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Vasily Petrenko Celebrates 10 Years with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

Thursday 7 July 2016 7.30pm

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)
In the South (Alassio), Op.50

A flurry of strings; the horns vault skywards, and in a dazzling flash the whole Italian Riviera lies spread before us, shimmering under the mid-day sun. From Mendelssohn’s *Italian* symphony (1833) to Sibelius’s *The Oceanides* (1914), northern European composers have pursued a love-affair with the land of cypresses and lemon blossom. But perhaps only a composer from our damp, grey island could capture the sheer delight; the heart-stopping, somersaulting elation that a Briton feels when, through a train window or from a sudden bend in the road, they catch that first glimpse of sun-baked hills plunging down to an endless blue sea.

Even when the reality was slightly different. In November 1903 Elgar and his wife and daughter travelled to the Italian resort of Bordighera. It wasn’t quite what he’d hoped for — “lovely, but too cockney for me”, he wrote to a friend, “I want something more Italian” — and the weather wasn’t exactly idyllic either. But: “What matter the Mediterranean being rough & grey? What matters rain in torrents? Who cares for gales? Tramontana! We have such meals! Such wine! Gosh!... we are at last living a life”. When weather allowed, the Elgars simply lost themselves in the villages and hills above the coast, hiking with a hired donkey called Grisia (“She’s a love”). Soon, Elgar found the Italy he’d been looking for, not in Bordighera, but another, quieter resort further down the coast: “We go to Alassio on Thursday”.

As so often when Elgar was able to relax, musical ideas tumbled upon him. The name of a village near Alassio, Moglio, suggested a rhythm. The towering Roman ruins at La Turbie, just over the French border, created striking musical images, and an exuberant musical pen-picture of Hereford Cathedral’s resident bulldog Dan, “triumphant (after a fight)”, reinvented itself as that rocketing opening. It was timely: an Elgar Festival was planned at Covent Garden for March 1904. Elgar had promised a new work and rumours were circulating about a symphony. What eventually coalesced in Elgar’s mind was something quite different; something that no British composer had yet pulled off – a full-blown symphonic poem written in the ultra-modern idiom of Richard Strauss, *In the South (Alassio)*.
And he did it with breathtaking verve. The musical language is Wagnerian, the inspiration Italian, and it’s all headed with a quote from Byron:

...a land
Which was the mightiest in its old command
And is the loveliest...

After that tremendous beginning, and the great vista that opens beyond it, comes a quieter second set of ideas based on the “Moglio” rhythm (with a bittersweet hint of lemon), and two extraordinary episodes, both inspired by the Italian landscape: a powerful representation of a Roman aqueduct in huge, striding chords, followed by a ravishing, wave-lapped intermezzo, entitled *canto popolare* and sung by solo viola and horn. (Elgar later published this section as a song to words by Shelley, under the title *In Moonlight*). Then, with a brusque toss of the head, Elgar re-summons the energy of the opening and sets about reviewing all his Italian dreams, before gathering them together in a glittering, headlong final sweep for the finish. “I love it”, declared the usually reticent composer. “It’s alive!” *In the South* was premiered by the Hallé Orchestra at Covent Garden on 16 March 1904, with Elgar himself conducting.

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**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)**

**Cello Concerto No.1 in E flat, Op.107**

*Allegretto / quite fast
Moderato – / at a moderate speed –
Cadenza – / cadenza –
Allegro con moto – / fast, with movement*

Mstislav Rostropovich was barely 30 when he joined Shostakovich for a series of performances of Shostakovich’s Cello Sonata – but already his artistry was unmistakable. Shostakovich was impressed; Rostropovich, for his part, was desperate to ask Shostakovich for a concerto. Fortunately, he didn’t: “If you want him to write something for you”, explained Shostakovich’s wife Margarita, “the only recipe I can give you is this – never ask him or talk to him about it”. Rostropovich stayed quiet – and on 2 August 1959 Shostakovich handed him the score of his First Cello Concerto. The cellist memorised it in four days flat. Premiered in Leningrad, it immediately established itself as a modern classic – the post-war cello concerto.

Anyone expecting a cello concerto like Elgar’s or Dvořák’s is in for a surprise. This is a modern concerto. It’s slim – the orchestra is pared down to strings, woodwind and a single horn, with only timpani and celesta as “extras”. It’s concise – the outer movements are barely five minutes long. And it’s efficient. Shostakovich builds the entire first movement from the cello’s brusque, four-note opening motif. The ideas are pithy, the exchanges to-the-point. In the USSR, dissidents knew that talk was not to be wasted, and the ideas in this first movement are no less powerful for being terse. In fact, they can be infectiously catchy. Meanwhile the horn keeps watch at the door, shouting occasional warnings and reminding soloist and orchestra to keep to the point.

Only in the *Moderato* can they speak openly. The cello wanders sadly through a desolate landscape, building slowly towards an impassioned climax ... and down again, the cello answered now by the icy chime of the celesta. There’s a quiet rumble of drums as the cello begins its unaccompanied cadenza. Its thoughts become more agitated, even angry, until the orchestra crashes back in with three chords and a whirling, mechanical folk-dance. It’s a lighthearted release, but with a very bitter flavour. Why? Shostakovich throws us one clue, as the woodwinds exchange fragments of the popular song *Suliko* – widely known to be Stalin’s favourite. Rostropovich would have known exactly what he meant. The dance grinds on, and suddenly we’re back at the start of the concerto as that four-note theme barks out again. The cello works itself into a frenzy but the game’s up; a rattle of drums and it’s all over.

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SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)
Symphony No.3 in A minor, Op.44

Lento – allegro moderato / slow – moderately fast
Adagio ma non troppo / slow, but not too slow
Allegro / fast

Rachmaninov's musical language has its roots deep in the music of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and, most importantly, the Russian Orthodox Church. His musical training was unusually thorough, involving ten years of study at the conservatories of St Petersburg and Moscow, and his outstanding performance was rewarded by the presentation of a Gold Medal from the latter. By the time he wrote his Second Symphony in 1907 his instantly recognisable compositional style was fully formed, and in later years he made only slight adjustments and additions to it.

The Third Symphony, written in 1935-36, was received with scant enthusiasm by public and critics alike. It was composed with the virtuoso forces of the Philadelphia Orchestra in mind, and it was this group that gave the premiere in November 1936 under the baton of Stokowski. A typically harsh critic of the time, B.H. Haggin of the Brooklyn Eagle, dismisses it as “a chewing-over again of something that never had importance to start with”. It may be that this reviewer expected all composers to follow the example of Stravinsky, constantly adopting new techniques and undergoing a stylistic reversal every few years. Rachmaninov certainly did not work in this way, expressing his approval of Stravinsky's The Firebird (1910), but saying of Petrushka (1911) that “it is already worse”, and finding his compatriot’s later works receding further from his taste.

Criticism came also from the opposite quarter. Some listeners evidently expected another work from precisely the same mould as the ever-popular Second Symphony and Second and Third Piano Concertos, which all date from the first decade of the 20th century, long before the turmoil of the First World War, the Revolution and Rachmaninov’s exile. They were disappointed and perplexed to find deviations from what they knew and loved. The composer Nikolai Medtner was apparently distressed by his friend’s concessions to modernism, though from the perspective afforded by 80 years of musical ‘progress’ it is hard to hear what he was concerned about.

The Third Symphony nevertheless found some admirers. Rachmaninov’s cousin and sister-in-law Sophia Satina said on her first hearing of it: “I have no doubt at all that the symphony is about Russia, about Russia’s history, and that it expresses your own devotion to our beloved country”. Henry Wood expressed the opinion that the work would take its place alongside Tchaikovsky’s symphonies in the public’s affection. Rachmaninov himself felt that the Third Symphony was worthwhile, writing to a friend in Russia soon after the premiere that “both audience and critics responded sourly. Personally I’m convinced that this is a good work”.

In comparison to the Second Symphony, the Third shows Rachmaninov enjoying greater rhythmic freedom, extending the boundaries of his harmonic language and employing the orchestra in a far more flamboyant way. A remarkable formal innovation is the compression of the slow movement and Scherzo into a single unit, allowing the usual four movements to be cut down to three. At the heart of the work is the juxtaposition of a new-found structural tautness and economy of means with the intensely lyrical Romanticism so familiar from his earlier works.

First movement
Hereralding the Third Symphony is a brief and meditative motif oscillating around a single note, in the manner of Russian Orthodox chant, which Rachmaninov assigns to the subtle blend of horn, two clarinets and one muted cello. After an angry full orchestral outburst, the movement continues with a succession of haunting and sorrowful melodies on the woodwind and strings. Coloured throughout by a mood of yearning and nostalgia, the Lento – allegro moderato is punctuated by moments of almost Mahlerian tragedy. A recollection of the initial chant motif closes the movement.

Second movement
The Adagio non troppo is in an asymmetrical arch-form in which the central Scherzo is framed by Adagio passages. It opens with an extended variation of the chant motif for the solo horn with a richly-textured harp accompaniment. In the words of Rachmaninov’s biographer Patrick Piggott the subsequent Scherzo
section is “one of Rachmaninov’s most vivacious and colourful pieces of orchestral writing”. In the final bars of the rapturous Adagio that succeeds it, the chant motif makes a portentous appearance.

**Third movement**
Since the Symphonie fantastique of Berlioz (1830), a rich symbolism has grown around the Dies irae plainchant from the Mass for the Dead. Despite its origin in the liturgy of the Catholic rather than the Russian Orthodox Church, no composer has embedded it so deeply into his music as has Rachmaninov. The Third Symphony proves no exception. Reminiscences of a Russian folk celebration are set in a mood of resolute defiance in the Allegro finale. At the centre of the movement is a vigorous fugue led by the strings, and its continuation provides a backdrop for an allusive reference to the Dies irae. In the closing section Rachmaninov transcends the gloom of the Dies irae to provide a radiant, hopeful passage, darkened finally by a recollection of the chant motif of the opening bars.

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