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City of
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Symphony
Orchestra

Kazuki Conducts Rachmaninoff's
Second Symphony
Symphony Hall
Wednesday 7 June, 2023, 7.30pm

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**KAZUKI
CONDUCTS
RACHMANINOFF'S
SECOND
SYMPHONY**

Concert programme £4



Principal Funders:

PROGRAMME

Holst Japanese Suite 10mins

Beethoven Piano Concerto No.4 34mins

Interval

Rachmaninoff Symphony No.2 55mins

Kazuki Yamada Conductor

Seong-Jin Cho Piano

KAZUKI YAMADA CONDUCTS RACHMANINOFF

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Wednesday 7 June 2023, 7.30pm
Symphony Hall, Birmingham

KAZUKI CONDUCTS RACHMANINOFF'S SECOND SYMPHONY

Is Rachmaninoff's Second the most romantic symphony ever written? With its grand, storm-swept vistas, endless melodies and rapturous emotions, it's definitely a contender, and Kazuki Yamada simply loves it. Every performance is a special occasion – but first comes Holst's exquisite Japanese jewel-box, and a CBSO debut for Seong-Jin Cho: a pianist who's rapidly acquiring a worldwide following.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

JAPANESE SUITE, OP.30

Prelude – Song of the Fisherman

I Ceremonial Dance

II Dance of the Marionette

Interlude – Song of the Fisherman

III Dance under the Cherry Tree

IV Finale – Dance of the Wolves

THE GLOBE, WEDNESDAY 5 MAY 1915

Michio Ito, who comes the London

Coliseum on Monday, is indeed a Japanese

dancer; but he will not give an exposition

of Japanese dancing...The fantastic

interpretation of music is his business;

European music maybe. But, as he says,

"I am from the East: and so my

interpretation will naturally take the colour

and sentiment of my country." Michio Ito's

four dances are The Dance of the Green Pine, a measure popular in Japan during 400 years; a Fox Dance by Moonlight; a Seated Movement, and a Study of a Japanese Lady, with Umbrella and Fan.

The Tokyo-born dancer and choreographer Michio Itō (1892-1961) was an artist who crossed cultures – an innovator whose career eventually took him to Hollywood. In May 1915, however, when the London Coliseum booked Itō to perform a short London season, the promoters were not sure what to expect. Itō was quite happy to dance to Chopin but the Coliseum's audiences expected something a bit more oriental and so Gustav Holst was asked to arrange something Japanese. Itō (wrote Holst), "supplied all the themes excepting that of the *Marionette Dance*" (Itō whistled the tunes, Holst scribbled them down). Once orchestrated, the results have an unmistakably English accent.

But Holst was fascinated by Oriental cultures, and he painted the four dances (whose titles might or might not correspond to the ones advertised in advance) and the connecting *Prelude* and *Interlude* in his most evocative orchestral colours. He was clearly happy with the resulting *Japanese Suite*; he included it on his programme at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham on 19 September 1920, when he was invited to guest-conduct the third ever concert by the two week-old City of Birmingham Orchestra.



GUSTAV HOLST

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

PIANO CONCERTO NO.4 IN G, OP.58

Allegro moderato

Andante con moto

Rondo: Vivace

Prince Joseph von Lobkowitz's Viennese palace was lavish, but it offered a certain exclusivity. In March 1807 Beethoven took advantage of that privacy to try out a new piano concerto that he had completed over a year before. With his hearing now in severe decline, the last thing he had wanted was to play this new concerto in public. But no other pianist would touch it – it was simply too unusual. Who, for example, had heard of a piano concerto that began with the piano alone – and playing softly? And then, when the orchestra meets that quiet piano phrase with an equally hushed reply, in a different key: well, that in itself would have been enough to diconcert any conventional Viennese piano virtuoso.

There are no barnstorming keyboard heroics here: Beethoven makes the piano sing and laugh, lovingly spinning out phrases, suddenly dropping to a whisper or slipping sideways into another key. That's before we even get to the extraordinary *Andante*, where gruff strings seem determined to crush the gentle piano... until the roles gradually reverse and it's the orchestra's turn to melt into quietness. Franz Liszt imagined "Orpheus taming the wild beasts" here; it's not hard to hear why the image has stuck.

The opening theme of the finale, meanwhile, is barely there at all. But from the piano's first entry it starts to unfurl and blossom into song. Drums and trumpets get their proper say – but what sticks in the mind is the tender, lilting poetry of the many quieter interludes. You might think that one of these themes sounds like a gentle pre-echo of the *Hymn to Joy* (and you'd think right).

The play-through *chez* Lobkowitz reassured Beethoven. On 22 December 1808, he inserted the concerto, at the last minute, into a concert that already included the world premières of his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and *Choral Fantasia*. What sounds to us like the greatest evening in the history of music was actually a wash-out. The theatre was freezing, though one audience member did comment on "a new forte-piano concerto of monstrous difficulty, which Beethoven played at the fastest speed imaginable". Beethoven never played in public again.

"Beethoven makes the piano sing and laugh, lovingly spinning out phrases, suddenly dropping to a whisper or slipping sideways into another key."

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

SYMPHONY NO.2 IN E MINOR, OP.27

Largo – Allegro moderato

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Adagio

Finale: Allegro vivace

Sergei Rachmaninoff's career as the rising star of the Moscow Conservatoire came to an abrupt end in St. Petersburg on the evening of 27 March 1897. That night saw the premiere of his First Symphony, his most ambitious work to date – and it was an



SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

unmitigated disaster. Rachmaninoff left the hall in despair even before the performance had ended; the critics tore into him, and the 24-year old composer fell into a state of nervous collapse. "I felt like a man who had suffered a stroke and had lost the use of his head and hands," he wrote later. Destroying the score of the symphony, he wrote no more music for three and a half years until a course of psychotherapy restored his creativity and re-started his career with what would become his best-known work – the Second Piano Concerto.

By 1907 he was world famous as a conductor and pianist as well as a composer, but when a Russian newspaper reported that he had completed a new symphony even his close friends were surprised. "It's true," he confirmed to his friend Mikhail Slonov, "I finished it a month ago, and immediately put it aside. It was a severe worry to me and I'm not going to think about it any more." It's not hard to understand why Rachmaninoff chose to write another symphony, and equally easy to understand why he kept its composition a secret, even to the extent of moving to Dresden to compose it. The failure of the First Symphony haunted him throughout his life.

But if his aim was to demonstrate his new-found confidence, he succeeded magnificently. The completed Second Symphony could hardly sound more polished, or more gloriously confident. Freed from the constraints of concerto form, Rachmaninoff's inspiration breathes and expands more freely than in any of his previous works, its big, noble melodies unfurling effortlessly over the space of huge but perfectly measured musical paragraphs. The Second Symphony is Rachmaninoff's longest concert work, lasting well over an hour if all the repeats are observed.

This made it the main victim of the critical reaction against Rachmaninoff's music that

set in after his death, and for years it was performed in a heavily-cut version omitting up to 20 minutes of music. Rachmaninoff was supposed to have sanctioned these cuts himself, but the conductor Eugene Ormandy once invited Rachmaninoff to cut the symphony for a Philadelphia performance – and he told a slightly different story. “In the first movement,” recalled Ormandy, “after the introduction, there are four bars of vamping until the main theme begins. ‘Oh, you can cut two bars there,’ Rachmaninoff said. And that was all. That was the only cut he would allow. ‘You don’t know what cuts do to me,’ he said. ‘It is like cutting out a piece of my heart.’”

Today, it’s hard to imagine how anyone can have been so insensitive. Of all the great late-Romantic symphonies, Rachmaninoff’s Second surely requires the least analysis to enjoy; the stream of inspired melodies is continuous and you need only sit back and let them sweep past. But the Symphony is nonetheless highly structured, in very effective classical forms. In the sonata-form outer movements the transitions between sections are always clearly marked with instrumental recitatives or dramatic cadences, and the whole, mighty structure is tied together with a range of thematic cross-references. Music first heard in the slow introduction recurs in the *Adagio* and at the climax of the *Finale*; material from the second and third movements also reappears in the fourth. The rich, deep-hued orchestration throughout the Symphony adds another level of unity.

Still, for all the Symphony’s formal logic, you’d need to have a heart of ice not to feel the tug of the deep, dark emotional current that sweeps it from first bar to last. “There is something in the Russian soul that corresponds to the immensity, the vagueness, the infinitude of the Russian land,” wrote Nicholas Berdayev, and the

long introductory *Largo* surely evokes some vast, overcast steppe. The climax of the development section resembles a tremendous winter storm, while the great *Adagio* conjures endless, sunlit vistas.

Rachmaninoff was always reticent about the meaning of his music, but the Symphony’s emotional programme is not hard to read – the archetypal Romantic journey from darkness to light. (Rachmaninoff’s boyhood hero was Tchaikovsky, after all.) One writer has compared the *Adagio* to the love scene in Rachmaninoff’s 1905 opera *Francesca da Rimini*; and its emotional message is certainly unambiguous. Away from the dazzling public spectacle of his piano concertos, Rachmaninoff poured some of his most personal music into his symphonies. In the Second, he wrote out his heart.

1. LARGO – ALLEGRO MODERATO

The Symphony opens with a slow introduction on the broadest scale; almost a self-contained movement in its own right. Cellos and basses intone the chant-like motto-theme, and bass clarinet, violas and cor anglais create a sombre atmosphere as the *Largo* builds to an impassioned climax and subsides once more into the gloom.

A cor anglais recitative and a shiver from the violins launch the first movement proper, a huge sonata-form structure with an urgent and lyrical first subject. A solo clarinet ushers in the tender second theme; hesitant woodwinds call out, and the strings melt in response. Rachmaninoff builds the music into great rapturous arcs, and rounds off the exposition with a luminous song for the cellos. The development opens in nervous quiet; solo violin and oboe cry out like birds fleeing before a storm, and when that storm finally breaks, it’s titanic, peaking in two successively louder and more

dissonant climaxes. Unsurprisingly, after this, the recapitulation makes most use of the quieter second subject-group, rendered even gentler by the contrast – though the thunder isn't quite played-out yet...

2. SCHERZO: ALLEGRO MOLTO

Rachmaninoff is at his most energetic in the *Scherzo*: a vigorous opening theme for horns flies by amid flashing triplet figures and glittering writing for violins and glockenspiel. A lyrical second melody takes us briefly back to the tender moments of the first movement, but it's no more than an interlude, and the opening music makes a swift return. The central section of the movement begins with a crash before developing into a sort of Russian Orthodox procession, a chant-like melody carried forward by the winds and surrounded by sparkling *staccato* figuration for strings. In true classical style, a repeat of the *scherzo* follows – the motto-theme sounding balefully in the low brass before the movement blinks into silence.

3. ADAGIO

Quite simply, the most uninhibitedly romantic music Rachmaninoff ever wrote. An ardent, rising motif for the strings introduces the great clarinet melody that is the heart of the whole symphony. "He sang, and in every sound his voice made there breathed something familiar as our birthright and so vast no eye could encompass it, just as if the Russian steppe were being unrolled before us, stretching away to an endless distance" - Turgenev could have been writing of this tune. The exquisitely soft and intricate accompaniment, with strings divided into 16 parts, subtly underlines its beauty.

The opening motif returns, still more ardent, and then again after the second subject group, a poignant question-and-answer between the woodwinds (the rhythm just happens to match the words "Do you

love me?", in both Russian and English). There's a moment's silence before the brief development section, but comment on such heartfelt music seems unnecessary and the main melody soon returns, quieter and even sweeter, on violins. The movement ends in profound tranquillity.

4. FINALE: ALLEGRO VIVACE

After that hushed close, the finale bursts in with irresistible exuberance. Four bars of pounding rhythm introduce a brilliant march, and even after the initial energy subsides, galloping triplet-rhythms drive the music vigorously forward. A cymbal crash and a triumphant fanfare introduce the sweeping second subject, a broad, ecstatically happy melody which Rachmaninoff gradually winds down, finally bringing it to rest in a peaceful reminiscence of the *Adagio*.

The development section begins with a flurry. The mood becomes more agitated, memories of the *Largo*, *Scherzo* and *Adagio* rattle by, but jubilation is never far from the surface, and in a tremendous passage beginning with a descending scale on the bassoon, the whole orchestra gradually joins in what sounds like a great celebratory peal of bells, heralding the return of the opening march and the build-up to the final climax of the Symphony. To the accompaniment of fanfaring trumpets, the second subject returns in glory; the motto theme peals majestically through a cascading orchestra, and in a final, breathless rush, Rachmaninoff winds the Symphony up with a flourish. The overwhelming feeling is of a triumphant and joyous homecoming – exactly what awaited Rachmaninoff when the Symphony was premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, on 26 January 1908.

Programme notes © Richard Bratby

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KAZUKI YAMADA

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As the new Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Kazuki Yamada builds upon the deep musical bond formed with players during his time as Principal Guest Conductor of the orchestra, a role held by him since 2018. Alongside his commitments in Birmingham, Yamada is also Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo. Having already worked with the two organisations in partnership, conducting collaborative performances of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in Monaco in 2019, Yamada's new appointment sees a continuing link forged between Monaco and Birmingham, with the CBSO Chorus set for a return to Monaco in 2023 for a performance of Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Time spent under the close supervision of Seiji Ozawa served to underline the importance of what Yamada calls his "Japanese feeling" for classical music. Born in 1979 in Kanagawa, Japan, he continues to work and perform in Japan as Principal Guest Conductor of the Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra.

© SASHA GUSOV

SEONG-JIN CHO

With an innate musicality and overwhelming talent, Seong-Jin Cho has established himself worldwide as one of the leading pianists of his generation and most distinctive artists on the current music scene. His thoughtful and poetic, assertive and tender, virtuosic and colourful playing can combine panache with purity and is driven by an impressive natural sense of balance. Seong-Jin Cho was brought to the world's attention in 2015 when he won First Prize at the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw, and his career has rapidly ascended since. In 2016, he signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon. An artist high in demand, Cho works with the world's most prestigious orchestras including Berliner Philharmoniker, Wiener Philharmoniker, London Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, New York Philharmonic and The Philadelphia Orchestra. Conductors he regularly collaborates with include Myung-Whun Chung, Gustavo Dudamel, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Andris Nelsons, Gianandrea Noseda, Sir Simon Rattle, Santtu-Matias Rouvali and Esa-Pekka Salonen.



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