



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY ORCHESTRA

BEN GERONON
conductor

STEPHANIE CHILDRESS
violin

Saturday 17 February 2018, 8.00pm
West Road Concert Hall, Cambridge



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Cambridge University Orchestra

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Nico Muhly Mixed Messages
Bruch Violin Concerto No.1
Mahler Symphony No.1

Ben Gernon conductor

Stephanie Childress violin

CUMS Concerto Competition 2017
winner

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PROGRAMME NOTES

Nico Muhly (b. 1981)**Mixed Messages**

Nico Muhly's work runs the gamut from pop-music arrangements to avant-garde collaborations, film soundtracks, and major choral and orchestral compositions. Muhly has worked with eclectic commercial artists including Björk and Rufus Wainwright, and yet has also written works for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, violinist Hilary Hahn, and the Royal Ballet. He counts among his compositions a grand opera – *Two Boys*, produced at the English National Opera and the Metropolitan Opera – and a chamber opera (*Dark Sisters*, a joint commission with the Opera Company of Philadelphia). But he can also be heard in performances at New York's experimental-music hub, The Kitchen. He has written numerous orchestrations and arrangements of works by musicians ranging from William Byrd to the popular rap artist Usher. Among his film scores, Muhly wrote the original music for the 2008 Oscar-winning film *The Reader*, winning him the "Discovery of the Year" award from the World Soundtrack Academy.

Born in Vermont and raised in Rhode Island, Muhly sang in an Episcopal Church choir in Providence during his youth, and freely acknowledges a deep affinity with the Anglican choral tradition. Works for choir constitute a significant portion of his prolific output, though orchestral compositions and pieces for small ensemble also figure prominently in his catalog.

Muhly graduated from Columbia University with a degree in English literature, and later earned a Masters in Music from the Juilliard School in 2004. His composition teachers include John Corigliano and Christopher Rouse, and Muhly also acknowledges the influence of the minimalist and post-minimalist procedures of, for example, John Adams, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass (for whom he worked as an editor, MIDI programmer and keyboardist for several years).

In 2013 Muhly orchestrated his *Bright Mass with Canons* – originally written for choir with organ accompaniment – for the Philadelphia Orchestra, who premiered the orchestral version with the Westminster Symphonic Choir. *Mixed Messages* is Muhly's second commission for the Philadelphia Orchestra.

The title of *Mixed Messages* is, like the piece itself, multivalent. "'Mixed messages' is a phrase that you hear applied to any number of interpersonal encounters from the strictly business to the romantic," Muhly notes. He is drawn to this notion that music can be interpreted along divergent, even contradictory paths simultaneously. While arising from the pandemic possibilities of miscommunication in the modern era (especially when technologically mediated, as in texting and email) this idea also opens up new musical possibilities based on ambiguity, transformation, and layering. "The

materials can be seen as joyful,” he explains, “but also menacing; each idea contains its own contradiction.”

Throughout this single-movement piece, the mixing of messages is achieved in several ways. First, Muhly keeps the orchestral families internally intact, but somewhat at odds with each other. The brass motif that opens the work, for example, sounds at cross purposes with the string figures and woodwind lines around it. But later, as the motifs cycle through the different instrumental groups, the contexts change. The percussion and woodwinds both subsequently repeat, in turn, that initial brass motif. But in the interim the brass have moved onto something else, and don't appear to recognize or acknowledge the reiteration. Contrasting ideas emerge in seeming random order, and then spontaneously return as well. The instrumental families hear and learn from each other, but never seem to agree on what has been heard or learnt.

Second, while Muhly retains the regular pulse of minimalism in this work, the rhythms themselves are irregular and asymmetrical. Much of the accompaniment consists of familiar ostinato patterns that one might hear in a piece by Glass or Adams, though the patterns change far more frequently, before they have a chance to settle into consistency. Muhly evokes here a capricious machine in which the rhythmic engine is running all the time, but which occasionally veers off track, pauses in a sudden panic, slows unexpectedly, or spins wildly out of control. Its lopsided unpredictability makes analysis perplexing, and intentionally undercuts a single narrative reading of the work.

Finally, amid all the layering of timbre, motif, and rhythm, Muhly includes palpably Romantic gestures – a soaring line for the cellos and cor anglais, an extended violin solo, and strings reaching up higher and higher near the conclusion. In every case, though, there is a wrench deliberately placed in the works, to mitigate the singularity of Romantic effect. String glissandi undermine triadic harmonies, percussion interjections disrupt an emergent sense of consonant calm, and aggressively repeated chords antagonize the melody. The ending then comes rather abruptly, as if someone got the wrong message and turned off the machine before it was finished.

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We are grateful to Dr Howard for allowing us to use these notes.

Max Bruch (1838–1920)

Violin Concerto No.1

Although Bruch's Violin Concerto No.1 in G minor (op.26) is undoubtedly a staple of the violin repertoire, we often forget that its popularity is a textbook example of the performers being the propagators of musical traditions in the concert hall. Bruch initially rose to prominence among his contemporaries as a choral composer first and foremost, with over twenty major choral compositions and four operas. Only in the latter half of the twentieth century did his instrumental works, and concertos in particular, start planting themselves in the standard concert repertoire. During his

life he was fascinated by string instruments, going on to write three violin concertos alongside his *Scottish Fantasy* for violin and orchestra and his celebrated *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra. The first violin concerto, arguably his most famous, is often compared to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, due to the omission of a lengthy orchestral introduction which usually serves to prepare both the soloist and the audience for the stream of music that is to come, in addition to the through-composed nature of the movements. From a violinist's point of view, the work presents the soloist and conductor with the incredible challenge of re-interpreting a work that is so ingrained in the concert repertoire, finding new twists and turns that might not have previously been brought to light. Fundamentally the violin is the guiding voice, presenting its virtuosity in the first couple of bars of the first movement following a quiet micro-introduction from the woodwinds. What follows in the first movement is what can only be described as a concise tempest of sound. Calmer waters lead the ensemble into the second movement which is possibly one of the most compelling of its kind. As a soloist there is always a tendency to neglect second movements, instead choosing to focus much time and effort on the traditionally difficult technicalities of the first and third movements of a concerto. This is not a possibility in Bruch's case for it is perhaps the movement with the most depth, ebbing and flowing from the initial theme to its culmination right at the end of the movement. This is an intense trajectory that requires a huge variety of sounds as well as a clear interpretative direction from the soloist, thus making it the concerto's centre-piece, quite literally. Historically Bruch has strong ties with Britain as he was, at the height of his career, the principal conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic Society from 1880 to 1883. I hope that tonight's performance will shine a new light on this much-loved work, perhaps betraying the subtleties of a bygone Romantic age, struggling in the face of Stravinsky and Schoenberg's exciting and radical innovations. In any case, the third movement's energy and verve are enough to propel the soloist into the typical bravura of the Romantic concerto, although perhaps with more innovation from Bruch than is traditionally expected...

Stephanie Childress

INTERVAL

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No.1

At the time Mahler composed the *First Symphony* (1885-1888), his most successful composition to date was a song cycle, the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer). It had been composed in 1884 for the soprano Johanna Richter, whom Mahler had met and fallen in (unrequited) love with while conductor of the Kassel Opera House. Many of the themes from the Wayfarer songs worked their way into the first symphony, though by the time of its completion, Mahler's muse had changed form - he was then in love with the much older, and married, Marion von Weber.

It would be another fourteen years before Mahler married the beautiful socialite Alma Schindler, though she, too, had a connection to the *First Symphony*: when she and Mahler first met, all she could think about was how much she detested the work! Indeed, it is a work that gave Mahler much grief. For years, it was poorly received, and he edited the work heavily before finally publishing it in 1899. For the first three performances, in fact, the piece was in five movements, separated into two separate sections. Mahler referred to it as a “Symphonic Poem” or “Tone Poem in Symphonic Form” with the title “The Titan” and an accompanying programme. Eventually, though, he removed the second movement as well as the titles, in favour of a more traditional four-movement structure, which is its final form (and the form you will hear tonight).

The programme, though, is worth reading, to get a sense of the depth and variety of emotion Mahler saw in the work:

PART I: From the days of youth

1. Spring and no end.
2. Flower
3. Full Sail

Part II: Commedia Umana

4. Funeral March
5. Finale (dall’ Inferno al Paradiso)

In the first movement, we hear a morning awakening, and the dew almost glistens off the sustained high A’s that open the movement. As the morning gathers light and energy, the cuckoo joins in, followed by hunting calls, and finally, the day breaks into song. The next movement is a jaunty scherzo, which recalls German folk songs (Ländler) and almost transports one to the pub (or as the title suggests, a sailor’s quarters). The third movement is a funeral march, famously based on the melody of Frère Jacques, but tragically inflected to the minor mode. Allegedly, this was a popular pub song at the time, but presented in Mahler’s low, muted colours (initially bass, then muted cello, then bass tuba, and so on) the theme does not retain the jaunty feel of the second movement. Then out of nowhere, the rhythm becomes swung, and accompanied by Turkish cymbals and drums: we have joined a vulgar band procession. Above the score, Mahler writes, “With Parody.” This movement is the one that most offended audiences initially, and if you allow yourself, you may also find its dark humour quite disturbing and unsettling. Finally, the work ends with a Finale initially subtitled “from inferno to paradise.” Indeed, the movement is full of vast mood swings, from a “flash of lightening from a dark cloud,” to divine calm, to eventual victory. But there are several retreats, failures and rough patches before the final triumphant ending, and you may find yourself dismayed as the music falls yet again into the hellish angst and chromaticism. With apologies for the spoiler alert, I assure you that glory will come in the end and will be well worth the wait.

Watch out, though! Mahler wrote that he removed the programme notes upon publication of the work in 1899 because he did not want the audience to be misled by their specific images and emotions. Indeed, one of Mahler's most famous utterances is: "A Symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything." This symphony, despite being Mahler's shortest at about 60 minutes in length, is certainly full. While it may contain the many emotions, images and sounds I have outlined above, it contains much more than that. So take this note with a grain of salt, let your listening be guided by your own experiences, hopes, dreams, and fears, and allow yourself to find your own world and worlds in Mahler's work.

Naomi Woo



BIOGRAPHIES

Ben Gernon

Born in 1989, Ben Gernon first attracted international attention in 2013 when he won the Nestlé and Salzburg Festival Young Conductor's Award after a unanimous vote by the jury led by Ingo Metzmacher. Gernon is praised repeatedly for his effortless authority on the podium, his drive and command of the orchestra and his incisive, heart-felt and evocative interpretations and has quickly earned himself a reputation as one of the finest and most exciting young conductors working today both in the concert hall and opera house. Working now with some of the world's major orchestras, Gernon took up his position of Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in the 2017/18 season, one of the youngest conductors to have held a titled position with a BBC orchestra.



This season Gernon makes many significant orchestral debuts across the globe with orchestras including the Oslo Philharmonic, DSO Berlin, Czech Philharmonic, Munich Chamber, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Pacific Symphony orchestras, Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart and Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, as well as returns to the BBC Symphony, BBC Scottish amongst others. As Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, Gernon will conduct the orchestra in several concerts across the season in Manchester's Bridgewater Hall and elsewhere, with soloists such as Richard Goode and the Berlin Philharmonic's Solo Horn Stefan Dohr, as well as in the studio and family and education concerts.

Gernon is a regular guest conductor with most of the UK's orchestras, including the Philharmonia, City of Birmingham Symphony and BBC Symphony orchestras and has conducted twice at the BBC Proms, including on the occasion of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's 80th Birthday. Highlights of his 2016/17 season in Europe included debuts with the Vienna Symphony, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Swedish Radio Symphony orchestras. In the US Gernon made his debut with the Chicago Symphony at Ravinia and returned to the LA Philharmonic to make his debut at the Hollywood Bowl following his season as Dudamel Fellow in 2013/14, and in the summer of 2017 he made his debut with the Houston Symphony Orchestra.

A keen opera conductor, Gernon made his debut in 2016 with Glyndebourne Touring Opera conducting Don Giovanni and returned in 2017 for a production of Barber of Seville. Elsewhere in 2017 he made his debut at Stuttgart Opera conducting The Marriage of Figaro and at Royal Swedish Opera with

The Magic Flute. Previous productions have included a specially-crafted arrangement of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* with the Young Singers Academy at the Salzburg Festival and looking further ahead he will return to Royal Swedish Opera and will make his debut at London's Coliseum with English National Opera in 2018/19.

Ben Gernon studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama with Sian Edwards, with whom he still works closely, and with Sir Colin Davis, who was a profoundly influential figure in Gernon's musical development.

Stephanie Childress

Stephanie Childress is a violinist and conductor from London. Born in May 1999, she started playing the piano at the age of five and the violin at the age of six. She is currently in her third year of reading Music at St John's College (Cambridge) and is President of the college's Music Society (SJCMS).

She attended the Royal College of Music Junior Department from 2008 to 2015 where she studied violin, piano, voice, and was Leader of both the Symphony and Chamber Orchestras.

Having joined the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain in 2013, Stephanie co-led the orchestra in 2014 and was appointed as Leader for the 2015 season.

In July of 2014, she won the LSO String Academy Candide Award for Outstanding Performance, and in 2015, was a Finalist at the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra Young Soloist Competition having also received the First prize for under-18.

She was a finalist in the 2016 Strings Category of the BBC Young Musician Competition and will be participating in the 2018 Competition. In December 2016, she toured Germany as the leader of the Balsom Ensemble for trumpeter Alison Balsom. This included a televised concert for Arte and culminated in a performance at the Wigmore Hall. She studies with the leader of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Pieter Schoeman and plays a 1710 violin made by Francesco Gobetti.

As a conductor, she is passionate about opera and has conducted performances of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* and Berkeley's *A Dinner Engagement*. Other projects have included Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the St John's College chapel and a run of Gilbert and Sullivan's *TV* at West Road in February 2018. Future engagements include her debut conducting the Southbank Sinfonia in April 2018.



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 Lizzie Millar, *SE*
 Chris Leighton, *CHU*
 Natalie Jones, *T*
 Victoria
 Daramy-Williams, *JE*
 Anna Ponek*
 Emily Newlyn, *CHR*
 Marco Gasparetto, *HH*

VIOLIN II

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 Westbrooke, *EM*
 Hermione Kellow, *Q*
 Roy Navid, *T*
 Juan Álvaro Muñoz, *Q*
 Jacquelin Siu, *CHU*
 Olivia Armitage, *MUR*
 Hattie Hunter, *JE*
 Jiamin Zhou, *CAI*
 Alex Gunasekera, *CC*
 Susanna Alosey, *N*
 Kieran Agg, *DOW*
 Caroline Bassett, *T*

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 Harry Perkin, *CL*
 Angela Wittmann, *N*
 Charlotte Connal, *MUR*
 Sophie Wilkowske, *K*
 Tessa Jackson*
 Bella Powell*

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 Chris Hedges, *G*
 Orla Papadakis, *N*
 Catherine Porter, *R*
 Dominic Martens, *CL*
 Sebastian Ober, *CAI*
 Rachel Flint, *PET*
 Judy Sayers, *T*

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Alex Jones, *SE*
 Sam Fitzgerald, *SE*
 Kazuo Newcombe*
 Charlie Hewitt*

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Jack Mainwaring, *CHU*
 Leonie
 Stevenson-Jones, *CC*
 Christina Alishaw, *SID*
 Amelia Calladine, *HO*

OBOE

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 Helena Mackie, *CL*
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 Tony Hawkins*

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 Ed Liebrecht, *JE*
 Charlie Fraser, *JN*
 Patrick Sanguinetti, *ED*

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 Oliver Shenton, *CC*
 William Barnes-
 McCallum, *CTH*

TUBA

John Elliot*

TIMPANI

Robin Otter, *DOW*
 Richard Moulange, *T*

PERCUSSION

Agnes Fung, *JE*
 Finlay Stafford, *SID*
 Jane Chan, *N*
 Richard Moulange, *T*

HARP

Oliver Cope, *CL*

PIANO/CELESTE

Jamie Conway, *R*

* Guest players

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The Society has played a pivotal role in British musical life for over 170 years. It has educated Sir Andrew Davis, Sir Mark Elder, Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Edward Gardner, Christopher Hogwood and Robin Ticciati, has premiered works by Brahms, Holloway, Lutoslawski, Rutter, Saxton and Vaughan Williams, and has given generations of Cambridge musicians the experience of performing alongside visiting conductors and soloists including Britten, Dvořák, Kodaly, Menuhin and Tchaikovsky. Since the 1870s, CUMS has enjoyed the leadership of several of Britain's finest musicians, including Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, Sir David Willcocks, Sir Philip Ledger, and, from 1983 to 2009, Stephen Cleobury.

In 2009, Stephen Cleobury assumed a new role as Principal Conductor of the CUMS Symphony Chorus, Sir Roger Norrington was appointed as Principal Guest Conductor and a series was launched to expose CUMS members to a succession of world-class visiting conductors.

In 2010, CUMS entered another new phase when it merged with the Cambridge University Chamber Orchestra and Cambridge University Music Club. In October 2010, the Society launched the Cambridge University Lunchtime Concerts – a new series of weekly chamber recitals at West Road Concert Hall showcasing our finest musical talent. In 2011 it welcomed the Cambridge University Chamber Choir, which is directed by Martin Ennis and David Lowe and Nicholas Mulroy. In 2014, the Cambridge University Jazz Orchestra and the Cambridge University New Music Ensemble joined CUMS as associate ensembles. Most recently, in 2017, CUMS Orchestras undertook a restructure, forming two ensembles (Cambridge University Orchestra and Cambridge University Sinfonia) as opposed to three, with the aim of creating a greater number of opportunities for students to play under some of the best professional conductors.

CUMS continues to provide opportunities for our finest student soloists and conductors by awarding conducting scholarships and concerto prizes, and it encourages new music by running a composition competition and premièring at least one new work each year. Recent highlights have included a recording of *The Epic of Everest's* original score for the British Film Institute, Verdi's *Otello* (Act I) conducted by Richard Farnes, J.S. Bach's *Mass in B minor* conducted by Sir Roger Norrington and Brahms' *Symphony No.1* conducted by Sir Mark Elder.

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Each year, 500 students — reading everything from Music and Maths to Medicine and Modern Languages — take part in up to 40 concerts, as conductors, instrumentalists, singers and composers. CUMS offers these students opportunities to work with world-class conductors and soloists, tackle ambitious repertoire and develop as musicians.

CUMS receives no core funding from the University, and income from ticket sales does not meet the full cost of delivering a world-class musical education. The Supporters' Circle plays a vital role in helping to raise the £35,000 needed every year to sustain CUMS' programme of ambitious projects, which includes orchestral coaching from members of the major London orchestras, and the opportunity to work with professional conductors and soloists.

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West Road Concert Hall
Cambridge
CB3 9DP
www.cums.org.uk