BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

Autumn & Winter 2026

Friday 30 October 12pm
Britten Studio

Duration: 60', with no interval

Friday Lunchtime Concert

AERA Ensemble

Emily Crook clarinet
Isabella Todes violin/viola
Amiri Harewood piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Piano Trio in B flat, Op.11, 'Gassenhauer' (1797)
arr. for clarinet, viola and piano by Paul Klengel (1854–1935) *21'*

i. Allegro con brio
ii. Adagio
iii. Tema con variazioni: 'Pria ch'io l'impegno' (Before I go to work)

Max Bruch (1838–1920)
Eight pieces, Op.83 (1910): selection *15'*

iii. Andante con moto
iv. Allegro agitato
v. Rumänische Melodie

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)
Suite from L'Histoire du soldat (1919) *17'*

i. Marche du soldat (The Soldier's March)
ii. Le violon du soldat (The Soldier's Violin)
iii. Un petit concert (Little Concerto)
iv. Tango – Valse – Ragtime
v. Danse du Diable (The Devil's Dance)

Supported using public funding by
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Beethoven had moved to Vienna in 1792, hoping to study with Haydn. At the time of writing his Op.11 trio he was already building a career as a composer-pianist, successfully forging links with aristocrats from the higher echelons of Viennese society who generously supported him. Beethoven had initially written the trio for the then highly unusual combination of clarinet, cello and piano, but, with an eye on sales, later transcribed it for the more conventional piano trio combination (with violin in place of clarinet). The Klengel transcription for today's forces seems wholly in keeping with that spirit, particularly as the viola melody that is to dominate the lovely slow movement is initially presented in the higher, tenor register of the cello. (Beethoven – ever the pragmatist – upcycled this melody into his Septet two years later.)

An assertive, arresting unison opening sets the sonata-form first movement in motion. A brief bridging passage feinting into the minor key adds an air of mock-mystery before the second theme, played 'dolce' (sweetly) on the clarinet. The variation finale gives the trio its nickname ('Gassenauer'). It takes as its theme a number from a hit contemporary comic opera by Joseph Weigl, a tune that proved so popular it was often heard sung outside ('Gassen' meaning 'streets' in Austrian German). The mood is jovial throughout, even in the obligatory minor-key variations (placed three from the start, and three from the end – a solemn chorale and a stentorian military march respectively), and particularly in its droll diversion into a skipping 6/8 time coda. Beethoven reputedly later regretted his choice of finale, probably suggested to him by the trio's original clarinettist Joseph Bähr, and pondered writing an alternative, less lightweight conclusion. But his skill and humour in variation – even on the most banal of themes – was already proven (it was to find its zenith in the Diabelli variations a quarter of a century later), and this movement is a perfectly fitting end to a trio that is light and airy, has a Classical poise and elegance, but is franked as Beethovenian by characteristic traits – the abrupt changes in dynamic, unexpected little harmonic twists and boisterous humour.

Bruch was an elderly man when he wrote this collection of expansive character pieces. He is still primarily known for three popular works for solo stringed instrument and orchestra – the First Violin Concerto (actually, the first of three for the instrument), the exuberant *Scottish Fantasy* for violin and *Kol Nidrei* for cello. This was the first chamber music he had produced for some 42 years, and was written for his son Max Jr, a clarinettist-composer, though the pieces were never intended by Bruch to be played as a complete suite. In instrumentation terms, the model is Mozart's 'Kegelstatt' clarinet trio, but these have more than a whiff of Brahmsian melancholy about them, and feel like interlopers from the 19th century written over a decade into the 20th. All the pieces, bar one, are in a minor key, with the alto registers of clarinet and viola singing primarily in muted, burnished colours. The first piece (No.3) we hear today, however, finds the viola in strident, declamatory mode akin to the opening of *Kol Nidrei*. The clarinet responds with a contrasting, long arch of a melody, and though the viola initially re-enters with its opening material, it quickly acquiesces and adopts the soothing tones of the clarinet. No.4 has the air of one of Brahms' 'gypsy' finales. The eastern European influence extends into the following Romanian melody (No.5, based on an actual folk tune), in which clarinet and viola jointly develop the opening idea accompanied by an increasingly impassioned piano.

Just five years separate **Stravinsky**'s gargantuan ballet score *The Rite of Spring* from his theatre piece *L'histoire du Soldat* (The Soldier's Tale), written to be 'read, played and danced' by a cast of four with seven-piece band. Not that he had been silent in the intervening period, producing numerous small-scale instrumental works and the ballets *Reynard* and *Les noces*. But the world had changed. Stravinsky was stranded in Switzerland, in dire need of income, but the calamity of the Great War and its aftermath necessitated works on a more economical scale. There was soon to be another, chillingly familiar, restriction on touring productions – the deadly flu epidemic sweeping Europe. Stravinsky and his Swiss librettist Charles Ferdinand Ramuz adapted a Russian folktale based on the classical Faust storyline – boy meets devil; boy sells soul (violin) to devil in return for untold wealth and romantic success; boy meets girl; devil proves an unreliable, not to say malevolent, business partner. Motto? *On n'a pas le droit de tout avoir* – no-one can have it all.

The scale may be smaller, but many of the musical devices from his great pre-war ballets remain; the motoric, driving rhythms, astringent harmonies and overlapping ostinato – repeated riffs – that substitute for more conventional development of thematic material. They are joined by a new influence – that of the nascent jazz form, ragtime. Stravinsky later conceded 'my knowledge of jazz was derived exclusively from copies of sheet music, and as I had never actually heard any of the music performed, I borrowed its rhythmic style not as played, but as written'. Nevertheless, it adds a delightful piquancy to this theatre-opera-ballet hybrid.

The Suite for trio was culled from the full work the year after the premiere. It comprises a spritely march, full of smudged harmonies and a crisp rhythmic vitality followed by a febrile little dance with an almost unchanging ostinato (The Soldier's Violin) that first attracts the attention of the Devil. The solider's musical prowess is shown off in the extrovert Little Concerto. Ragime is a humorous sequence of three little dances as the soldier successfully woos – alas, temporarily – an ailing princess. They are a swooning tango, slightly unhinged music-box waltz and that curiously convincing take on the piano rag. Finally, the Devil bewitches, beguiles and wrong-foots the solider – and us all? – with a manic, almost percussive display of fiddling.

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