

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
Programme Notes Online

Thursday Series

Petrenko's Brahms II

Thursday 18 October 2018 7.30pm

Sponsored by Hill Dickinson

PAUL HINDEMITH (1895-1963)

Overture, Cupid and Psyche

In his twenties, the German composer Paul Hindemith started to discover the musical style that would make his name. It was tight, brittle, eruptive, rhythmically driven, sometimes acerbic and bore more than a passing reference to the music of times past: the bustling textures and instrumental weave of Baroque music (Handel and Bach) and the elegance and order of the Classical period (Haydn and Mozart).

Its lucidity made Hindemith's music particularly suitable for dance, and it was on a visit to the Villa Farnesina in Rome that the composer saw Raphael's frescoes on the story of Cupid and Psyche and decided to write a ballet on the theme. He got no further than the Overture, perhaps intentionally so; Hindemith was falling out of love with dance and knew that the Overture was the one bit that wouldn't need to be choreographed.

The story of Cupid and Psyche is one of beautiful attraction, love lost and love regained. There is no narrative element to Hindemith's neo-classical fast-slow-fast Overture. Rather, he depicts the beauty of Psyche while the luminosity of Raphael's frescoes shines through the score's transparency and detail. Some have heard a tinge of disillusionment and regret in the piece's slow central section; the work was written in 1942, in the depths of the Second World War, while the exiled composer lectured at Yale University.

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SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)
Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor, Op.14

Moderato / At a moderate speed
Adagio sostenuto / Slow, sustained
Allegro scherzando / Fast, playful

Conducting the premiere of the First Symphony by a 24-year-old Moscow composer on the night of 27 March 1897, Alexander Glazunov may have been drunk – or just hung over – but the performance was a disaster, and the composer, Sergei Rachmaninov, had fled the hall even before it finished. The symphony was never again played in Rachmaninov's lifetime, and his confidence was so shattered that he found himself unable to compose. Friends tried to lift his spirits by arranging a meeting with his idol, Tolstoy – but the cantankerous old genius, rather missing the point, simply asked Rachmaninov “who needs music like this?” By now Rachmaninov was deeply depressed. In desperation, he agreed to undergo treatment with Dr Nikolai Dahl, a pioneering hypnotherapist.

It worked. Under Dahl's guidance, Rachmaninov began his first new work in three years – a concerto for his own instrument, the piano. “You will work freely and easily”, Dahl repeated to Rachmaninov, “the concerto will be of excellent quality”. So it was. Rachmaninov tried out the last two movements at a charity concert, and the response was so good that he finished the first movement in a fraction of the time. The complete concerto was premiered in Moscow on 9 November 1901 ... and need one say more? In 117 years its popularity has survived the launch of three more Rachmaninov concertos, critical snobbery, blatant imitation (Addinsell's Warsaw Concerto) – and of course Brief Encounter! Rachmaninov himself played it with the Liverpool Phil in the late 1930s.

The Second Concerto didn't just re-launch Rachmaninov's career; it gave him his musical voice. The ill-fated Symphony remains a powerful work but it's very different from the Rachmaninov we know now. With its velvet-dark colours, haunting melodies and broad, eloquent paragraphs, the Second Concerto is the first work that sounds like the Rachmaninov of the Classic FM Hall of Fame. And Dahl was right – it really is of excellent quality. From that hypnotic opening chain of piano chords, the first movement rises in a great arch to a martial, trumpet-topped climax and down again. The second turns Orthodox chants (clarinet) into a dreamily romantic nocturne – with a glittering firework display at its centre. And the finale speeds breathlessly through the night with three pauses for that tune. There's little in music to match the thrill of its final, triumphant return, as the glittering piano crowns a great orchestral surge and then races for the finish. You'll hear Rachmaninov's signature – the rhythm of his name – in the very last bar.

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JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Symphony No.2 in D, Op.73

Allegro non troppo / Fast, but not too fast

Adagio non troppo / Slow, but not too slow

Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino) / Quite fast, graceful (as if at a gentle walking pace)

Allegro con spirito / Fast, with spirit

Black armbands

Brahms spent two decades writing his First Symphony. As a young man, Schumann had hailed him as the heir to Beethoven – so Brahms, self-critical at the best of times, knew that he had a lot to live up to. Writing the First Symphony was a titanic effort, and the Symphony itself expresses just that. It was premiered on 4 November 1876. And then, less than a

year later, while the musical world was still furiously discussing “Beethoven’s Tenth” – Brahms announced to his astonished friends that he’d finished another! So soon after the First, and written in a fraction of the time – what on earth could it be like? Brahms dropped a few hints shortly before its premiere on 30 December 1877. “Musicians here play my latest in black crêpe armbands because it sounds so mournful”, he wrote, “and it’ll be printed with a black border”.

Mellow fruitfulness

If you know the Symphony you’ll already be smiling. For all his seriousness (and that formidable beard) Brahms loved a leg-pull. This new Symphony was the sunniest and most serene major work he’d ever put in front of an astonished public. The stormy-browed titan of the First Symphony had now, it seemed, made a Symphony of waltzes, lullabies and glowing colours. Everything about it breathed relaxation, and some listeners dubbed it Brahms’ Pastoral symphony. He spotlights the rustic sounds of horns, clarinets and cellos, and includes a third movement whose lilting oboe solo sounds like a shepherd’s pipe. But this is definitely Brahms’ Pastoral, not Beethoven’s. Beethoven’s is in F major – a clear, bright key, and his symphony is brisk and springlike. D major, Brahms’ choice, is traditionally a mellow key of warmth and celebration – so, put one way, Brahms’ symphony feels like a golden late-August afternoon against Beethoven’s bright May morning.

The Classical Romantic

That could hardly be the whole story, of course – a composer who’s just spent most of his adult life learning how to write a true classical symphony doesn’t suddenly forget it. Opening with a rumble in the basses and a tender horn call, it’s a good few bars before the violins sail in with a serene, singing theme and the movement starts to stir. It feels like Brahms is simply gathering breath. But listen carefully – the four low notes that are the very first things you hear appear again and again throughout the symphony, tying the argument together. The

lovely melody for cellos and horns a few moments into the first movement may sound like the twin of Brahms' famous Lullaby; but it's also the 'second subject' of this classically-structured movement. And the second movement, rich and dark, really is Brahms at his most eloquently serious. He knew that sunshine alone can express nothing without shade. "Vintage wine from fine old kegs", indeed, this Adagio pours its wisdom sweet and clear.

An equal and opposite reaction

But still – the Second Symphony really was the very last thing anyone expected from the composer of the First. Anyone, that is, except Brahms, who throughout his career followed passionate, hard-fought masterpieces with works that seemed the exact opposite. After each angry First Symphony, Piano Concerto or Quartet, came a genial Second – like a creative reflex action. Few composers disciplined themselves as strictly as Brahms. So when we hear him indulging in long, gorgeous solos for his beloved horn and clarinet, letting fly as exuberantly as he does in the finale, and finally blazing exultantly away with the biggest brass section he ever used – well, it's hard not to feel he's earned the right. And we get to share the pleasure. As his great supporter the critic Hanslick put it: "The Second Symphony extends its warmth to connoisseurs and laymen alike. It belongs to all who long for good music, whether they understand the technicalities or not".

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