

65th Gstaad Menuhin Festival & Academy | July-September 2021

London – a European music city

Between Yehudi Menuhin's meeting with Edward Elgar in 1932 and his being knighted in 1993 as "Lord Menuhin of Stoke d'Abernon", 61 years had passed. Although Menuhin was a citizen of the world, his biography spans the British metropolis from one end to the other. It was here that the young violinist (born in 1916) developed his artistic identity, impressed from his first visit around 1930 by people's open-mindedness and acceptance. 1959 saw him and his wife, Diana Gould, settle permanently in London, just as the couple began construction of their chalet "Chankly Bore" in Gstaad. Today he rests in Stoke d'Abernon, in the garden of the Yehudi Menuhin School which he himself founded there.

Yehudi Menuhin had the rare privilege to be personally acquainted with the two icons of English music of the past 150 years: Edward Elgar and Benjamin Britten. While Elgar's music still belongs to the post-Romantic era, Britten's is part of the avant-garde of the mid-20th century. He established a very close relationship with each of them, one that strongly influenced the rest of his career.

On July 15, 1932, London experienced a historic moment: in the Abbey Road studios, Sir Edward Elgar recorded his *Violin Concerto* with a 16-year-old boy from California by the name of Yehudi Menuhin. Even though he was totally impressed, Elgar put an early end to the session: he wouldn't have missed the afternoon horse race in the city for anything in the world! Thanks to a combination of technique beyond reproach, a great depth of sound and a striking evocative capacity for his age, he raised the standard so high that it was never to be surpassed. This has made this recording a reference since 1932 for all performers who tackle Elgar's *Violin Concerto*. Better still, this collaboration with the master enabled the young Menuhin to establish his career firmly in Europe and around the world, and gave a decisive boost to his love for London, on the way to making it his chosen homeland.

Benjamin Britten and Menuhin first met in 1945 at a party organised by the publisher Boosey & Hawkes. There Britten heard that Menuhin was about to give concerts with pianist Gerald Moore in the newly liberated concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. He was deeply impressed by this liberal world-view and totally selfless commitment to the wounded and victims of wartime barbarism. He offered to accompany him to subsequent concerts in the midst of this horror, and this was the beginning of a strong friendship that would last their entire lives. They celebrated this friendship by inviting each other to their respective festivals: Britten in Aldeburgh, Menuhin in Bath and Gstaad, where Britten the pianist played the first notes of the Menuhin Festival in 1957, alongside his partner Peter Pears, cellist Maurice Gendron, and of course Menuhin.

London musical life in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries was ironically driven by musicians from continental Europe. Composers such as Handel and later Johann Christian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (who travelled there with his father Leopold at the age of eight), Joseph Haydn, followed by Felix Mendelssohn and Antonín Dvořák, were captivated by the artistic vitality of the city, which provided so many opportunities and, beyond its walls, such romantic scenery of untamed nature! It was only at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries that authentically English composers such as Elgar,

Delius, Bridge, Vaughan Williams, Holst or Britten gained real popularity, putting an end to centuries of continental supremacy.

Yet, when we speak of English music and trace its evolution throughout the centuries, a particular source of English inspiration surpasses all the pre-Baroque and classical composers of that time: William Shakespeare. In the 16th century, the poet created material that was to be a source of inspiration right into the 21st century. The strength of the subjects he tackled, the power of his words, his ability to maintain tension, make him an author that musicians feel naturally inclined to set to music. Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* feature among the most iconic adaptations of the playwright's work. In the melody field, his texts also struck a chord with composers such as Franz Schubert, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Joseph Haydn and Benjamin Britten.

What is striking about London's musical life in the Baroque and Classical periods is that practically everything that was produced was for “commercial” purposes, the entire scene being in the hands of private opera and concert producers: when Georg Friedrich Handel arrived in London in 1711, he ran his own opera company, hand in hand with the Swiss “cultural manager” Johann Jacob Heidegger. And he knew precisely how to appeal to Londoners' tastes. His great talent for drama, emotion and performance music guaranteed him a special status among the nobility, the Royal Household and the common people, so much so that at the end of his life he was considered in England as a genuine national composer. His *Coronation Anthems*, and in particular the famous *Zadok the Priest*, composed by Handel for the coronation of King George II, offer a majestic tableau which to this day continues to impress at major events such as the UEFA Champions League football games.

The impresario Johann Peter Salomon, who also emigrated from Germany (around 1780), became successful by organising concerts in London as a freelance. It was he who forged the “legend” of Joseph Haydn even before the latter arrived on the island, performing his symphonies in his series of concerts during the 1780s. For his actual arrival in London during the 1791/92 and 1794/95 seasons, he himself staged everything by commissioning twelve new symphonies from Haydn – known today as the “London Symphonies” – and by initiating the composition of the oratorio *The Creation*.

The tradition of European composers travelling to London continued in the 19th century, Felix Mendelssohn for instance, who visited the island no less than ten times during his short life. In 1829, he followed in the footsteps of Mary Stuart, criss-crossing – often on foot – the Highlands, peat bogs and sea cliffs. From Scotland, he wrote to his parents: “In the dark twilight, we today visited the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved, where a small room can be seen, with a spiral staircase by the door. The chapel next door is now without a roof; everything is overgrown with grass and ivy, while the altar in front of which Mary was crowned Queen is destroyed. All is but ruin and decay, and above it hangs the serene sky. I believe that I have found today the beginning of my *Scottish Symphony*.” Although he wrote his *Hebrides Overture* shortly after returning from his trip, it was to take thirteen years and several other inspirational visits to Scotland before this Third Symphony, the aptly named “*Scottish Symphony*”, was premiered in 1842. London's position as a thriving international city and leading financial capital inspired many foreign musicians to come there in search of fame and recognition. Founded in 1813, the Royal Philharmonic Society commissioned many composers, such as Antonín Dvořák (with his *Seventh Symphony*) or Carl Maria von Weber (with his opera *Oberon*). Mendelssohn was an honorary member.

Many dramatic operas by Italian composers have medieval England as their setting. This is the case, for example, of Bellini's belcanto masterpiece *I Puritani*, set in Plymouth during the Baronial War. The Puritan warlord Oliver Cromwell defeated the forces loyal to the crown in 1644 and overthrew King Charles I. When his supporters, the "Knights", rose up again in 1648, the King was taken prisoner and executed the following year. It is, incidentally, one of the few romantic operas with a "happy end".

It is one of the most famous photographs in the history of pop music: the Beatles crossing Abbey Road in single file in the sixties, on their way to record a new album in the well-known studios. Thanks to the fantastic quality of their music and lyrics, the Beatles managed to bridge the gap between classical and pop culture. With them, the opposition of both worlds has no reason to be, one can love them both. Similarly, bands like Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, and even more so Queen with its charismatic leader Freddy Mercury, distil an art that rivals the greatest lyrical dramas. On the other hand, classical music has been increasingly drawing from pop music since the seventies: ensembles of all kinds have adopted hits, arranging them, playing them, adapting them, and infusing them with the extra vocal and instrumental sophistication of the classical tradition. Inspired by the Comedian Harmonists, primarily English a cappella vocal ensembles have in recent years given birth to a new genre capable of reaching a wide audience. *Over the Sea – Shanty Songs for String Orchestra*, the piece composed by Thomas Adès (1971) especially for the Gstaad Menuhin Festival, should also be seen through this prism of an art without borders whether in form or style: based on traditional sailors' songs, it nevertheless speaks the musical language of 2021.

London today is punctuated by a rich and varied musical life that breaks down the barriers of genre, and whose heart and driving force are undoubtedly to be found in the summertime "BBC Proms". With more than 70 concerts attended each evening by over 5,000 people in the Royal Albert Hall and other venues in the city, they celebrate the world and the magic of music.

It would be an impossible task to bring together all the musical richness of this City of London in a single edition of the Gstaad Menuhin Festival & Academy; however, many facets of this affluence will be featured in Gstaad next summer. From July 16 to September 4, 2021, we would like to invite you to take part in this great musical celebration. Welcome to the 65th edition of the Gstaad Menuhin Festival!

Yours truly,
Christoph Müller, Artistic Director

Special thanks to Mr. Desmond Cecil for his research and valuable contextual insights.