



# Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra

Our Lady and St Michael's RC Church  
Pen-y-Pound, Abergavenny

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2023, 2.30pm

[www.abergavennysymph.org.uk](http://www.abergavennysymph.org.uk)

# Abergavenny Orchestral Society

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# Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra

Leader

**Marisa Riordan**

Conductor

**Michael Bell MBE**

Violin

**Helena Todd**

*The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave) – Overture, Op.26* Mendelssohn

Violin Concerto no.1 in G minor, Op.26 Bruch

1. *Vorspiel. Allegro moderato –*
2. *Adagio*
3. *Finale. Allegro energico*

## **INTERVAL**

*Refreshments available in the St Michael's Centre*

Symphony no.3 in E flat, Op.55, *Eroica* Beethoven

1. *Allegro con brio*
2. *Marcia funebre. Adagio assai*
3. *Scherzo. Allegro vivace*
4. *Allegro molto*

## ***The Hebrides – Overture***

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47)**

The publication of the supposed works of the Celtic bard Ossian in the 1760s exerted an abiding influence over the emergence of the European Romantic movement. Whether or not these poems were genuinely old remains a matter for debate – current thinking is that they were largely forged by their publisher James Macpherson – their influence was enormous, being admired by, among others, Napoleon, Thomas Jefferson and of course Walter Scott. Hence Scotland became the “go-to” place for German Romantics, whether actually in the body or only in spirit. (It is perhaps fortunate that some didn’t attempt the journey, given their apparent grasp of geography: Beethoven’s *Airs écossais* include such well-known Scottish numbers as *The Last Rose of Summer*, *Paddy Whack* and *Of Noble Race was Shenkin*.)

Mendelssohn was one of those who did actually go, taking a trip to Scotland in 1829 and specifically visiting the island of Staffa, off the coast of Mull. The plunging B minor theme that begins the overture was supposedly jotted down by him on first seeing the giant basalt columns that form the feature known as Fingal’s Cave, a name that later got attached to the piece by its publisher (Fingal, the hero of Ossian’s poems, doubtless packed more commercial punch than some old islands.)

The second theme, in the conventional D major – surely one of the loveliest penned even by this master-melodist – rises from the depths just as the first had descended into them. The following development falls into several parts, an initial stormy section being followed by a calm passage of echoing woodwind and brass fanfares, perhaps illustrating the shelter offered by the cave to wave-tossed mariners, before we are cast once again onto the raging seas. (Mendelssohn’s next composition was the overture *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* – no doubt he’d seen enough of Scottish waters.) The opening theme reappears in an abbreviated form, followed by the second, not now deep in the cellos but home in B major, *tranquillo*, on solo clarinet. A vigorous coda follows, but the last word is given to a solo flute, over quiet pizzicato strings, as the island disappears over the horizon.

## **Violin Concerto no.1 in G minor**

**Max Bruch (1838-1920)**

If Bruch has not quite suffered the fate of becoming a “one-work” composer, it is nevertheless true that his G minor violin concerto has completely overshadowed all his other works. The only others that maintain any hold on the repertoire are also for solo strings and orchestra: the *Scottish Fantasy*, for violin, and *Kol Nidre*, for cello. The popularity of this concerto became a source of frustration to Bruch, who tired of hearing it, recommending that violinists go away and play his other two concerti instead, which he considered as good, if not better. His dismissal of the piece might seem churlish if its popularity had made him rich, but it did no such thing; he assigned the copyright to Simrock for a pittance then, when left impoverished by World War I he tried to sell the manuscript to the American pianists Rose and Otilie Sutro, who kept it and sent him some worthless German paper money in supposed payment.

The piece seems to have taken some time to establish itself in the concert-hall. After the premiere, which he himself conducted, Bruch withdrew the piece for a through revision at the hands of Joseph Joachim, who first performed the revised version in 1868. When Bruch played it through to Brahms, the only compliment that the older composer could muster was “It is written on very nice paper” – which didn’t deter him from concluding his own violin concerto, ten years later, with a theme very similar to that of Bruch’s finale.

The first movement, marked *Prelude*, is in fact a very nearly fully worked-out sonata movement, although the recapitulation is truncated so that the second theme does not reappear, the music instead winding down gently into the central *Adagio*. The violin is in from the start, after the model of Mendelssohn’s concerto, with no extended orchestral introduction, often interrupting the orchestra with rhapsodic cadenzas. The slow movement is an unbroken flow of melody, although three separate themes can be distinguished, the second, including a prominent dotted rhythm, leading to an ardent climax. The soloist enjoys the briefest of rests at the beginning of the finale before the “Hungarian” theme appears; this, and a contrasted hyper-Romantic outpouring, lead the concerto to a dancing conclusion.

### **Symphony no.3 in E flat, *Eroica* Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Beethoven was not known to suffer significantly from writer's block; if his speed of composition slowed in his later years, this was perhaps due to the musical and spiritual demands encountered in the unknown country into which his art was leading him. Nevertheless, even measured against his normal rate of production, the years 1804-06 are something remarkable – the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* sonatas, the G major piano concerto and violin concerto, the fourth symphony and the three Rasoumovsky quartets all date from this period. And right in the middle of this string of masterpieces comes the third symphony.

Most immediately noticeable about these works is their sheer size, compared to earlier classical models: the first two Rasoumovsky quartets both clocking in around 40 minutes, the first movement of the piano concerto taking 17, that of the violin concerto an extraordinary 25, and the *Eroica*, even if following Beethoven's own crazily fast metronome markings, running to 45 minutes, with each of the first two movements nearly as long as an entire Haydn symphony. Just as remarkable is the level of expression that Beethoven demands of his performers; the score of the *Eroica* is plastered with sudden dynamic changes, fierce accents both off and on the beat, *dolces* and *sotto voces*.

The story behind the composition of the *Eroica* is well-known: how Beethoven had first inscribed it to Napoleon, only to score out and trample the title-page on the news that Bonaparte had declared himself Emperor, leaving only the dedication "to the memory of a great man".

Beethoven's first two symphonies had begun with slow introductions after the manner of late Haydn, but with two *forte* chords the *Eroica* launches straight into its opening *Allegro con brio*. Perhaps the least remarkable feature of this most revolutionary of symphonies is the nature of its themes – the first an unpromisingly banal affair, waltzing up and down an E flat major triad, although the bass soon descending to a C sharp in anticipation of distant tonal adventures to come. The second is similarly undistinguished, consisting of a few repeated, rather sad woodwind chords, although soon leading to more hammering offbeat chords for full orchestra where any sense of the 3/4 pulse is completely lost (except to the orchestra members, hopefully). The

development climaxes in four bars of terrifying dissonance with F major chords hurled against a persistent E natural in the woodwinds – who then proceed calmly with their own development in E minor, as if to say “told you so”. The recapitulation is famously anticipated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> horn playing the theme 4 bars early – the point in the first rehearsal where Ries, Beethoven’s assistant, commented “Can’t that damned idiot count?”, only to have the full score hurled at his head. The recapitulation runs its course, although with many new tonal twists, then, when we imagine all is said and done, plunges into a huge coda, effectively a second development, lasting not far short of 150 bars.

The second movement, built on the same immense scale as the first, is a funeral march in C minor. The great *adagio* of Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* sonata was described as a “mausoleum of collective suffering”, and the same description might apply here – although the first reaction of Welsh listeners may be to smile at the similarity between the first theme and the tune of *Sosban Fach*. A central, triumphal, C major section leads not to a literal repeat of the opening march but to an extended fugue and development. At the end, mere fragments of the theme are left in the violins, as though the mourner were falling asleep, exhausted with weeping.

The Scherzo is the only remotely “normal” movement, with scurrying strings supporting woodwind solos and a jolly hunting-horn trio. The repeat of the Scherzo is almost exact – although even here, Beethoven cannot resist a rude irruption of 2/2 time into the prevailing 3/4.

In 1802, Beethoven had composed a set of piano variations on a theme of which he was very fond (he also used it in his *Prometheus* ballet music), primarily as a vehicle for his own keyboard virtuosity. This enormous and demanding work is over twice the length of the *Eroica*’s finale. Nevertheless, when he came to re-use the theme to conclude the symphony, Beethoven pushed it into completely new territory, creating a movement that is neither variations nor sonata-form, but an utterly original and unprecedented combination of both.

**HELENA TODD** started playing the violin at school, aged 6. Growing up, her most influential violin teachers were Harry Cawood and Gillian Bradley. A member of the Cardiff County orchestras and National Youth Orchestra of Wales, she went on to study violin performance at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama before training as a nurse.

Whilst nursing, she attended a Kodály summer school, whose focus is on learning through song and singing games. Inspired by this, she attended the Kodály Institute in Hungary to undertake further study in this approach. In 2019 she completed her PGCE in primary teaching with a specialism in music. She worked as a supply teacher until the pandemic called her back to nursing.

Throughout her working life she had continued to play, performing with the Aderyn Quartet and in orchestras including the Gwent Chamber Orchestra, Young Musicians' Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Vitae, Women of the World Orchestra and most notably Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra, which she led from 2018-2021.

During lockdown, Helena prepared for the ABRSM Diploma, which she achieved with distinction in July 2021. In 2022 she became mother to a beautiful son. She continues to pursue means to combine education and music, attending outreach training with Spitalfields Music. This summer she was awarded a bursary to play in violin masterclasses with Thomas Gould and participate in a jazz improvisation course at Dartington Summer School.

Helena is grateful to Myriam Brunswick and the Citron family for the generous loan of a 1770 L. Hill violin.



**MICHAEL BELL** MBE was born in Neath. After graduating from Cardiff University, Michael formed the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra and has conducted the orchestra since CPO's inaugural concert in June 1982.

Michael has conducted an enormous and wide-ranging repertoire with CPO, in more than 350 concerts, including symphonies by Mahler, Richard Strauss, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Vaughan Williams, Elgar and Shostakovich, as well as major orchestral works by Stravinsky, Ravel and Prokofiev, and many more besides.

Michael has always had a great enthusiasm for film music, and in 1994 introduced A Night at the Movies as an annual feature of CPO's repertoire. The concert in December 2017, celebrating the music of John Williams, was performed to the highest audience figures at St David's Hall for thirteen years.

As well as being Music director for Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra, Michael is now also the regular conductor of Brecknock Sinfonia and Hereford Symphony Orchestra.

In the 2018 New Year's Honours Michael was awarded an MBE for services to music.

## **New members**

If you would be interested in joining the orchestra, please contact us at [info@abergavennysymph.org.uk](mailto:info@abergavennysymph.org.uk). You can check our website for details of the rehearsal schedule.

## **Our next concerts...**

Sunday December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023, 4pm  
Family Concert – “Heroes and Villains”  
King Henry VIII School, Abergavenny

Sunday March 24<sup>th</sup>  
Programme to include:  
Humperdinck – Hansel and Gretel Overture  
Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade

### **Acknowledgements**

Abergavenny Orchestral Society is grateful to the staff and members of **Our Lady and St Michael’s RC Church** for allowing us to use this beautiful church for our concert.

AOS is affiliated to **Making Music**, which represents and supports amateur music societies throughout the UK.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of **Llanarth Village Hall Committee** for provision of our rehearsal venues;

The **Performing Arts Service** at Monmouthshire Libraries for providing music.

# Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra

## **1st Violin**

Marisa Riordan  
Kathryn Clarke  
Romilly Cook  
Roger Evans  
John Jenkins  
Jane Leney  
Diana MacPherson  
Erin Morgan  
Derek Pike  
Freya Piper

## **2nd Violin**

Selina Hamilton  
Jane Anscombe  
Anita Bromley  
Lizzy Judd  
Simon Marr-Johnson  
Lynne Pollitt  
Stephen Shaw

## **Viola**

Simon Large  
Anna Moloney  
Gavin Stoddart  
Rachel Tucker  
Angi Turnbull

## **Cello**

Stephen David  
Clare Fisher  
Laura Kostoris  
Rohan Lewis  
Tessa Lewis  
Keira Morgan  
Hannah Poulson  
Sue Rogers

## **Bass**

James Leney  
Richard Mynors  
Will Stephens

## **Flute**

Bethan Barlow  
Heather Thornton

## **Oboe**

Malcolm James  
Martin Bailey-Wood

## **Clarinet**

Robert Watson  
Ian Hall

## **Bassoon**

Janet Lloyd  
Chris Poynton  
Becky Rogers

## **Horn**

Peter Geraghty  
Rod Paton  
Hannah Stonelake

## **Trumpet**

Paul Kelly  
Mark Perry

## **Timpani**

Judith Pendrous

The orchestra is grateful for the support of non-members who have augmented various sections for this concert.