

**CBSO**

City of  
Birmingham  
Symphony  
Orchestra

Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No.2  
Symphony Hall  
Thursday 12 October, 2023  
2:15pm

CBSO.CO.UK



**RACHMANINOFF  
PIANO CONCERTO NO.2**

Concert programme £4

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# INTRODUCTION

Bringing *Parsifal Suite* to the magnificent acoustic of Symphony Hall feels like the climax of what has been a 7-year project.

Back in 2016 I was scratching my head. How could I perform the great orchestral set pieces from Wagner's opera *Parsifal* in concert? The opening prelude has been a regular feature of orchestral repertoire for as long as anyone can remember. Often, it's performed in combination with the Good Friday Music, a pairing that many concert-goers have grown to love.

But what about the rest? The Act 2 Prelude, conjuring up Klingsor's magical realm, is blisteringly dramatic and offers fast-paced contrast. The Act 3 Prelude is a wonder of the musical world, as are the mighty centrepieces of the outer acts, the interludes of Transformation Music, which swell our emotions as the opera stage transforms from forest into castle. Both passages are as astonishing as anything I've heard on a concert stage.

So where's the catch? It all comes down to Wagner's gift for steering the audience. Just when the orchestra appears to be reaching a conclusion, the music morphs imperceptibly into the next vocal scene. To stop in concert would be like stopping mid-sentence.

I was determined to avoid composing new endings or interludes in the style of Wagner – better to respect the original. My solution instead was to sit the extracts in an order in which they could run into one another, either directly or in one case with a stitch of Wagner from elsewhere in the opera. The result was unexpected – it just feels right. Having published and recorded *Parsifal Suite*, I hope that others now have greater access to this extraordinary music. I'm delighted to be with the CBSO for this, the first UK performance since the record release.

**Coleridge-Taylor, Ballade for Orchestra**

11mins

**Rachmaninoff, Piano Concerto No.2**

35mins

*Interval*

**Wagner (arr. Gourlay), Parsifal Suite**

48mins

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**Andrew Gourlay, Conductor**

**Jeneba Kanneh-Mason, Piano**

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Thursday 12 October, 2:15pm  
Symphony Hall, Birmingham

# RACHMANINOFF PIANO CONCERTO NO.2

“Here, time becomes space...” Wagner's Parsifal is a musical journey into sheer beauty, a world of sound so beautiful that it sends shivers down the spine. It's an incredible way to follow the artistry of Jeneba Kanneh-Mason: the young British piano star who creates her own special kind of magic. Believe us, when she plays Rachmaninoff's best-loved concerto, it'll be much more than just a brief encounter...

**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)**

## COLERIDGE-TAYLOR, BALLADE FOR ORCHESTRA

Coleridge-Taylor was one of those composers – like Britten, like the much earlier Mendelssohn – who started early and had no doubts about their musical destiny. His talent may have come from his musical grandfather – a farrier (or blacksmith) by trade, he also played the violin – and his uncle, who became a professional musician. His family was not well off: he was raised by his mother, Alice, and his grandfather (his father – a doctor from Sierra Leone – had returned to Africa when Alice was pregnant, not knowing of the boy's existence). The family worked hard to support him in his early lessons and future ambitions. He learned violin with a local teacher in Croydon, then later won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in his teens, taking composition lessons with Charles Villiers Stanford.

The *Ballade for Orchestra* is one of his earliest works, written when he was barely out of college. It was commissioned in 1898 by the Three Choirs Festival, who had originally offered the opportunity to Edward Elgar. Elgar instead heartily recommended Coleridge-Taylor with the words ‘I wish, wish, wish you would ask Coleridge-Taylor to do it... he is far and away the cleverest fellow going amongst the young men.’ The *Ballade* was well-received after its premiere, and a glowing interview in *The Musical Times* remarked that Coleridge-Taylor was a ‘very gifted musician who has something to say and, moreover, something worth saying.’

The *Ballade* is a confident, flowing and gorgeously lyrical piece, opening with a theatrical trill followed by two themes: the first in a rocking, rolling style, the second a longer, leaping melody. These two themes chase each other around in the first few minutes, before ushering in a more romantic passage with a soaring melody. The opening themes gallop back, then play out in a variety of styles and inventive

orchestrations (at one point, a slinky version of theme 1 sounds like something out of cabaret). We are treated to a longer, even more passionate version of the central theme again before the first two return to close out this exhilarating orchestral work.

**Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

## RACHMANINOFF, PIANO CONCERTO NO.2

- I Moderato
- II Adagio Sostenuto
- III Allegro Scherzando

The 1946 film *Brief Encounter* begins with a train roaring out of the fictional Carnforth station. Its thunderous noise obscures the initial opening notes of the film soundtrack; the dramatic start of Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto, with its spread chords and turbulent melody, emerges from the cacophony. Right from the start, the film conveys a sense of urgency, and of surging passion. It was Noël Coward's idea to use the Rachmaninoff this way – he wrote the screenplay – and Coward's biographer Oliver Soden notes that the music gives this British, suburban tale of thwarted love a thrill of Russian melodrama. (Another film, *The Seven Year Itch* starring Marilyn Monroe, has the deluded hero attempting to seduce Monroe with the same piece; she prefers Chopsticks). All of which preamble is to set the scene for a work which – while some might consider it a cliché – still has an extraordinary dramatic power in performance.

This power is conveyed through the magical way Rachmaninoff writes for piano (a brilliant performer, he was the soloist at the premiere in 1901), but perhaps most through its seemingly endless supply of yearning melodies. The opening theme, for example, lasts an initial eight bars, but then expands into a continuous sequence, eventually

lasting some 44 bars. After a fanfare-like flurry, a new, equally gorgeous theme begins in the piano. And so it continues. The second movement starts with yet another rapturously seamless tune (years later to become the basis of Eric Carmen's rock ballad 'All by myself', made famous in yet another film: *Bridget Jones' Diary*). Comprising a dreamy series of triplets, and is deliberately off-kilter with the orchestral theme above. The final movement, in mostly a more jaunty spirit, has another show-stopper as its second major theme.

The Concerto's melodies are generously shared between orchestra and piano, the soloist often duetting with a member of the woodwind, and for such a virtuosic work for piano, there is surprisingly no lengthy 'cadenza' for solo piano. Instead, there are brief sections of fireworks in each movement before the main business of this work – melody – is reclaimed. The Concerto ends in a well-earned major key, all passion finally spent.

**Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**

## WAGNER, PARSIFAL SUITE (500)

- I Prelude to Act 1
- II Good Friday Music (Act 3)
- III Transformation Music (Act 3)
- IV Prelude to Act 3
- V Prelude to Act 2
- VI Transformation Music (Act 1)
- VII Finale (Act 3)

Wagner's final opera is one of his longest; and for a Wagner opera, that's saying something. The original work lasts just over four hours (not including intervals), and is a prime example of how Wagner composes his stageworks in an unbroken, seemingly endless flow, as opposed to breaking down the acts into a series of arias, duets, choruses, etc. Andrew

Gourlay's aim in arranging his suite was to create a substantial orchestral representation of Parsifal that was true to that sense of continuity and seamless blending of scene into scene. The resulting 45-minute work, as he puts it, 'stitches together' the opera's preludes and finale, its 'Good Friday' music, and the transformation scenes, where the forest gives way to the Grail palace – a place where, according to one of the characters in the opera, 'space becomes time.'

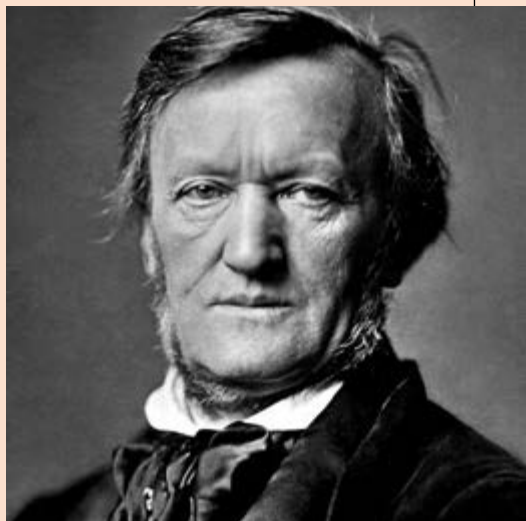
Wagner drew on various versions of the 'holy grail' legend for his plot, which is a complex one. Putting it as briefly as possible, the story concerns the eternally wounded King of the Grail Knights, Amfortas, who according to prophecy can only be cured by a 'holy fool,' a chosen one. Along comes Parsifal, an innocent, and apparently a foolish one. After various trials and tribulations, he comes to realise his status as 'the chosen one' and eventually heals Amfortas on Good Friday. Along the way, he reclaims the 'holy spear' which wounded Amfortas from the villainous Klingsor, and releases Klingsor's handmaiden Kundry from a curse.

As with all of Wagner's operas, principal characters and themes are associated with their own *leitmotif*, a distinct melody which travels through the opera, transforming over time and in contact with other motifs. The opera – and Gourlay's suite – begins with the principal motif: a long thread of a tune which gives birth, as it were, to several other motifs and outlines the psychological drama to follow. It starts with a straightforward rising 'triad' figure, then becomes more anguished before tailing off ambiguously. It is followed by a suitably noble 'Grail' theme, quite similar to the first half of the main motif; and then another associated with 'Faith,' again for brass.

As the opera is set in a strange, perpetual cycle, seemingly outside literal time, the music can quite happily reorder itself without losing the psychological sense

of the original drama. After the Prelude, Gourlay jumps to Act 3 (the Good Friday music, the 'transformation' music, and the Prelude), followed by the preludes to Act 2 and the Act 1 transformation. The suite concludes with the Act 3 Finale. Already in the opening Prelude we can hear the perpetual state of yearning and the eternal suffering of Amfortas. The glorious Good Friday music offers the promise of redemption, while the transformation scenes move in and out of darkness and light – the Act 3 version a reversal of the first. The Act 3 prelude emphasises the heaviness and even weariness of the Knights in their perpetual suffering; while the prelude to Act 2 is in the contrasting realm of Klingsor and Kundry, full of malicious energy. The opera ends with the triumphant Act 3 Finale, Amfortas cured, and Parsifal now the King of the Grail Knights. The motifs in the Finale – notably the main theme – are sweeter, less anguished. They finally allow themselves to resolve into peace.

Programme notes © Lucy Walker



RICHARD WAGNER, 1871.  
FRANZ HANFSTAENGL, PUBLIC DOMAIN,  
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Conductor

# ANDREW GOURLAY



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Andrew Gourlay won First Prize at the 2010 Cadaques International Conducting Competition. Subsequently he was Assistant Conductor to Sir Mark Elder and the Hallé Orchestra and in 2015 to 2021 he was Music Director of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León in Valladolid. Recent guest engagements include the Philharmonia, BBC orchestras, London Philharmonic, RLPO, Hallé, CBSO, RTÉ Symphony, Ulster Orchestra, Melbourne, Auckland, Bremen, Stavanger, Tampere, Bordeaux, Hobart, San Diego and Fort Worth. He appears regularly at the BBC Proms in London. Operatic engagements include the UK premiere of Francesconi's Quartett (Royal Opera House), Tippett's The Ice Break (Birmingham Opera Company with the CBSO), the premiere of Tom Coult's Violet (Aldeburgh Festival) in 2022 and the The Cunning Little Vixen (Opera North). Andrew Gourlay has made recordings with the London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, BBC Symphony, and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. The first own-label OSCyL disc of Rachmaninov's Symphony No 2 and The Isle of the Dead was released in spring 2019 followed by Shostakovich 10 in 2021. His orchestral suite from Parsifal with the London Philharmonic was released in November 2022.



# JENEBA KANNEH-MASON

Pianist Jeneba Kanneh-Mason is already captivating audiences with her “maturity in performance and interpretation” (Fraser). She recently made her BBC Proms debut performing the Florence Price Concerto and was heralded by the press as “demonstrating musical insight, technical acuity, and an engaging performing persona” (Music OMH). Recent and forthcoming highlights include an extensive UK tour with the Hungarian Radio Symphony and Riccardo Frizza, a European tour with Chineke!, debuts with the Detroit Symphony, Philharmonia, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, Belgrade Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic, and the Sinfonia Viva for the New Year Gala. Jeneba was a Keyboard Category Finalist in BBC Young Musician 2018, winner of the Murs du Son Prize at the Lagny-Sur-Marne International Piano Competition in France, 2014, and The Nottingham Young Musician 2013. She was also winner of the Iris Dyer Piano Prize at The Royal Academy of Music, Junior Academy, where she studied with Patsy Toh. Jeneba holds the Victoria Robey Scholarship to The Royal College of Music, studying piano with Vanessa Latache. She is grateful to Lady Robey, The Nottingham Soroptimist Trust and to The Nottingham Education Trust.



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