



BEDFORD SINFONIA

Conductor: Ian Smith

Leader: Alex Collins

Saturday 24 January 2026
All Saints Church, Bedford, 7:30pm

Programme notes

Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel (1805–1847)

Overture in C major

Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, the oldest of four children, was born four years before her younger brother, the composer Felix. Her compositional gifts were overlooked for many years, despite the fact she wrote more than 250 Lieder, more than 125 piano pieces, a piano quartet, piano trio and her vivacious *Overture in C*; nearly all of them remained unpublished during her lifetime. Renewed interest in recent years has helped restore her rightful place in history.

One teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter, wrote that Abraham Mendelssohn had ‘*adorable children, and his oldest daughter could give you something of Sebastian Bach. This child is really quite special*’. Historian Richard Taruskin wrote, ‘*The life of Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel is compelling proof that women’s failure to compete with men on the compositional playing-field has been the result of social prejudice and patriarchal mores...*’. Her husband, Prussian court painter Wilhelm Hensel, who she married in 1829, supported her music and believed she should publish.

Felix and Fanny were very close. As they grew up, works both had written were performed frequently at Sunday concerts in their home. They wrote to each other often, and she sent constructive criticism which he always considered carefully. Felix often called her ‘Minerva’, comparing her to the Roman goddess of wisdom.

Scholars believe Fanny wrote her *Overture in C Major* sometime between 1830 and 1832. It languished, undiscovered, in a library for more than 100 years after her untimely death at the

age of 42 in 1847. Its skilful writing amply demonstrates her deep understanding of instruments and the compositional craft.

Programme notes: Bruce Brown

Amy Beach (1867–1944)

Symphony in E Minor, Op. 32 (Gaelic Symphony)

Born Amy Cheney in Henniker, New Hampshire in 1867, Amy Beach was recognised as a remarkable child prodigy and made her public debut as a pianist in 1883, playing Chopin and Moscheles at the Boston Music Hall. It was also the year of her first published compositions. In 1885 she performed with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but upon her marriage to the distinguished surgeon, Dr H.H.A. Beach, she curtailed her performances to a small number of annual charity concerts in accordance with his wishes, and focused on composition. '*[Dr Beach] did not want me to drop my music,*' she later explained, but '*urged that I should go on, and any fees received would go to charity. I was happy, and [he] was content.*' Following the death of her husband in 1910, she resumed performing and toured Europe to great acclaim, playing her own music, until the onset of WWI.

For the *Symphony in E minor, Op. 32*, Beach drew inspiration for the large orchestral work from simple old English, Irish and Scottish melodies; thus, she subtitled the work 'Gaelic'. It was premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1896.

The first of the symphony's four movements draws substantially on 'Dark is the Night,' a tumultuous sea song Beach composed in 1890. Both movement's first two themes come from it, but they're greatly expanded on in the symphonic canvas, where they are passed through the orchestra, stretched out and elaborated upon. A substantial development leads to a blazing climax marked by the juxtaposition of duple and triple rhythms. A solo clarinet leads to the recapitulation, which is followed by a driving coda.

The second movement is based on a tune called 'The Little Field of Barley.' Beach treated it inventively, essentially like an inverted scherzo, with a pair of slow sections marked *Alla Siciliana* framing a quicksilver *moto perpetuo* variation on that melody. These Sicilianas offer wonderful opportunities for Beach to showcase her considerable skills as an orchestrator. In the first, a burnished horn solo leads to an extended melody for solo oboe, discreetly accompanied by clarinets and bassoons. The second expands on this, featuring a duet between solo oboe and cor anglais bracketed, at the beginning, by violins playing *sotto voce* tremolo patterns in their highest register and low strings plucking out a gently dancing rhythm beneath. The effect is pure magic: atmospheric and theatrical.

The third movement, melodic and slow in nature, draws on two Irish tunes – 'Cushlamachree' and 'Which way did she go?' – and is intended to evoke, in Beach's words, '*the laments of a primitive people, their romance and their dreams.*' Opening with extended solos for violin and cello, it maintains a rather sombre attitude.

In the final movement, Beach returns to the melody of the first movement, though here given even more dramatic voicing. Her program describes the movement as an expression of *'the rough, primitive character of the Celtic people, their sturdy daily life, their passions and battles, and the elemental nature of their processes of thought and its resulting action'*. The rich orchestration establishes the romantic style of the symphony, and the movement's big dotted-rhythm motto is repeated obsessively. The work ends in a blast of ebullient E major.

It might be interesting to note that Amy Beach, the first significant American-born and trained composer, who also happened to be a woman, claimed to have experienced no hardship on account of her gender. *'I have never felt myself handicapped in any sort of way,'* she told Edwin Hughes in 1915, *'nor have I encountered prejudice of any sort on account of my being a woman.'* The press record may suggest otherwise, but that statement was typical of Beach, who was, by all accounts, a well-grounded, generous person.

Programme notes: Derived from 'Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian: The Life and Work of an American Composer' by Adrienne Fried Block (OUP, 1998) and other sources

Ethel Smyth (1858–1944)

Overture to *The Wreckers*

'I am the most interesting person I know,' Ethel Smyth mused proudly in her memoirs, *'and I don't care if anyone else thinks so.'* English by birth, she enjoyed a cosmopolitan lifestyle that took her to Germany, France, Italy and Egypt. Dressed in her signature tweed suit, and often accompanied by one of her beloved Old English sheepdogs, she became a fixture of European social and artistic circles, known for her eccentric habits (cigar smoking, mountain climbing, bicycle riding) and loquacious conversational style. So forceful was Smyth's personality that it seemed inseparable from her musical voice. In the words of her friend Virginia Woolf, *'she has spun these coherent chords harmonies melodies out of her so practical vigorous, strident mind'*. She was also an outspoken feminist and advocate for women's rights.

Smyth wrote six operas over her career. The third and best-known of these, *The Wreckers*, was inspired by a trip to the Isles of Scilly, off the coast of Cornwall, in the late 1880s. She was entranced upon learning some unsavoury local history: in the 18th century, coastal villagers would 'wreck' passing ships by luring them to the shore, murdering their crews and plundering their valuables. This, Smyth thought, was an ideal premise for an opera. In 1903 she enlisted her friend, the Boston-born writer Henry Brewster, to write a libretto loosely based on this historical subject. The opera was completed in 1904 and was premiered in Leipzig (as *Das Standrecht*) in 1906.

The Wreckers is a bleak tale of love, violence and betrayal amid the desperate and disempowered, and the overture evokes the twinned forces – the physically powerful sea and the socially powerful church – that govern the villagers' lives. The overture's opening gesture, of three ascending notes followed by a torrent of dotted rhythms, is initially presented in unison by the strings, woodwinds and brass. A calmer mood soon pervades. A cor anglais ushers in a mournful rendition of a Cornish folk song where it is passed on to the strings. But the respite is brief and the wreckers' theme returns. An atmosphere of increasing agitation

culminates in a glorious, hymn-like tune characterised by rhythmic and melodic unity. Then the overture swells in grandeur, finally reaching a celebratory conclusion.

Programme notes: Lucy Caplan

Interval

Florence Price (1887–1953)

Symphony No. 1 in E minor

I. Allegro ma non troppo

II. Largo, maestoso

III. Juba dance: Allegro

IV. Finale: Presto

Florence Price's *Symphony No. 1* stands not merely as a milestone in American music but as a profound testament to creative spirit, resilience and the forging of new musical paths. Composed in 1931 and premiered in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, it became the first symphonic work by a Black woman to be performed by a major American orchestra. Yet, beyond its historic significance, the symphony itself pulses with invention, warmth and a uniquely American voice shaped by Price's life, influences and the times in which she lived.

Florence Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and was a child prodigy in both piano and composition. She attended the New England Conservatory, one of the few major institutions to admit students of colour at the time. Despite her talents and education, Price faced persistent obstacles due to her race and gender, prompting her move to Chicago in the 1920s, where she joined a vibrant Black cultural community.

The symphony's first movement opens with a sombre, sweeping theme in the lower strings, establishing an atmosphere of gravity and grandeur. This is soon joined by contrasting, lyrical melodies and lively rhythms, creating a sense of epic narrative: Price's melodic contours and harmonic palette are unmistakably her own. Syncopations and blue notes hint at jazz and spirituals, while the orchestral writing is rich, with colourful woodwinds and bold brass. The second movement is a heartfelt song without words, reminiscent of a spiritual. The strings offer gentle, sustained harmonies, while solo oboe or clarinet sings out the movement's yearning melody. There is a profound sense of nostalgia and dignity, underscored by the use of the pentatonic scale and hymn-like chord progressions. The music moves from darkness to light, embodying both sorrow and hope.

Perhaps the most distinctive movement is the third, which brings the lively energy of the Juba dance to the concert hall. The *Juba*, a syncopated dance of African origin, became popular among enslaved communities in the American South. Price's movement captures its spirit with offbeat rhythms, percussive effects, and playful melodies – often assigned to the piccolo, clarinet and strings. The music bubbles with joy and improvisatory flair, offering a welcome

contrast to the more solemn earlier movements. Price's skilful orchestration and thematic development ensure that the movement's exuberance is grounded in structure and tradition. The symphony's final movement bursts forth with vitality and optimism. Rapid, swirling figures in the strings are punctuated by bright brass and woodwind fanfares, and Price incorporates echoes of themes from earlier movements, creating unity across the symphony. The movement builds to a triumphant close, brimming with hope and confidence.

'Florence Price's Symphony No. 1 is a work of profound beauty and historical import' the critic for the *Chicago Daily News* wrote. *'It is a faultless work, a work that speaks its own message with restraint and yet with passion, [...] worthy of a place in the regular symphonic repertory.'* More telling was the reception in the Black press. *'No one could have sat through that program ... and not felt, with a sense of deep satisfaction, that the race is making progress in music,'* wrote Robert Abbot, editor of the *Chicago Defender*, arguably the most important and most widely read Black publication in America at the time. As more musicians and audiences rediscover Price's legacy, her long-overlooked voice is finally taking its place among the greats of American music.

Over seven years, Price wrote extensively to Serge Koussevitzky, the Russian-born American conductor. *'To begin with,'* she wrote in a letter on 5 July 1943, *'I have two handicaps – those of sex and race. I am a woman, and I should like to be judged on merit alone.'* In another letter, she wrote *'Unfortunately the work of a woman composer is preconceived by many to be light, froth, lacking in depth, logic, and virility [...] Add to that the incident of race – I have Colored blood in my veins – and you will understand some of the difficulties that confront one in such a position.'*

At the premiere of the symphony, performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Frederick Stock, Price was called to the stage again and again after the performance to share the enthusiastic response with Stock and the orchestra members. It was a startlingly unfamiliar sight: a lone Black woman in a long, white gown, within an all-white, all-male community, the image perfectly symbolising the singularity of Black success in the blinding whiteness of the mainstream classical music world.

Programme notes: Phillip Huscher (Chicago Symphony Orchestra) and others.

Several of these notes were supplied through the Programme Note Bank of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies, and from other sources.