends Coordinator – Miranda Fagandini

# Thames Youth Orchestra

Ellie Lee, leader

## First Violins

Ellie Lee\*  
James Walsh  
Anna Selig  
Zara Kwan  
Imogen Dodds  
Olivia Johnson

## Second Violins

Rosie Parker\*  
Jessica Plummer  
Toby Piachaud  
Sung-Hyo Lee  
Steffi Schofield  
Kath Roberts  
William Brunt  
Hermione Shotton-Oza  
Nina Lim

## Violas

Eleanor Figueiredo\*  
Grace Moon  
Ed Tan  
Heppy Longworth  
Tom Pollard

## Cellos

Fred Mikardo-Greaves  
Eunyoung Lee  
Miles Dilworth  
Amy Hur  
Sarah Ebsworth  
Krzysztof Kaczmarek

## Bass

Marianne Schofield\*

## Flutes

Minyoung Seo  
Louis Tam  
Mayuko Tanno

## Oboes

Catherine Hancock\*  
Jesus Duque

## Clarinets

Georgina Feary\*  
Tom Nichols  
Ellie Pryde  
Miranda Evans

## Bassoons

Isabel White\*

\*principal

## Horns

Alexei Watkins\*  
Tom Jackson\*  
William Whiting  
Chris Born  
David Liu  
Sadhbh O'Sullivan

## Trumpets

Imogen Hancock\*  
Bryony Watson  
Nicolaj Schubert  
Robert Hawkins

## Trombones

Edmund Jillings\*  
Julius Whiteman  
Matilda Ashe-Belton  
Tom Cope

## Timpani

Patrick Milne

## Percussion

Daehyun Lee  
Jennifer Dawson  
Hugo Fagandini  
Will Lewis-Smith

## Piano

Patrick Milne