

Hayden Butt Junior Recital

27th November 2025, 3:20 pm

Bélá Kovás

Hommage á Richard Strauss

Camille Saint-Saëns

Clarinet Sonata, Op. 167

- I. Allegretto
- II. Allegro animato
- III. Lento
- IV. Molto allegro

Cherie Khor, piano

Programme Notes

Bélá Kovás (1937-2021)

Hommage à Richard Strauss

Bélá Kovács is a Hungarian clarinetist and long-time professor at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest. Renowned for his imaginative approach to clarinet pedagogy, he published *Hommages* for solo clarinet, a collection of concert etudes written to expose his students to the characteristic idioms of major composers. These works offer a refreshing artistic alternative to purely mechanical etudes, each piece drawing upon the stylistic fingerprints of its dedicatee while remaining distinctly virtuosic and idiomatic for the clarinet.

Hommage à Richard Strauss is among the most technically demanding of the set. It features a whirlwind of rapid passagework, playful gestures, and long, winding melodic lines that seamlessly connect each section—qualities that immediately evoke Strauss's exuberant orchestral writing. The light, spirited character of the piece belies its formidable technical demands. Kovács structures the work around a recurring motive in 6/8 time, which frames the etude at both its opening and close, anchoring the listener amidst episodes of both lyrical repose and spirited agitation.

The work's narrative arc shows clear allusions to Strauss's music. Its opening rush of semiquavers sweeps across the clarinet's range before giving way to a more vocal, Lied-like section reminiscent of Strauss's richly expressive songs. This contrasts with an ensuing burst of brilliant, virtuosic figuration, which leads into an interlude that blossoms into a buoyant waltz. In this moment, Kovács gestures unmistakably toward Strauss's Viennese sound world, recalling the opulent lyricism and gentle nostalgia of *Der Rosenkavalier*. The mischievous wit and playful shapings throughout the etude also nod to *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, whose spirited humor and quicksilver turns of phrase seem to echo in Kovács's writing. Ultimately, the return of the opening theme brings the work full circle, concluding with a flourish that synthesizes its diverse characters into a cohesive homage.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Clarinet Sonata, Op. 167

- I. Allegretto
- II. Allegro animato
- III. Lento
- IV. Molt allegro

Camille Saint-Saëns was one of the most celebrated French musicians of his time: a composer, pianist, organist, scholar, and thinker whose artistic tastes remained deeply rooted in classical ideals even as the musical world around him shifted toward modernity. In his later years, he became a defender of traditional craft, often expressing his skepticism toward what he viewed as excessive experimentation in the early twentieth century. Despite this, he was widely revered for his artistry, intellect, and contributions to French musical life.

Composed in 1921, the Clarinet Sonata is one of the final works of Saint-Saëns's long life and part of a projected series of sonatas for wind instruments. Intended as a gift to the future of French chamber music, these sonatas reflect a return to clarity, elegance, and classical balance. The clarinet sonata is cast in four concise movements that together form a unified, expressive arc.

The first movement, Allegretto, opens with a gently rippling piano line beneath a tender clarinet melody. The music carries the quality of a calm, affectionate lullaby tinged with quiet melancholy. Its graceful poise and understated lyricism recall the refined charm of an earlier musical era.

The second movement, Allegro animato, shifts to a playful, scherzando character. Light-footed and spirited, it showcases the clarinet's agility through lively interplay and quick transitions, while maintaining the elegance that permeates the entire sonata.

The third movement, Lento, forms the emotional core of the work. Opening in E-flat minor, it explores the deepest register of the clarinet with a raw and unguarded intensity. The writing feels almost like an outpouring of direct, unfiltered emotion—blunt in its simplicity yet profound in effect. After reaching a moment of depth and stillness, the texture gradually lifts toward a more transparent and introspective close.

The final movement, Molto allegro – Allegretto, bursts to life with virtuosic brilliance. Its rapid runs and spirited momentum highlight the clarinet's technical flexibility while maintaining an undercurrent of lyrical expressiveness. In the closing pages, Saint-Saëns brings back the opening melody of the first movement, lending the sonata a touching sense of return and completion. This cyclical gesture, elegant and understated, reflects the composer's mastery of form and his lifelong devotion to clarity and balance.