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SEPTURA

with Tanya Myers, Narrator

Thursday 12 December, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

PROGRAMME

Das Wort ward Fleisch

Heinrich Schütz

Christmas Suite

Johann Sebastian Bach

Es ist ein Ros entsprungen

Michael Praetorius

Chorale Prelude on Es ist ein Ros entsprungen

Johannes Brahms

Overture from Hänsel und Gretel

Engelbert Humperdinck

Interval

Nutcracker Suite

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Please ensure all mobile phones are switched off. Photographs and videos of the performance are not permitted.

There is a Sennheiser Infrared enhanced hearing system in the Djanogly Recital Hall; please request a headset from our front-of-house staff to enhance your enjoyment of this evening's concert.

Please ensure hearing aids are switched to the appropriate concert setting.



PROGRAMME NOTES

The seasonal celebration of Christmas has been the inspiration for so many great musical masterpieces, and brass instruments are a vital part of this festive musical fabric. In this concert Septura focus on some of the highlights of the rich Christmas canon, with a wide-ranging programme spanning five centuries of music, arranged for brass.

We start with Heinrich Schütz's *Das Wort ward Fleisch* (The Word was made flesh, SWV 385). One of 29 motets from his 1648 *Geistliche Chor-Music*, it is a setting of the iconic Advent text in which St John unveils the wonder of the Incarnation. It is no stretch of the imagination for this to be played on brass instruments – these motets were written in the model of Schütz's teacher, the great Giovanni Gabrieli, who presided over the golden age of brass in Venice. As in Gabrieli's choral works, the vocal lines would have been doubled by instruments, and in fact Schütz noted that these motets were "to be used both vocally and instrumentally". An imperious D minor opening gives way to dancing celebratory figures, and the setting is largely declamatory, with constantly-shifting groupings of voices. It builds to a forceful climax with the whole ensemble, cathartically resolving to a triumphant D major.

Any survey of Christmas masterpieces would be lacking without reference to Johann Sebastian Bach. We have created a little suite of two pieces, bound together (as Bach himself did in oratorios and cantatas) by a chorale. We begin with the opening chorus of the Christmas cantata *Ich freue mich in dir* (I rejoice in You, BWV 133). Composed in Leipzig 10 years before the Christmas Oratorio, this is an exuberant celebration of the birth of Jesus – a bustling *moto perpetuo* movement, with the phrases of a chorale providing joyful interjections. The tender first chorale of the Christmas Oratorio, *Wie soll ich dich empfangen* (How shall I embrace You), follows. This was a favourite of Bach's (he used it five times in the St Matthew Passion), and is played here by the trombones and tuba alone. The cyclical structure of the Christmas Oratorio is reinforced by the fact that this same chorale appears in the final chorus of Part VI, *Nun seid ihr wohl gerochen* (Now you are well avenged). And so it seems fitting for us to play that chorus, especially because in its original form it is a trumpet solo. This is the triumphant climax of the final part, and the virtuosic solo is played on a piccolo trumpet, as the chorus celebrate the failure of Herod's plan.

We feature two versions of the German Marian Hymn *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* (A rose has sprung up). First is the familiar harmonisation by Michael Praetorius, written in 1609. We perform the simple homophonic first and last verses with a quartet of two trumpets and trombones; for the middle verse, however, we use a round – a canon, in which all the instruments play the melody, starting one after another. This cascades down through the entire group, starting with the E-flat trumpet and ending with the tuba. This same melody also provides the basis for Johannes Brahms's chorale prelude for organ, although it is quite artfully disguised. It is in the top voice, but is concealed by an array of passing notes, with the melody notes sometimes appearing on syncopated beats. The prelude has a gentle devotional air, and organists usually shift between manuals for different phrases of the chorale, creating a variety of soft sonorities. We do the same, but use different mutes to make the contrasts; the harmony is four-part, and so we never use more than four instruments, but we progressively change from straight mutes, to harmon, cup, and finally bucket mutes.

Humperdinck's opera *Hänsel und Gretel* grew out of four songs, based on the Brothers Grimm fairytale, that he wrote in 1889 for a Christmas puppet show for his sister's children. In subsequent years he developed it into a full opera, and Strauss conducted the premiere on 23 December 1893, describing it "as a masterpiece of the highest quality". The Overture has become a firm Christmas favourite – Humperdinck called it "Children's Life" and it serves as a showreel for some of the opera's musical highlights. Although the Wagner-inspired orchestration of the original is lavish, for a large orchestra, it is the colours of the brass section that provide the essential sonorities. The innocent and hymn-like Evening Prayer opens, a beautiful chorale for four horns, before a bright trumpet fanfare heralds a more energetic series of folk-inspired dances. By the end of the overture Humperdinck has skilfully woven all of these elements together to form a triumphant contrapuntal climax – the brass blazing – before we return to the warmth of the opening.

Perhaps the greatest secular Christmas masterpiece is Tchaikovsky's ballet, *The Nutcracker*. Composed in 1892 with a libretto based on Alexandre Dumas's adaptation of ETA Hoffmann's story, *The Nutcracker* is set on Christmas Eve, and tells the story of a young girl, Clara, whose favourite present, a nutcracker shaped like a little man, turns into a handsome prince at midnight. We will play a selection of movements from the ballet, starting with the energetic *Miniature Overture*, which with its restless *moto perpetuo* rhythms conjures all of the excitement of Christmas Eve. As night falls the children burst into the living room, and Fritz (Clara's brother) performs a *March* with his squadron of toy soldiers, with crisp rhythmic trumpets eventually succumbing to the chaotic bellowing of the low brass. The children enthusiastically *Galop* around the room (our trumpets fly around acrobatically), before their parents and the guests from the town enter with a little more grandeur (the trombones take the tune). All gathered together, they begin a rustic dance.

The festivities are interrupted by angular music, very low in the trumpet range, heralding the *Arrival of Drosselmeyer*, an eccentric magician and toymaker, and Clara's godfather. He has brought presents: for Clara, a large doll, which dances a graceful waltz, to the tune of a low trumpet; and for Fritz, a soldier which, once wound up, springs into a crazed mechanical dance of its own. Drosselmeyer then reveals a final gift: a wooden nutcracker, carved into the shape of a little man. Clara loves it, but Fritz tries to crack too big a nut, and breaks it. Clara tries to console the broken little man with a *Berceuse* (lullaby), played gently by the E-flat trumpet, but Fritz and his friends keep interrupting with a din of toy trumpets and drums – here we have had to expand our forces to include a piccolo “toy” trumpet, ratchet, and mouth siren. The commotion only ends when everyone joins together to dance a hefty German folk dance, the *Grandfather's Dance*.

The guests depart and the family go to bed, but in the middle of the night Clara wakes and nervously tiptoes downstairs to tend to her beloved nutcracker. As the clock strikes midnight, the Christmas tree grows ever larger in front of *Clara & The Nutcracker*. An almost Wagnerian endless melody grows through the trumpets, accompanied by restless movement in the trombones, reaching a massive climax that unleashes the full force of the septet as the Nutcracker grows to become a life-size Prince.

Suddenly there is a pattering of tiny feet, as an army of mice appear from under the floorboards and arrange themselves for *The Battle*. A shot is fired and Tchaikovsky's score vividly conjures the chaos of the battlefield: calls to arms ring out through the septet; the rhythmic scampering of mice is heard above a commanding virtuosic tuba solo; and the mechanical legions of Fritz's hussars are reinforced by howling harlequins, clowns and jumping jacks. Unable to bear it any longer, Clara throws her slipper with all her might at the King of the Mice, and with a ferocious *sforzando* he is knocked unconscious. With dizzying semiquavers the whole room begins to swirl, and Clara faints.

As she awakes, Tchaikovsky introduces the most beautiful music of the entire ballet, with another rapturous endless melody played first by the lowest trumpet. Clara finds herself in *A Forest of Fir Trees in Winter*, brightly lit by gnomes carrying flaming torches. The music builds to a glorious climax as she looks around to see the Nutcracker standing beside her, now transformed into a charming Prince.

Clara and the Prince travel through the Land of Sweets, to the enchanted palace of Confituremburg. A fanfare heralds their arrival, and the Sugar-Plum Fairy, ruling in the Prince's absence, commands exotic sweets to dance in honour of the couple. *Le Chocolat* is first, with a flamboyant Spanish trumpet melody giving way to graceful duetting trombones with castanet accompaniment. *Le Café* evokes the dusky Arabian desert, with relentless low brass rhythms underpinning mysterious shifting harmonies below the trumpet melody. In contrast, the *Trepak* is an energetic Cossack candy-cane dance, featuring virtuosic agility in the bass trombone and tuba. The septet is muted to depict the delicate marzipan flutes of the shy *Mirlitons*. Then the *Sugar-Plum Fairy* herself takes to the stage. Her surprisingly graceful dance calls for a uniquely ethereal sound – Tchaikovsky's original uses the celeste, and here we adopt three harmonized muted trumpets.

The Prince thanks Clara for saving his life, and to show his gratitude he invites her to reign with him in the Land of Sweets. She accepts, and everyone joins together in an ecstatic waltz – made even more joyful by the brassy brilliance of the septet – to celebrate the new rulers of Confituremburg.

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SEPTURA

Septura brings together London's leading players to redefine brass chamber music through the uniquely expressive sound of the brass septet.

Septura was born out of a passion for the awe-inspiring sound of brass instruments. The ensemble's creation – the brass septet – is uniquely vibrant and versatile, and Septura aims to harness its intense emotional power to produce transformative musical experiences for audiences. In short, it is pioneering a simple message: music sounds better on brass.

To fulfil its mission Septura has brought together the very best brass players in the UK – holding principal positions in the Royal Philharmonic, London Symphony, BBC Symphony and Philharmonia orchestras – and with their unparalleled skill and virtuosity the ensemble has forged a chamber group described as “dazzlingly polished” (BBC Music Magazine), and now firmly established as one of the best in the world.

Artistic Directors, Simon Cox and Matthew Knight, are two of the most preeminent and prolific arrangers for brass, and together they have created a diverse counterfactual canon: re-imagining great music of the past for brass, and addressing historical imbalances by putting a spotlight on under-represented composers. Looking to the future, Septura is commissioning leading composers such as Roxanna Panufnik to create a rich repertoire of original music for brass septet.

Weaving its ever-increasing repertoire into vivid and captivating live events, Septura continues to break down barriers with musical and cross-arts collaborations, recently working with artists ranging from Cathy Tyson and Derek Jacobi to John Rutter and The Sixteen. The ensemble takes its inimitable innovative programming around the world, touring in Europe, Japan and the USA, as well as performing at the UK's most prestigious festivals and venues, including regular appearances at London's Wigmore Hall.

Septura records regular releases for Naxos Records, and the first nine discs have received widespread critical acclaim, described variously as “irresistible” (The Observer), “exceptional” (The Arts Desk) and “brass playing at its most exalted” (Fanfare). Its next recording will highlight the music of female composers, past and present.

Currently Ensemble in Residence at the Royal Academy of Music, London, in 2023 Septura launched its first residential Summer Brass Academy in collaboration with the Rudolfs Foundation to inspire future generations of brass players. Their outreach work also includes close collaboration with the Amber Trust, through which they introduce the power of brass instruments to blind and partially-sighted children.

TANYA MYERS

Tanya is delighted to return to Lakeside to join Christmas with Septura.

Lakeside holds a special place in her heart. Her Meeting Ground Theatre Production of ‘Inside out of Mind’, about HCA workers and dementia was nurtured and performed here, before commencing successful tours, welcoming thousands of NHS workers into theatres around the country. For decades, as an actress and theatre maker for TV, Film, and Theatre, she has enjoyed the great privilege of working both near and far, in collaboration with wonderful creatives. Her best-selling audiobook narration usually finds voice under the pseudonym Juanita MacMahon (her grandmother's name); it is lovely to be narrating this evening as Tanya!