

**CBSO**

City of  
Birmingham  
Symphony  
Orchestra

Rhapsody in Blue  
Symphony Hall  
Wednesday 27 March 2024,  
7:30pm

CBSO.CO.UK



# RHAPSODY IN BLUE

Concert programme £4

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to tonight's concert, conducted and curated by dear friend to the CBSO, Ilan Volkov, in a programme which showcases a unique perspective and celebration on the evolution of American music.

Starting with Charles Ives' "Three Places in New England," here we have an orchestral masterpiece capturing scenic landscapes and evoking Americana nostalgia across, well, three places = Boston and Stockbridge in Massachusetts and Redding in Connecticut. We then transition to the avant-garde world of rock icon Frank Zappa with "Bob in Dacron and Sad Jane." Composed nearly 50 years ago, Zappa's irreverent blend of rock, jazz, and orchestral elements still challenge the listener's expectations in surprising and exciting ways.

After the interval we continue our exploration of musical experimentation with George Lewis' "Memex". Lewis' intense, engulfing work serves as a bridge between tradition and innovation, connecting the past with future orchestral composition possibilities.

Finally, we are treated to George Gershwin's beloved and timeless masterpiece, "Rhapsody in Blue," featuring the virtuosic Canadian

pianist, Stuart Goodyear. Gershwin's popular fusion of classical and jazz influences embodies the spirit of American music, bringing our extraordinary musical voyage of discovery across the Atlantic full circle. I do hope you will enjoy this vibrant American kaleidoscope here in Birmingham tonight.



**Ives, Three Places in New England, 18mins**

- I. The Saint-Gaudens in Boston Common
- II. Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut
- III. From the Housatonic at Stockbridge

**Zappa, Bob in Dacron and Sad Jane, 22mins**

*Interval*

**Lewis, Memex, 17mins**

**Gershwin, Rhapsody in Blue\*, 16mins**

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**Ilan Volkov, Conductor**

**Stewart Goodyear\*, Piano**

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We also regularly take photographs for promotional use, so you may see a professional photographer at our concerts. Please ask a member of the front of house team if you have any questions about this.

To ensure that everyone is able to enjoy the performance, please make sure your mobile phone is set to silent.

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# RHAPSODY IN BLUE

A solitary clarinet starts to wail, and the skyscrapers of Manhattan light up the evening sky. In leafy New England, marching bands collide head-first – and make a glorious noise. And at the intersection of jazz, classical and pop counterculture, the music of Frank Zappa and George Lewis creates fabulous new worlds. Anything's possible in American music: but Ilan Volkov and Stewart Goodyear do the impossible every day.

Charles Ives (1874-1954)

## THREE PLACES IN NEW ENGLAND

- I. The Saint-Gaudens in Boston Common
- II. Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut
- III. From the Housatonic at Stockbridge

The music of Charles Ives has, as the *New Grove Dictionary* puts it, 'an unparalleled ability to evoke the sounds and feelings of American life.' Throughout his unusual career – he worked for years as an insurance agent alongside composing – Ives absorbed the hymn tunes, band marches and folk music of the world around him. At the same time he developed a highly individual musical language, fusing more traditional American tunes with an eclectic, modern approach. These 'Three Places' are American to their core: rooted in New England and concerned with significant events in US history, principally battles of the Civil War. Each movement is a network of recollections, many of them concerning active experiences: marching,

fighting, being killed (the first movement is effectively a slow march into battle). This entire work somehow anticipates film music in its epic scope and its ability to conjure up a 'montage' effect of scenes and landscapes.

In the first two movements, fragments of tunes weave in and out of the orchestral texture – from spirituals to military songs, and from marching tunes to bursts of Wagner (the 'Ride of the Valkyries' makes a cameo appearance in the second movement). These melodies frequently collide with each other or segue abruptly into another tune. This happens to some extent in the poignant 'St Gaudens' but is especially true of 'Putnam's Camp' in which sounds of the band at a picnic mingle in a young boy's imagination with battle cries and trumpet calls. In the movement's final stages the US national anthem makes a bid to be heard out of the melée of swirling orchestral texture. The third movement

takes a break from a military narrative and instead evokes the flow of the Housatonic River, by turns serene and turbulent.

Frank Zappa (1940-1993)

## BOB IN DACRON AND SAD JANE

There's nobody in the music world quite like Frank Zappa, for whom a term such as 'crossover artist' barely covers the range of his interests and activities. Arved Ashby describes Zappa as having 'many roles, varied to the point of conflict: guitar idol, rock star, social critic, filmmaker, composer, diplomat, activist, general provocateur...'. Many of these roles feed into his musical style and artistic mission. For Zappa, rock and classical music were accorded the same value and had equal influence on his work. He grew up listening simultaneously to blues alongside Stravinsky and Webern. His idols were both Guitar Slim and experimental composer Edgard Varèse. He would alternate from rockstar to avant-garde from one day to the next: royalties from his Grammy-award winning song *Valley Girl* paid for the recording sessions with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1983, which included *Bob in Dacron* and *Sad Jane*.

Both these orchestral works were part of the same ballet score featuring both dancers and grotesque, inflatable versions of the principal characters. The (bizarre) scenario appears to be a drama about self-image and how we perceive others, framed through multiple perspectives. The score is for full orchestra and a simply vast array of percussion. In *Bob in Dacron* the dissolute and narcissistic Bob tries on a series of hideous outfits (presumably made from dacron?) then gets drunk and makes an idiot of himself in a bar. Angular chords and a constant, restless agitation accompany Bob as he tries on his clothes, witnessed

by a troupe of admiring – but completely imaginary – girls. As he swings louchely into the bar later, the music swings with him. *Sad Jane* is a homeless woman, attempting to settle down for the night dressed in multiple overcoats and with bunched up newspapers for shoes. Her music is wistful and considerably less highly-charged than Bob's as she tries on both garments and musical guises (jazz mainly but also a surprisingly military-sounding passage, punctuated by side-drum). The two characters, and their puppet counterparts, gradually deflate and dissipate. 'Sad Jane' ends in a melancholy mood, far from Bob's self-deluded brashness.

George Lewis (b. 1952)

## MEMEX

George Lewis, like Zappa, is a multi-faceted artist, combining an active performing career with composition. In a 2021 Proms interview he outlined nine categories of his output, including 'open improvisation' and 'installations'. As a trombonist he has performed and collaborated with film-makers and artists as well as other musicians; and he pioneered the 'Voyager' in the 1980s, one of the first electronic devices to respond live to a musician's performance. He remains fascinated with the concept of electronic response and memory. 'Memex,' a contraction of 'memory' and 'expansion,' was a theoretical device conceived in the 1940s as a means of creating links across a vast body of information – and effectively prefiguring the internet.

Channelling the spirit of limitless connection – and perhaps also its unintended consequences – Lewis's orchestral scores are built around large structures of sound, sometimes building to crisis point. At other times, there is a more delicate texture, in which unsettling effects from the strings and woodwind

create noises resembling electronic bleeps, or even distant cries. The huge orchestral forces are put to powerfully inventive use with a full artillery of percussion, and particular prominence is given to the metallic instruments. At times, the intricate jangle of individual lines conjures up the image of a tangle of interconnected wires transmitting data across a dense network, threatening to collapse under the sheer weight of information.

**George Gershwin (1898-1937)**

## RHAPSODY IN BLUE

The premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was a major moment in American concert history and – 100 years later – is much discussed even today. The *Rhapsody* was first heard as part of an incredibly long concert entitled 'An Experiment in Modern Music' – the programme of which was jazz-focussed – at the Aeolian Hall, New York on 12 February 1924. Works of other American composers featured on the bill, such as Victor Herbert and 'novelty pianist' Zez Confrey, and Gershwin's new work was the penultimate piece – by which time some of the audience had left, and others were bad-tempered with fatigue. It was, however, rapturously received in the hall; while the critics were less impressed, tending toward condescension (one critic wrote that Gershwin had 'made an honest woman out of jazz').

For some listeners and critics since, the piece does not deserve its beloved status – even Leonard Bernstein, who adored and frequently played it, thought it had flaws; for others, it is an example of cultural appropriation from black musicians. Yet as Kenan Malik has recently put it, music can only benefit from the 'messiness of cultural interaction', of whatever kind. Gershwin himself, channelling the spirit of the piece on a train before he composed it, wrote 'I heard it as a sort of musical

kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.' This was of particular concern to American composers in 1924, who were attempting to define their own 'Americanism', and jazz and blues were a significant part of that definition. For Malik it is not so much about 'appropriating' music from black musicians, but ensuring that they – the influencers – are represented on stage at least as much as the influenced.

From whatever perspective, *Rhapsody in Blue* has remained a stalwart of the concert hall, as well as having a busy social life at the movies. Throughout the twentieth century and beyond it has become shorthand in cinema soundtracks for a glittering kind of East coast life: the opening clarinet swoop blending with the stylish monochrome opening of *Manhattan* (1977); the dance-rhythms fusing with the life of the main character in *The Great Gatsby* (2013); or the sound world evoking metropolitan romance for the chaotic lead of *Trainwreck* (2015). Its 'Rhapsodic' nature defies formal analysis, and instead the piece is a vivacious collection of themes and styles, creating an overall 'montage' effect, linked together by improvisatory-like bursts from the solo piano. Its frenetic high spirits calm briefly in the centre of the piece, giving way to a purely romantic melody. Yet it does not take long for the insistent rhythmic drive – what Gershwin called the 'rattle-ty bang' – to start up again. As a more friendly critic, Olin Downes, wrote after the premiere 'the audience was stirred and many a hardened concertgoer excited with the sensation of a new talent finding its voice.' Audiences are surely still stirred a hundred years later.

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Conductor

# ILAN VOLKOV



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A musical omnivore, Ilan Volkov also serves as a dynamic figurehead of the international contemporary music scene. He enjoys a long-standing relationship with BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, as Principal Conductor from 2003 and Principal Guest Conductor since 2009. Ilan is currently Principal Guest Conductor with the Brussels Philharmonic. In 2012, he launched the Tectonics Festival, which has since become one of the world's most diverse and acclaimed celebrations of new music, with festivals in Adelaide, Oslo, New York, Tel Aviv, Krakow, Athens, Glasgow and Reykjavik. In 2020 he co-founded the I&I Foundation with Ilya Gringolts to support the development and performance of new music. Equally at home in opera, his extensive operatic ventures have most recently included George Benjamin's *Lessons in Love and Violence* at Opernhaus Zürich, the world premiere of Missy Mazzoli's new work *The Listeners* with Norwegian National Opera, and Samir Odeh-Tamimi's new creation *L'Apocalypse Arabe* for the Aix Festival. Volkov's diverse discography includes Stravinsky's ballet scores and a Gramophone Award-winning recording of Britten's complete works for piano and orchestra, both for Hyperion, and a critically acclaimed survey of Liszt's three *Funeral Odes* with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

# STEWART GOODYEAR

Proclaimed "a phenomenon" by the Los Angeles Times and "one of the best pianists of his generation" by the Philadelphia Inquirer, Stewart Goodyear is an accomplished concert pianist, improviser and composer. He has performed with, and has been commissioned by, many of the major orchestras and chamber music organizations around the world. Last year, Orchid Classics released Mr. Goodyear's recording of his suite for piano and orchestra, "Callaloo" and his piano sonata. His recent commissions include a Piano Quintet for the Penderecki String Quartet, and a piano work for the Honens Piano Competition. His discography includes the complete sonatas and piano concertos of Beethoven, as well as concertos by Tchaikovsky, Grieg and Rachmaninov, an album of Ravel piano works, and an album, entitled "For Glenn Gould", which combines repertoire from Mr. Gould's US and Montreal debuts. His Rachmaninov recording received a Juno nomination for Best Classical Album for Soloist and Large Ensemble Accompaniment. Highlights for the 2023-24 season are his performances at Summer for the City (Lincoln Center, NY), Southbank Centre (UK), Schleswig-Holstein Festival, his recital debut at Wigmore Hall, his debut with the CBSO, and his return with the Milwaukee Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, and his Carnegie Hall debut with the Royal Conservatory Orchestra of Toronto.



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