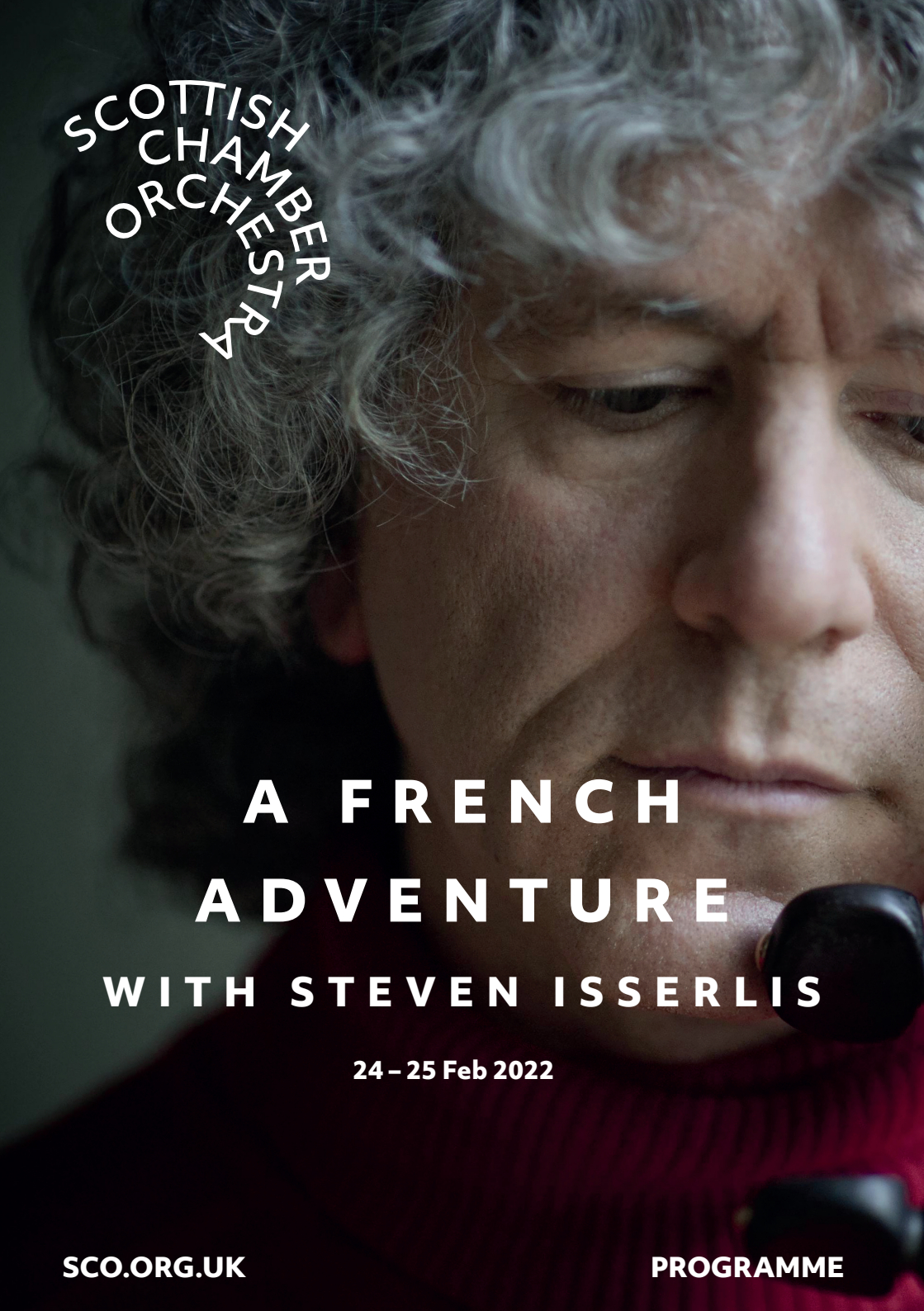

SCOTTISH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

A FRENCH ADVENTURE

WITH STEVEN ISSERLIS

24 – 25 Feb 2022

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Season 2021/22

A FRENCH ADVENTURE
WITH STEVEN ISSERLIS

Kindly supported by Claire and Mark Urquhart

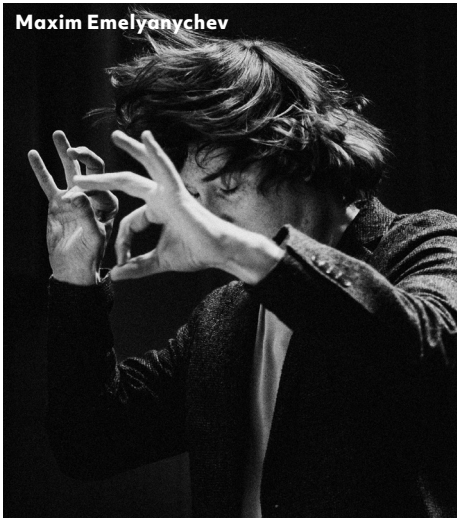
Thursday 24 February, 7.30pm The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh
Friday 25 February, 7.30pm City Halls, Glasgow

Debussy Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune
Saint-Saëns Cello Concerto No 1

Interval of 20 minutes

Françaix Dixtuor
Bartók Divertimento for String Orchestra

Maxim Emelyanychev Conductor
Steven Isserlis Cello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Kana Kawashima
Aisling O'Dea
Amira Bedrush-McDonald
Elita Poulter

Second Violin
Marcus Barcham Stevens
Gordon Bragg
Siobhan Doyle
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Nikita Naumov
Adrian Bornet

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Robin Williams
Katherine Bryer
Mary James

Cor Anglais
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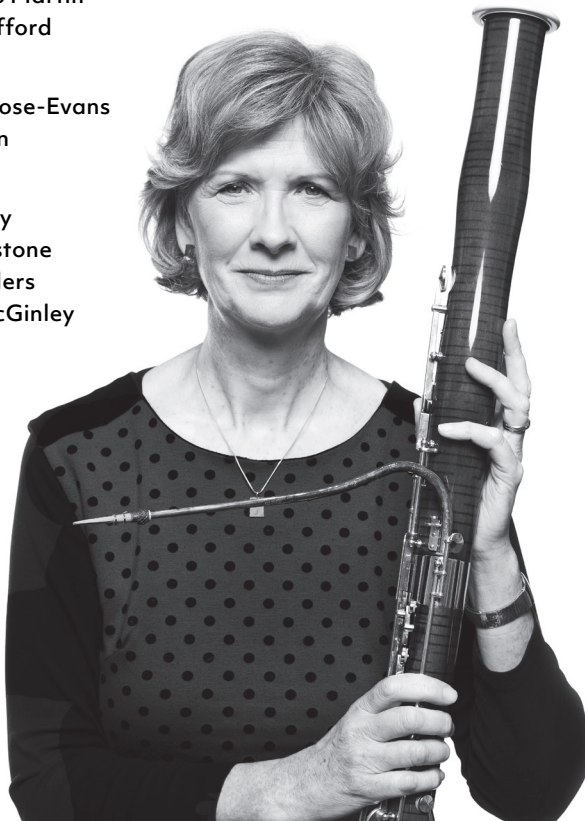

Alison Green
Sub-Principal Bassoon

WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO HEAR

Debussy (1862–1918)

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1894)

Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Cello Concerto No 1 (1872)

Allegro non troppo
Allegretto con moto
Allegro non troppo

Françaix (1912-1997)

Dixtuor (1987)

Larghetto tranquillo - Allegro
Andante
Scherzando
Allegro moderato

Bartók (1881-1945)

Divertimento for String Orchestra (1939)

Allegro non troppo
Molto adagio
Allegro assai

A flute slithers languorously down a few notes of a scale and back up again, in what's barely even a melody. Oboes and clarinets intone a mysterious, reedy chord, and a quiet flurry of pluckings emanate from a harp. With these apparently aimless, disconnected gestures, Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* emerges hesitantly from silence. Yet in a mere ten minutes of sensuous sounds, it succeeded in overturning many of music's existing conventions, and in shining a bright light on fresh sonic possibilities, new musical directions – all, with quintessentially French refinement, using just a caress, a suggestion.

By 1892, when he began composing his *Prélude*, Debussy had spent two unhappy years in the Italian capital after winning the Prix de Rome in 1884. He'd also immersed himself in Wagner in two trips to Bayreuth, and he'd marvelled at Javanese gamelan at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. He was a composer confident in his radical new ideas about music, which crystallised the following year in his only completed opera, inspired by attending a Paris performance of Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Debussy's *Prélude* is in some ways a precursor to his opera – if nothing else, it shares the opera's repressed sexuality, sumptuousness and suggestion.

And suggestion, rather than anything as vulgar as overt storytelling, was the relationship that Debussy also intended between his *Prélude* and the poem that inspired it, *L'après-midi d'un faune* by symbolist writer Stéphane Mallarmé, at whose free-thinking Saint-Gervais salon

Claude Debussy

Yet in a mere ten minutes of sensuous sounds, it succeeded in overturning many of music's existing conventions, and in shining a bright light on fresh sonic possibilities, new musical directions – all, with quintessentially French refinement, using just a caress, a suggestion.

the young Debussy had been a regular visitor. In the poem, a faun, half-man and half-goat, exhausted from his erotic escapades with two nymphs in the forest, lies in the afternoon heat imagining future conquests while blowing an idle tune on his pipe. It's the faun's lazy piping we hear at the *Prélude's* opening, but the rest is, as Debussy described it, 'a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon'. Mallarmé was delighted with Debussy's musical interpretation, inscribing a manuscript of his poem after hearing the *Prélude's* first performance:

'Sylvan spirit, if with your primal breath
Your flute sounds well,
Hear now the radiance
When Debussy plays.'

Camille Saint-Saëns, too, was out to celebrate a particularly French sensibility in his 1872 Cello Concerto No 1. The work came just a couple of years after his nation's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, as a direct result of which he and Paris Conservatoire professor Romain Bussine had established the French capital's Société Nationale de Musique, with the stated aim of promoting and celebrating a distinctively French style of music above the prevailing Germanic trends.

Saint-Saëns was already a well-established figure at this point, with operatic successes and several concertos behind him. Indeed, the fact that we perhaps remember him chiefly as the composer of a frivolous, throwaway collection of zoological pieces – *The Carnival of the Animals*, which he refused (save 'The Swan') to have published during his lifetime – distracts from his wide-ranging achievements. As well as a composer, organist, pianist and conductor, he was a teacher, a noted writer and traveller, and a scholar across

Camille Saint-Saëns

Saint-Saëns, however, takes a somewhat blunter approach in simply interrupting his first 'movement' while it's in full flow, swerving sideways into a 'slow movement' (which, truth be told, is neither slow nor a movement), then returning to the opening music as if nothing has happened.

a bewilderingly wide range of subjects, from Classical languages to the occult.

He also lived for an extraordinarily long time. He was born just a few years after the death of Beethoven, yet lived to experience *The Rite of Spring* and the antics of Les Six, that loose Parisian composer collective of the 1920s who aimed to replace the pastel-hued lyricism of impressionism with something altogether wittier, brighter and more sophisticated. Towards the end of his life, Saint-Saëns was considered by many young musical firebrands to be something of a dinosaur, but he nonetheless moved with the times in his own, admittedly fairly conservative ways.

And as far as staying on-trend in the 1870s, Saint-Saëns's First Cello Concerto fits that bill ideally with its unusually compact structure. Condensing all of a larger work's disparate sections into a single movement was hardly new – Mendelssohn had joined up the movements of his Violin Concerto in 1844, and Liszt was constantly seeking unity and self-referential organic-style growth across his music (as anybody who heard Benjamin Grosvenor play his First Piano Concerto with the SCO at the start of February will know). Saint-Saëns, however, takes a somewhat blunter approach in simply interrupting his first 'movement' while it's in full flow, swerving sideways into a 'slow movement' (which, truth be told, is neither slow nor a movement), then returning to the opening music as if nothing has happened.

The Concerto was commissioned by Belgian cellist Auguste Tolbecque, a close friend of Saint-Saëns and principal cellist in the Paris Conservatoire's orchestra. And it was premiered, on 19 January 1873, not as part of Saint-Saëns's new-fangled Société Nationale de Musique concerts,

Jean Françaix

His bubbling conservational style is clearly in evidence in his captivating Dixtuor, whose ten instruments seem almost like guests at an elegant soirée, chuckling together and commenting entertainingly on each other's repartee.

but at the more conservative Concerts du Conservatoire. Indeed, the concert's conductor, Édouard Deldevez, acidly informed the composer that the Concerto wouldn't have stood a hope in hell's chance of getting a Conservatoire performance without the involvement of Tolbecque. It raised a few eyebrows at its unveiling, but reactions were generally positive. *The Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, for example, commented: 'We must say that the Cello Concerto seems to us to be a beautiful and good work of excellent sentiment and perfect cohesiveness, and as usual the form is of greatest interest.'

Its soloist launches into the urgent, impassioned opening theme right from the start of the first movement – no preparatory orchestral statement here. It's almost as if the melody is so compelling that the cellist can't wait to share it with us, and accordingly, that theme comes to dominate much of the first section of the Concerto, as well as returning in its third 'movement'. A second, slower and far more lyrical theme emerges later, and it's this second theme that suddenly slows to a halt during what would normally be the movement's central development section, to unexpectedly usher in the minuet-like slow 'movement'. Here, the solo cello sings a more expressive, heartfelt song against dainty, music-box-like accompaniment. There's a brusque return for the opening music, however, as Saint-Saëns resumes his more turbulent explorations following the lengthy interruption, though he rises into the brighter major as the work heads towards its conclusion.

When is chamber music not chamber music? Probably when it gets to the stage of involving the miniature orchestra that French composer Jean Françaix assembles for his Dixtuor (or Dectet – for ten individual players), commissioned in 1987 by the Cologne-based Linos Ensemble and

Béla Bartók

So it was a strange, dark time for Bartók to be working on one of his lightest, most immediate pieces. And not insignificantly, the work he moved on to immediately after the Divertimento was his serious-minded, grief-stricken, searingly intense Sixth String Quartet.

premiered the same year. Indeed, Françaix melds together two iconic chamber groups – a wind quintet plus string quartet, and a double bass too – into a single entity in this charming, buoyant music.

Although he was working a few years later than the Parisian mischief-makers of Les Six – in fact, little Jean was only eight when that group received its nickname in 1920 – he shared much of their interest in clarity, objectivity, wit and sparkle. Indeed, he might just about have made it into their number: he was just six when he began composing, and went on to study with composition pedagogue extraordinaire Nadia Boulanger, who considered him one of her finest pupils. Françaix died as recently as 1997, and wrote prolifically during his long life (he described himself as 'constantly composing', barely finishing one piece before launching into the next). But he maintained a cheerful, neoclassical, easy-on-the-ear lightness throughout his output – which took in concertos, symphonies, operas and plenty more.

His bubbling conservational style is clearly in evidence in his captivating Dixtuor, whose ten instruments seem almost like guests at an elegant soirée, chuckling together and commenting entertainingly on each other's repartee.

Following a gently dissonant slow opening, the first movement's pastoral main melody is first sung on the first violin, rising to a sonorous climax before shifting into a faster section of unmistakable French nonchalance. A plangent oboe melody kicks off the melancholy slow second movement, while the quicksilver, helter-skelter third movement seems unable to contain its sense of fun. Françaix concludes with a bustling finale that seems about to trip over itself with its energy and verve, building up a considerable head of steam

before a piping piccolo heralds its abrupt conclusion.

It's hard to argue that Hungarian composer Béla Bartók's Divertimento for string orchestra continues tonight's French theme in any way, so let's not. Admittedly, Bartók wrote it in Switzerland rather than Hungary, but he was in the Germanic canton of Bern at the time, so even that doesn't count.

He'd been invited to the mountain chalet of the Swiss conductor and impresario Paul Sacher, who commissioned countless new works from composers as diverse as Stravinsky and Birtwistle, Richard Strauss and Pierre Boulez for his Basle Chamber Orchestra. (At the time of his death in 1999, Sacher was rumoured to be the richest man in Europe, having married the heiress of pharmaceutical giant Hoffmann-La Roche.)

Sacher had previously commissioned Bartók's denser, thornier *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, and asked for some lighter fare this time round. The composer was delighted to oblige, all the more so when Sacher offered him his mountain retreat in which to compose, complete with specially shipped-in piano and on-site personal chef. Remarkably, Bartók completed the piece in just 15 days, between 2 and 17 August 1939. When Sacher called in on him at the end of this period, he found the composer so engrossed in his work and oblivious to the outside world that he had to bring him up to speed on just how close Europe was to war.

Not that world affairs were anything Bartók was unconcerned by. He was a vehement, outspoken anti-Nazi, cancelling his German publishing contract once the Reich began to exert control, and increasingly critical of Hungary's own Nazi-sympathising regime. His ailing mother was one reason the Bartók family remained in Budapest in the run-up to the conflict. When she died in December 1939, however, Bartók and his wife headed for New York the following year.

So it was a strange, dark time for Bartók to be working on one of his lightest, most immediate pieces. And not insignificantly, the work he moved on to immediately after the Divertimento was his serious-minded, grief-stricken, searingly intense Sixth String Quartet. But it's not all fun and games in the Divertimento, either. Bartók consciously looks back to the bubbling invention of the Baroque concerto grosso in its witty dialogues between a group of front-desk soloists and the fuller orchestra, and makes joyful use of his passion for folk music in the stomping, unpredictable rhythms and bluesy accents of the first movement.

The second movement, however, takes a far darker turn, beginning in ominous undulations from the lower strings against which the violins intone what's barely a melody. It grows via a lumbering, heavy-footed march to reach a screaming, dissonant climax, before quickly subsiding to a grotesquely transfigured memory of the opening music. Just as well, then, that the good-humoured finale dashes on stage with exuberant energy, even if Bartók puts its folksy violin tune through all manner of upside-down, back-to-front contrapuntal trickery before it hurries to its joyful close.

© David Kettle

Conductor

MAXIM EMELYANYCHEV

At the Scottish Chamber Orchestra Maxim Emelyanychev follows in the footsteps of just five previous Principal Conductors in the Orchestra's 46-year history; Roderick Brydon (1974-1983), Jukka-Pekka Saraste (1987-1991), Ivor Bolton (1994-1996), Joseph Swensen (1996-2005) and Robin Ticciati (2009-2018).

2020/21 Season engagements included conducting the opera of the Geneva Grand Theatre in Mozart's *Clemenza di Tito* and the Toulouse Théâtre du Capitole in Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*. Debuts with the Orchestre de Paris, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Münchner Philharmoniker, the London Philharmonic, the Luxembourg Philharmonic, the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Accademia Nazionale of Santa Cecilia Orchestra, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Hessischer Rundfunk Frankfurt Orchestra, the Deutsche Symphony Orchestra, and returning to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

He regularly collaborates with renowned artists such as Max Emanuel Cencic, Patrizia Ciofi, Joyce DiDonato, Franco Fagioli, Richard Goode, Sophie Karthäuser, Stephen Hough, Katia et Marielle Labèque, Marie-Nicole Lemieux, Julia Lezhneva, Alexei Lubimov, Riccardo Minasi, Xavier Sabata and Dmitry Sinkovsky.

Maxim is also a highly respected chamber musician. His most recent recording, of Brahms Violin Sonatas with long-time collaborator and friend Aylen Pritchin, was released on Aparté in December 2021 and has attracted outstanding reviews internationally.

With the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Maxim has recorded the Schubert Symphony No 9 – the symphony with which he made his debut with the orchestra – which was released on Linn Records in November 2019.

For full biography please visit sco.org.uk

Cello

STEVEN ISSERLIS

Acclaimed worldwide for his profound musicianship and technical mastery, British cellist Steven Isserlis enjoys a uniquely varied career as a soloist, chamber musician, educator, author and broadcaster. He appears with the world's leading orchestras and conductors, and gives recitals in major musical centres. As a chamber musician, he has curated concert series for many prestigious venues, including London's Wigmore Hall, New York's 92nd St Y, and the Salzburg Festival. Unusually, he also directs chamber orchestras from the cello in classical programmes.

Steven's wide-ranging discography includes J S Bach's complete solo cello suites (Gramophone's Instrumental Album of the Year), Beethoven's complete works for cello and piano, concertos by C P E Bach and Haydn, the Elgar and Walton concertos, and the Brahms double concerto with Joshua Bell and the Academy of St Martin in the Fields.

Since 1997, Steven has been Artistic Director of the International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove, Cornwall. He also enjoys playing for children, and has created three musical stories, with the composer Anne Dudley. His two books for children, published by Faber & Faber, have been translated into many languages; his latest book for Faber is a commentary on Schumann's *Advice for Young Musicians*, and a book about the Bach suites will appear in 2021. He has also devised and written two evenings of words and music, one describing the last years of Robert Schumann, the other devoted to Marcel Proust and his salons, and has presented many programmes for radio, including documentaries about two of his heroes – Robert Schumann and Harpo Marx.

The recipient of many awards, Steven's honours include a CBE in recognition of his services to music, the Schumann Prize of the City of Zwickau, the Piatigorsky Prize and Maestro Foundation Genius Grant in the U.S, the Glashütte Award in Germany, the Gold Medal awarded by the Armenian Ministry of Culture, and the Wigmore Medal.

Steven plays the 'Marquis de Corberon' Stradivarius of 1726, on loan from the Royal Academy of Music.

For full biography please visit sco.org.uk

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THE SCOTTISH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA TARTAN

Kinloch Anderson, foremost experts in Highland Dress since 1868, and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra have been in partnership since 2014.

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra tartan, being worn here by SCO cellist Donald Gillan, was exclusively designed to celebrate the Orchestra's 40th Anniversary and has been officially registered in The Scottish Register of Tartans.

The tartan's background comes from the Ferguson, MacDonald and Maxwell clan tartans to represent Sir Charles Mackerras, Donald MacDonald and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies.

For limited edition tartan notebooks and lambswool scarves, please visit the SCO merchandise desk. For all tailored products, including waistcoats, trousers, skirts and made to measure kilts, please contact Kinloch Anderson directly.

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0131 555 1390
www.kinlochanderson.com

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A warm welcome to everyone who has recently joined our family of donors, and a big thank you to everyone who is helping to secure our future.

Monthly or annual contributions from our donors make a real difference to the SCO's ability to budget and plan ahead with more confidence. In these extraordinarily challenging times, your support is more valuable than ever.

For more information on how you can become a regular donor, please get in touch with Mary Clayton on 0131 478 8369 or email mary.clayton@sco.org.uk.

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