

An Aldeburgh Tribute to Erling Blöndal Bengtsson



Johannes Brahms

*Double Concerto for Violin and Cello,
in A minor, Op. 102*

Manoug Parikian, Violin

Ludwig van Beethoven

*Triple Concerto for Piano, Violin, and
Cello in C Major, Op. 56*

*Manoug Parikian, Violin
George Malcolm, Piano*

Live Concert, Aldeburgh, June 21, 1973

English Chamber Orchestra

Norman Del Mar, Conductor

In the early 1970s, Benjamin Britten visited The Royal Danish Conservatory in Copenhagen where cellist Erling Blöndal Bengtsson taught for thirty-seven years. After hearing Erling perform one of Britten's solo cello suites in a specially arranged concert, the composer invited him to the 1973 Aldeburgh Festival to give a masterclass and to perform in concert with Manoug Parikian (violin) and George Malcolm (piano). Erling was there for almost fourteen days, during which time he also played second cello in Schubert's *Quintet in C* with the Amadeus Quartet. Erling often talked about what an experience that was. Although it was not recorded by the BBC, they did broadcast the orchestral concert from Snape Maltings featured on this disc, which was preserved on an amateur off-air recording [more on this on page 7]. The English Chamber Orchestra was directed by Norman Del Mar with Britten in attendance.

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897) Concerto for violin, cello and orchestra, Op. 102 in A minor

Brahms's *Double Concerto* is the last of his orchestral works. He wrote it in 1887, two years after the *Fourth Symphony*. It may have been the fact that he had quarrelled with the Hungarian virtuoso violinist Joachim that led him to write another work in which his estranged friend might take part, not just another violin

concerto, as he had written before, but one for the unusual combination of violin and cello. Maybe it was an attempt to kill two birds with one stone, as he had made a promise to cellist Robert Hausmann that he would compose a concerto for him. The work did indeed bring about a reconciliation between the two men. Joachim took part in the first performance with Hausmann as cellist and with Brahms himself conducting.

The fifty-four-year-old composer wrote the *Double Concerto* during a stay in Switzerland and the lyrical richness of this music possibly reflects Brahms's enjoyment of his summer holiday there. The combination of violin, cello and orchestra was an unusual one. Given Brahms's love for the concertante forms of eighteenth-century music, it has been suggested that he wanted to breathe new life into the concerto grosso form; nothing in the score, however, bears any resemblance to Baroque compositional style, the two solo parts in particular being very far from that. The violin and the cello do not only alternate, but rather play so often together that we get the impression of a giant eight-stringed instrument, one that is amply suited to its confrontations with the full orchestra.

Although the solo instruments have equal shares of the musical material, the cello

frequently takes the initiative when a new theme appears. The first movement starts with a short, dramatic opening statement from the orchestra after which the cello launches into a bold cadenza – what Brahms describes as ‘in the manner of a recitative but always in strict time’ – which the violin eventually joins, with both instruments building to the reappearance of the full orchestra, making for an unusual and exciting start to the concerto. Alive to the difficulties of balance with this combination, Brahms scores with a light hand, the solo instruments often unexpectedly interrupting the orchestra as if taking part in a group conversation.

In the Andante, after a call to attention by the horns and woodwind, the soloists in unison give out a wonderfully serene and expressive, wide-ranging melody. A second, episodic theme is announced by the woodwind and embroidered by the soloists before the return of the first subject.

The cello leads the finale with an energetic theme in the Hungarian manner. Brahms had, in his early career, been introduced to gypsy music in his role as an accompanist, and it remained an influence throughout his life. It is the cello again that announces in double stops the strongly contrasting second subject, a solemn theme of Brahmsian nobility. As the

movement progresses, there is brilliance aplenty for the soloists, but, as ever with this composer, no display for its own sake. Every note of the passage work is an integral part of the musical architecture.

Critical reaction to the first performance was generally poor: ‘not brilliant for the instruments’ (Clara Schumann); ‘one of Brahms’s most unapproachable and joyless compositions’ (Richard Specht), but later critics warmed to it, Donald Tovey describing the concerto as having ‘vast and sweeping humour’. It was to be Brahms’s last major orchestral composition, possibly owing to its cool reception, and for the last ten years of his life he wrote mainly vocal and chamber works. He began composing a second double concerto but became disillusioned with the project and destroyed his sketches.

Although the *Double Concerto* is now recognised as a masterpiece, it is not performed as frequently as his other concertos, perhaps because it calls for two brilliant and equally matched soloists.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827) *Triple Concerto for piano, violin and cello, Op. 56 in C major*

Beethoven's *Triple Concerto* occupies a place apart both in his output and in the whole of the classical repertoire. Something of a Cinderella work, it is rarely performed, perhaps owing to the expense and logistics of securing three expert soloists. Indeed, it only received one public performance in the composer's lifetime. Composed around 1803–4 it was intended for Beethoven's patron and piano pupil Archduke Rudolph, a player of modest ability. The keyboard part is consequently the least demanding for the three soloists. The violin and cello parts, on the other hand, are written for top professional virtuosi. The first, and only, public performance was in 1808 but it made a poor impression, perhaps on account of performers who 'took it too lightly' according to Beethoven's friend Schindler. Although the cello takes more prominence in the concerto, it was a novelty at the time both to combine a piano trio with orchestra and also give the orchestra equal importance. It could be said that the *Triple Concerto* is not a concerto at all, since there is no real dialogue between the orchestra and the soloists, and the three solo instruments carry virtually all the musical argument.

Beethoven composed his *Triple Concerto* during

a period of astonishing creative activity which also saw the composition of the *Eroica* symphony, the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* piano sonatas, and the first version of his opera *Fidelio*. Yet despite its relative unpopularity with musicologists suspicious of its apparent lack of typically Beethovenian punch, the work is one of very few post-Baroque concertos for more than one soloist to retain a place in the repertoire, along with Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* for violin and viola, and Brahms's *Double Concerto* for violin and cello. To modern-day dismissals of the *Triple Concerto* as 'weak' Beethoven, the twentieth-century writer Hans Keller once offered the answer that 'we have perhaps come to realise that Beethoven's imperfections are not lack of perfections, but absence of completeness, in view of things to come'. What *was* soon to come was the *Fourth Piano Concerto* and the *Violin Concerto*, both works owing something to the expansive nature of the *Triple Concerto*.

The 'Triple', however, has glories of its own. The quiet, mysterious opening on cellos and basses develops into an extended orchestral crescendo followed by the entries of the soloists, one by one, the cellist leading the way, as so often in this work. The cellist spends a noticeable amount of time in the higher reaches of the instrument's range – Beethoven's answer to the problem of making the cello audible – using cantabile phrases but with no concession

whatsoever to the problem of intonation! The scale of the movement is somewhat dictated by the use of three soloists, with each of them, by turns, laying claim to the melody. But Beethoven controls this very cleverly and keeps orchestral tuttis generally short. The movement has a wealth of melodic material as well as a few surprises, not the least being the triumphant loud return of the main theme after the central development section.

It has been argued that the slow movement merely provides a large-scale introduction to the finale, its simplicity compensating for the formality of the first. The lyrical Largo's tranquil and uncomplicated mood opens with a sublime cello solo. Cello and violin share the melodic material of the movement while the piano provides a discreet accompaniment. Then the music modulates, leaving the cello hanging in the air, ready to launch into the last movement, which follows without a break.

The finale itself is a boisterous Rondo in the style of a polonaise, thanks to Chopin, now a familiar enough style to us, but in Beethoven's day a dance whose place in art music was relatively new. Again, time is saved by the cello leading straight off, the Polish flavour reaching its zenith in an ebullient episode midway through the movement. With the end in sight the metre changes, announcing a breathtaking

coda which races to a typically Beethovenian close. The whole movement has a freshness and vigour, making it a fitting conclusion to this relaxed yet expertly crafted work.

Manoug Parikian – Violin (1920 – 1987)

An artist of wide musical sympathies with many first performances to his credit (Rawsthorne, Seiber and Skalkottas), Manoug Parikian was one of the leading violinists of his generation. Of Armenian descent, Parikian was an exceptionally stylish player, producing a tone of remarkable purity and displaying a polished technique. His connections with Aldeburgh were extensive. As well as solo, chamber, opera and orchestral performances, he assisted Britten in his revision of the *Violin Concerto*, Britten also writing for him a cadenza to Mozart's *Adagio for Violin and Orchestra* (K261). He performed internationally and led many of the UK's leading orchestras, including the Liverpool Philharmonic (1947–48), the Philharmonia (1949–57), the Yorkshire Sinfonia (1976–78) and was musical director of the Manchester Camerata from 1980 to 1984. He also led the English Opera Group Orchestra between 1949 and 1951. As well as leading various chamber ensembles he formed a number of duos including one with George Malcolm (1950–1955). He made many important recordings and was an admired teacher. A champion of contemporary composers, concertos by Gordon Crosse, Alexander Goehr and Hugh

Wood were dedicated to him, as well as works by Elizabeth Maconchy and Thea Musgrave. He also inspired many younger English composers to write major works for his instrument.

Erling Blöndal Bengtsson – Cello (1932 – 2013)

Not many musicians have a public statue in their memory but Bengtsson's stands proudly outside Reykjavík's iconic new 'Harpa' concert hall, an indication of the esteem in which he is held there. Erling Blöndal Bengtsson's distinguished career started at four years of age with his first public performance in Copenhagen where he was born. At the age of sixteen he was accepted into the Curtis Institute after writing to Piatigorsky, who invited him to the USA to perform with the Tanglewood orchestra. He later became Piatigorsky's teaching assistant, and from 1950 to 1953 taught his own cello class at Curtis. In a performing career that spanned the globe, Erling performed from memory a concert repertoire that encompassed the entire cello literature. He also commissioned and introduced many new works, including fourteen cello concertos by Scandinavian composers. His 'burnished, vibrant tone and facilitating technique' resulted in numerous distinguished recordings, among them the complete Beethoven sonatas and Bach cello suites. He taught at the Royal Danish Academy of Music for thirty-seven years as well as at the Swedish Radio Music School,

Cologne's Hochschule für Musik and the University of Michigan School of Music. He appeared with most of the world's leading orchestras and many of the world's leading conductors. He visited the UK many times playing concertos with maestros such as Paavo Berglund, Charles Groves and Malcolm Sargent and notably gave a performance of the Walton concerto with the composer conducting. In his later years he gave masterclasses in Norway and Iceland, where he was a celebrated soloist. He was awarded many honours in his lifetime, among them the Knight First Class of the Order of Dannebrog in Denmark and, from Iceland, the Grand Knight of the Order of the Falcon. He was a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music and has been awarded the English Hyam Morrison Gold Medal for Cello. In 1993 he was honoured with the title Chevalier du Violoncelle by Indiana University, School of Music. In 2001 he received an Award of Distinction at the International Cello Festival, RNCM Manchester, named Premier Master Cellist 2005 by the Detroit Cello Society, USA and in 2013 honoured with the prestigious Jón Sigurdsson Award by the Icelandic government.

George Malcolm – Piano (1917 – 1997)

Renowned internationally as a virtuoso harpsichordist, Malcolm's first love was the piano, famously entering the Royal College of Music aged seven as a piano student. After the

war, during which time he directed the RAF Bomber Command Band, his enormous versatility and ability made him for many years pre-eminent in British musical life. As well as excelling in piano, harpsichord and organ, he held conducting posts with the BBC Scottish Orchestra and the Philomusica of London and enjoyed long and fruitful associations with the English Opera Group, the English Chamber Orchestra and the Northern Sinfonia. A long association with Benjamin Britten began during Malcolm's years as Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral. After hearing the boys perform his *Ceremony of Carols* there, Britten wrote his miniature masterpiece, *Missa Brevis*, for them. One of Malcolm's greatest achievements was undoubtedly the unique and thrilling sound he obtained from the Westminster boys, an influence still evident in present-day British cathedral choirs. As harpsichord soloist, Malcolm performed widely, both in Europe and worldwide, including Mexico, USA, Japan, Australia and Hong Kong. He gave numerous recitals with artists such as Yehudi Menuhin, Julian Bream, Pierre Fournier, Janet Baker and his pupil Andras Schiff, and enjoyed rewarding partnerships with Christopher Hirons, William Bennett, Alfredo Campoli, Manoug Parikian and Michala Petri. His vast discography includes the acclaimed Decca recording of Britten's *Cantata Academica* with the London Symphony Orchestra, choir and soloists, with

Malcolm as conductor. His regular appearances at the Aldeburgh Festival included sharing the conducting with Britten of the first performances of Britten's opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

A note on the recording

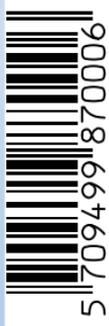
The source of this CD issue is an amateur off-air recording made in 1973 of a BBC broadcast from the Snape Maltings during that year's Aldeburgh Festival. A digitised copy of this was found in the British Library, London, and both the Library and the BBC have kindly agreed to make that transfer available to Danacord. Hi-fi it was not! Unfortunately, the mono recording suffered many problems: radio tuner interference, pops, crackles, hum, whistles and buzz, as well as overload and compression in louder passages. Additionally, there were dropouts and occasional instabilities due to the tape mechanism. So when I was asked if anything could be done to improve matters, I considered it necessary to utilise a substantial number of digital restoration techniques, editing and audio trickery which, despite some remaining minor imperfections, I hope has resulted in these splendid performances being substantially more enjoyable.

©David Lord

Erling Blöndal Bengtsson on Danacord
www.danacord.dk



Sculpture by Gottfried Eickhoff



DACOCD 870

MONO ADD

Total playing time 69:13

Recording released with
the permission of
BBC Broadcasting
Corporations

Digital sound
restoration by
David Lord

Produced by Merete
Blöndal Bengtsson

Executive producer:
Jesper Buhl

©DANACORD 2021
www.danacord.dk



LC 07075

This is the final release in the Danacord tribute to the Danish cellist Erling Blöndal Bengtsson. This volume features a BBC broadcast from the 1973 Aldeburgh Festival in which Bengtsson is joined by violinist Manoug Parikian and pianist George Malcolm in concertos by Brahms and Beethoven. Bengtsson was invited to Aldeburgh by Benjamin Britten after hearing him perform one of his Cello Suites in Copenhagen. Thanks to Merete Bengtsson's indefatigable detective work this amateur audio recording was discovered in the British Library and is issued here for the first time. Substantial audio restoration work was undertaken by David Lord. While the recording quality is somewhat short of 'Hi-fi' It remains a valued testament to Bengtsson's craft and his historic appearance at Britten's legendary festival.



Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Double Concerto for Violin and Cello
in A minor, Op. 102 33:07

- [1] I. Allegro 16:28
- [2] II. Andante 7:20
- [3] III. Vivace non troppo 9:33

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Triple Concerto for Piano, Violin,
and Cello in C Major, Op. 56 35:46

- [4] I. Allegro 17:22
- [5] II. Largo 4:26
- [6] III. Rondo alle Polacca 13:58

Manoug Parikian, violin
Erling Blöndal Bengtsson, cello
George Malcolm, piano

English Chamber Orchestra
Norman Del Mar, conductor

Live Concert, Aldeburgh,
June 21, 1973