

Music and the Natural World

Wild animals invade West Road as the Sinfonia of Cambridge presents two performances in a single day: an afternoon family concert and a full evening programme.

The centrepiece is 'Carnival of the Animals', with Maurice and Thalea Hodges as piano soloists and performed in the afternoon with Genevieve Helsby as narrator. Composed in 1886 by Camille Saint-Saëns while on holiday in Austria, its 14 movements bring to life a menagerie of animals, fish and birds (not to mention fossils). Nervous that a full performance might damage his reputation as a serious composer, Saint-Saëns allowed only one movement, 'Le Cygne', to be performed in his lifetime. Not until 1922 could the whole piece be played in public, but since then its combination of high spirits and melodic invention has endeared it to children of all ages.



Well-behaved small animals such as teddy bears are welcome to attend the concert free of charge if accompanied by a child.

In the evening concert, 'Carnival of the Animals' is preceded by two pieces which also pay homage to the natural world. The first, Roussel's 'The Spider's

Banquet', dates from 1912 and in a single movement presents a tragic drama in the world of insects. A sinister spider, a doomed butterfly, a fragile mayfly and a heroic praying mantis all engage in a spectacular struggle for life. Roussel, while unable entirely to escape the influence of Debussy on his music, here combines impressionistic harmonies with the energy and grace of the ballet for which the music was originally intended.

The exceptional young violinist Harry Castle, currently reading music at Clare College, joins the Sinfonia for Vaughan Williams's masterpiece 'The Lark Ascending'. Harry currently studies the violin with Professor Doña Lee Croft in London. He has played with many orchestras, including the International Lutosławski Youth Orchestra in the award-winning Szczecin Philharmonic Hall, the National Youth Orchestra and the City of Sheffield Youth Orchestra. With NYO Harry was lucky to work under the batons of world-famous names such as Sir Mark Elder, Vasily Petrenko and John Wilson amongst many others, and has been fortunate to have played in most of the best concert halls in the UK, including several appearances at the BBC Proms.



Like Roussel, Vaughan Williams was writing shortly before the Great War, which lends this music an added poignancy. Perhaps the most popular piece ever written for solo violin and orchestra, it floats ever higher above the stave, achieving a hushed transcendence in the final bars.