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CLASSICS

RICHARD
BLACKFORD
NIOBE

Tamsin Waley-Cohen *violin*
Czech Philharmonic
Ben Gernon *conductor*

NIOBE

RICHARD BLACKFORD (B. 1954)

1	Niobe The Lover	[6.44]
2	Niobe The Blasphemer	[4.34]
3	Niobe The Pleader	[4.08]
4	Niobe The Mourner	[7.43]
Total timings:		[23.09]

TAMSIN WALEY-COHEN VIOLIN
CZECH PHILHARMONIC
BEN GERNON CONDUCTOR

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Niobe is the story of a strong woman brought down by an even stronger woman, the goddess Leto. The story goes:

Niobe, daughter of Tantalus and wife of King Amphion of Thebes, gave birth to seven sons and seven daughters. At the annual celebration in honour of Leto, goddess of motherhood and protector of the young, Niobe boasts that she is greater than the goddess by virtue of the fact that Leto only has two children, Apollo and Artemis, whereas she has seven times as many. Leto, enraged, sends Apollo to kill all her sons and Artemis to kill all her daughters. Her husband Amphion, devastated, kills himself. Niobe is turned to stone on Mount Sipylus and, as she weeps ceaselessly, waters cascade down her rock face.

I discussed with Tamsin Waley-Cohen the plight of women in our own time who, under Sharia and other religious laws, are cruelly and harshly punished for offences of blasphemy, apostasy and non-conformity. Our subsequent discussions included the double standards also applied to Western women and how Niobe's story mirrors the plight of unfairly treated women in a wider context.

Niobe is a 23-minute single span of symphonic music that is connected to but independent of the story narrative. I gave the following titles to the four movements:

- I *Niobe The Lover*
- II *Niobe The Blasphemer*
- III *Niobe The Pleader*
- IV *Niobe The Mourner*

These four pillars support an extended, reverse sonata-form structure. Within that framework I have tried to portray in music Niobe's sensuality, feistiness, pride, arrogance, remorse, defiance as the story of her blasphemy against the goddess Leto and her extraordinarily harsh consequent punishment unfolds. The relationship of the violin soloist to the orchestra is inspired by the dramatic unfolding of the myth: the sensual love music for Niobe and her husband King Amphion; her virtuoso musical ambush of the goddess Leto's ceremonial music; her devastation at the murder of her fourteen children; her transformation into a rock with tears that will flow for eternity. At times the soloist leads the orchestral texture, whipping it into a frenzy, at others it is brutally bullied by the orchestra, literally hounded like the cello

soloist in Lutosławski's Cello Concerto. In discovering that sonata form could embrace the entire span of the work I thought about how the two principle themes of the exposition, those of Niobe and Amphion, could be recapitulated. After many developments and transformations of the Niobe theme in the first, second and third movements the point at which Amphion dies of a broken heart, as he contemplates the bodies of all his murdered children, forms a climactic return of his theme that had started so full of promise and confidence. The dying away of his theme leads to the fourth movement, in which the Niobe theme returns in a slow mournful, descending version, like her tears. I thought for a long time about how to make the final movement, which is the only proper slow movement of the work, emotionally climactic but still, timeless,

petrified. An interlude in which the violin slowly descends over arpeggiando multi-divided strings and pianissimo brass countermelody almost evokes beauty in Niobe's tragic transformation. But, like an insect struggling in the last seconds of its life to escape the amber that will encase it for millennia, the violin flails and struggles as the murmuring orchestra overpowers it in the final bar.

Along with the sonata structure I make extensive use of motivic transformation and development. Even the first thirty-six bars, the exposition of Niobe's theme as an extended cantilena, see the theme augmented, diminished and its intervals varied.

The intervals undergo their greatest alteration in the second movement and at the end of the fourth, where the song-like contour of

Violin

Niobe motif Motif extended Motif diminished

p (sensual) *f*

the theme is stretched to leaping intervals that cover the violin's widest range.

Each movement incorporates the same opening chord sequence, which is made up of six-part woodwind chords based on major and minor thirds – the prevalent intervals of Niobe's theme. Their recall in different guises (brass fanfares in non-retrogradable rhythms in the second movement, stabbing wind and brass chords in the third, muted string chords punctuated by soft wind in the fourth) give them the function of ritornelli, their presence tying the musical material down implacably as Niobe moves inexorably towards her tragic destiny. The four movements each move towards climaxes that define key elements of the story: the climax of the first movement builds from the combination of Niobe and Amphion's themes in a sort of love duet to the point of sexual climax; the second movement's climax is the point at which, at the height of her musical ambush of Leto's theme, Niobe trumps Leto's theme with her own; the third movement's is the point at which, confronted by the murder of his fourteen children, Amphion's heart breaks; the fourth is the final bars of the work in which Niobe struggles to break free from the orchestral barrage that petrifies her for eternity.

Niobe's father, according to the myth, was King of Phrygia, so I built much of the material on the Phrygian mode. Despite extensive use of Phrygian, Locrian, whole-tone and pentatonic scales the harmonic language of *Niobe* is chromatic. Clear tonal centres are defined but harmony is often used non-functionally, being made up instead of predominating intervals (the major and minor third for Niobe, the perfect fourth for Amphion, the tritone and descending sixths for Leto).

Regardless of whether the listener is even aware of Niobe's tragic story, let alone the progression of the four movements of this musical portrait, I hope that the passion, drama and conflict of the story will nonetheless be perceived as a taut musical structure in its own right.

I am indebted to Tamsin Waley-Cohen for her encouragement and support as we developed the concept for *Niobe* and her brilliance as a soloist and interpreter of my music.

© Richard Blackford

RICHARD BLACKFORD

Richard Blackford studied at the Royal College of Music London, where he was awarded the Tagore Gold Medal, then in Italy with Hans Werner Henze. He was subsequently first Composer-in-Residence at Balliol College Oxford and later Composer-in-Residence at the Brno Philharmonic. His music, which includes three operas, two ballets and many works for orchestra, chorus and chamber ensembles, has been performed and broadcast all over the world and has been recorded on Sony Classical, Warner Classics, Decca, Signum and Nimbus labels. His music has been performed and recorded by BBC Symphony Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, Brno Philharmonic, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Munich Philharmonic, Philharmonia and the RPO. In 2000 his four-hour choral and orchestral score for CNN/BBC *Millennium* won an Emmy Award for Best Title Sequence and for which Richard was nominated for Outstanding Achievement in Music. His three critically acclaimed choral works *Mirror Of Perfection*, *Voices of Exile* and *Not In Our Time* were all subjects of television documentaries and have been frequently broadcast and performed around



the world. In July 2015 Richard was awarded Die Goldene Deutschland for services to music in Germany.

www.blackford.co.uk

TAMSIN WALEY-COHEN

Born in London in 1986, Tamsin Waley-Cohen enjoys an adventurous and varied career. In addition to concerts with the Royal Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, Hallé, Liverpool Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic and BBC orchestras, amongst others, she has twice been associate artist with the Orchestra of the Swan and works with conductors including Andrew Litton, Vasily Petrenko, Ben Gernon and Tamás Vásáry. She enjoys a duo partnership with Huw Watkins, whose *Concertino* she premiered, and together they have recorded for Champs Hill and Signum Records, for whom she is a Signum Classics Artist. With her sister, composer Freya Waley-Cohen, and architects Finbarr O'Dempsey and Andrew Skulina, she held an Open Space residency at Aldeburgh, culminating in the 2017 premiere of *Permutations* at the Aldeburgh Festival and interactive performance artwork synthesising music and architecture. Her love of chamber music led her to start the Honeymead Festival, now in its tenth year. She is a founding member of the Albion string quartet. In 2016-2017 she was the UK recipient of the ECHO Rising Stars Awards, playing at all the major European concert halls and premiering Oliver



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Knussen's *Reflection*, written especially for her and Huw Watkins. She studied at the Royal College of Music and her teachers included Itzhak Rashkovsky, Ruggiero Ricci and András Keller.

CZECH PHILHARMONIC

1st Violin

Jan Mráček *concert master*

Magdaléna Mašlaňová

Otakar Bartoš

Jan Jouza

Jiří Kubita

Pavel Nechvíle

Zdeněk Starý

Jindřich Vácha

Milan Vavřínek

Miroslav Vilímec

2nd Violin

Václav Prudil

Ondřej Skopový

Petr Havlín

Pavel Herajín

Veronika Kozlovská

Jan Ludvík

Libor Vilímec

Helena Šulcová

Viola

Pavel Ciprys

Dominik Trávníček

Ondřej Kameš

Jaroslav Kroft

Jaromír Páviček

Ivan Pazour

Cello

Josef Dvořák

František Host

Jan Keller

Marek Novák

Karel Stralczynský

Ivan Vokáč

Double Bass

Petr Ries

Zdeněk Benda

Roman Koudelka

Jiří Valenta

Harp

Barbara Pazourová

Flute

Andrea Rysová

Sylvie Schelingerová

Oboe

Ivan Séquardt

Vladislav Borovka

Clarinet

Tomáš Kopáček

Jan Brabec

Bassoon

Martin Petrák

Martina Bálková

French Horn

Ondřej Vrabec

Kanako Mori

Trumpet

Jaroslav Halíř

Jiří Šedivý

Trombone

Robert Kozánek

Karel Kučera

Timpani

Petr Holub

Percussion

Daniel Mikolášek

Miroslav Kejmar

Celesta

Marcel Javorček

The 121 year-old Czech Philharmonic gave its first concert – an all Dvořák programme which included the world première of his *Biblical Songs, Nos. 1-5* conducted by the composer himself – in the famed Rudolfinum Hall on 4 January 1896. Acknowledged for its definitive interpretations of Czech composers, whose music the Czech Philharmonic has championed since its formation, the Orchestra is also recognised for the special relationship it has to the music of Brahms and Tchaikovsky – friends of Dvořák – and to Mahler, who gave the world première of his Symphony No. 7 with the Orchestra in 1908.

Throughout the Orchestra's history, two features have remained at its core: its championing of Czech composers and its belief in music's power to change lives. Defined from its inauguration as 'an organisation for the enhancement of musical art in Prague, and a pension organisation for the members of the National Theatre Orchestra in Prague, its widows and orphans', the proceeds from the four concerts that it performed each year helped to support members of the orchestra who could no longer play and the immediate family of deceased musicians.

As early as the 1920s, Václav Talich (Chief Conductor 1919-1941) pioneered concerts for workers, young people and other voluntary organisations including the Red Cross, the Czechoslovak Sokol and the Union of Slavic Women and, in 1923 gave three benefit concerts for Russian, Austrian and German players including members of the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras. The philosophy continues today, and is equally vibrant. In addition to a recently launched Orchestral Academy, a comprehensive education strategy engages with more than 400 schools bringing all ages to the Rudolfinum – some travelling as many as four hours – to hear concerts and participate in masterclasses. An inspirational music and song programme for the extensive Romany communities within the Czech Republic and Slovakia has helped many socially excluded families to find a voice.

An early champion of Martinů's music, the Orchestra premièred his Czech Rhapsody in 1919 and, its detailed inventory of Czech music, undertaken by Václav Talich included the world premières of Martinů's *Half Time* (1924), Janáček's *Sinfonietta* (1926) and the Prague première of Janáček's *Taras Bulba* (1924). Rafael Kubelík was also an advocate of Martinů's

music and premièred *Field Mass* (1946) and Symphony No. 5 (1947), while Karel Ančerl conducted the première of Martinů's Symphony No. 6 *Fantaisies symphoniques* (1956). *Fantaisies symphoniques* has also featured twice in the Orchestra's programmes at the BBC Proms, first in 1969 under Chief Conductor Václav Neumann and then in 2010 under Sir John Eliot Gardiner.

BEN GERON

In the 2017/18 season Gernon made many significant orchestral debuts across the globe with orchestras including the Oslo Philharmonic, DSO Berlin, Czech Philharmonic, Munich Chamber, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Pacific Symphony orchestras, Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart and Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, as well as returns to the BBC Symphony, BBC Scottish amongst others. As Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, Gernon conducted the orchestra in several concerts across the season in Manchester's Bridgewater Hall and elsewhere, with soloists including Richard Goode and the Berlin Philharmonic's Solo Horn Stefan Dohr, as well as in the studio and family and education concerts.

Gernon is a regular guest conductor with most of the UK's orchestras, including the Philharmonia, City of Birmingham Symphony and BBC Symphony orchestras and has conducted twice at the BBC Proms, including on the occasion of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's 80th Birthday. Highlights of his 2016/17 season in Europe included debuts with the Vienna Symphony, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Swedish Radio Symphony orchestras. In the US Gernon made his debut with the Chicago Symphony at Ravinia and returned to the LA Philharmonic to make his debut at the Hollywood Bowl following his season as Dudamel Fellow in 2013/14, and in the summer of 2017 he made his debut with the Houston Symphony Orchestra.

A keen opera conductor, Gernon made his debut in 2016 with Glyndebourne Touring Opera conducting *Don Giovanni* and returned in 2017 for a production of *Barber of Seville*. Elsewhere in 2017 he made his debut at Stuttgart Opera conducting *The Marriage of Figaro* and at Royal Swedish Opera with *The Magic Flute*. Previous productions have included a specially-crafted arrangement of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* with the Young Singers Academy at the Salzburg Festival and



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looking further ahead he will return to Royal Swedish Opera and will make his debut at London's Coliseum with English National Opera in 2018/19.

Ben Gernon studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama with Sian Edwards, with whom he still works closely, and with Sir Colin Davis, who was a profoundly influential figure in Gernon's musical development.

Niobe was commissioned by the Czech Philharmonic and premiered at the Rudolfinum, Prague on November 11th. 2017

The composer wishes to thank Sybil Kretzmer for her support of this recording and to whom the CD is gratefully dedicated.

Recorded in Dvořák Hall, Rudolfinum, Prague on 13th November 2017
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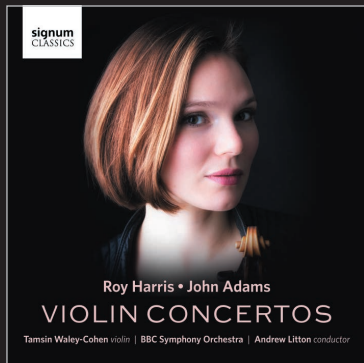
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