Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
Programme Notes Online

LIVERPOOL PHILHARMONIC

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● informative programme notes, many newly written
● photos and brief biographies of conductors and soloists
● a list of contract orchestra members
● texts or translations of sung items
● a list of choir members, where appropriate
● at many events a separate list of the players at that particular event will be available

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Thursday 21 March 2019 7.30pm
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SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)
The Isle of the Dead, Op.29
symphonic poem

The scathing reception of Rachmaninov's First Symphony in 1897 nearly put pay to his career as a composer. One critic, the composer César Cui, described it as the work "of some student at a conservatory in Hell asked to write a version of the Seven Plagues of Egypt". That the conductor Glazunov was drunk had not helped matters but the critical onslaught deeply affected Rachmaninov. Happily, however, after a course of psychotherapy he returned to composition and in the years preceding the revolution re-established his reputation with a series of enduring masterpieces including the Second and Third Piano Concertos, the Second Symphony and his highly atmospheric tone poem *The Isle of the Dead*.

In 1906 Rachmaninov began searching for subject matter on which to base a tone poem and, after a year or so, chanced upon Arnold Böcklin's painting *The Isle of the Dead*, or more accurately a black and white reproduction of the work he had seen on a visit to Paris. Böcklin's picture depicts Charon, the ferryman of Greek mythology whose dire occupation was to row the souls of the dead across the River Styx to the foreboding shores of the Isle of the Dead. Rachmaninov was drawn to the brooding Romanticism of the picture: "The massive architecture and the mystic message of the painting made a marked impression on me", he wrote. However, rather than limiting himself to the details of Böcklin's work, Rachmaninov provides us with a highly imaginative adaptation of the painting, a musical canvas replete with dramatic contrasts and characteristic Rachmaninov touches.

At the opening of the work the eerie stillness of the River Styx is gently disturbed by the motion of Charon's oars (represented by a repeated five-note motif in the lower strings) as the ferryman rows his mysterious passenger across the waters. The pervading gloom of the scene is heightened by subtle allusions to the *Dies irae*, a chant

that for centuries had formed part of the Requiem Mass and therefore one that inevitably carried associations of death, associations utilised by Rachmaninov in several other works. The music builds to a forbidding climax as the awesome, craggy coastline of the isle appears, Charon's 'oar motif' ceasing as the boat drifts towards the shore.

At this point Rachmaninov's elaborates Böcklin's vision with the introduction of what he described as a 'life' theme, an intense, ardent passage in which the soul wistfully recalls earthly joy and love. The soul's anguish increases in the form of an ecstatic, Scriabin-like outpouring but it is the sombre *Dies irae* that wins the day, appearing first in declamatory fashion and then more mysteriously in tremolo strings. The 'life' motif attempts to fight back but as the work reaches its main climax, decisive chords suggest a series of mortal blows. In the ghostly aftermath the *Dies irae* reappears triumphant, mocking a mournful echo of the 'life' theme. Charon's rowing resumes as he returns across the Styx, his grim work done, and he gradually recedes into the gloom.

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EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)
Sea Pictures, Op.37

Sea Slumber Song
In Haven (Capri)
Sabbath Morning at Sea
Where Corals Lie
The Swimmer

Throughout the ages creative artists have been fascinated by the sea, symbolising at is does ideas of birth, re-birth and the possibility of new discovery. With its sheer physical force the sea is both dangerous and utterly exhilarating. Indeed, Elgar's *Sea Pictures* – five poems set by the composer just after he came to public attention with his *Enigma Variations* of 1899 – are full of images of quest, discovery and sheer elemental power. The work was first performed on 5 October 1899 at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival, who had commissioned the piece. Elgar himself conducted and Dame Clara Butt was the singer. "She sang really well", Elgar wrote, noting also that she had appropriately "dressed like a mermaid".

The soothing cradle-rhythms of 'Sea Slumber Song' envisage the ocean as a comforting influence, while 'In Haven', a lyric penned by Elgar's beloved wife Alice, is a more stormy metaphor of life's inevitable ups and downs (Alice had originally written it as the song 'Love Alone will Stay').

Elgar's setting of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Sabbath Morning at Sea' captures both the unease caused by 'the waters around me, turbulent' and the thrill of 'the wondrous sight, the new wondrous sight' that faced the writer. By contrast the great deeps of Richard Garnett's 'Where Corals Lie' are calmer, though the 'airy spray' still 'lures me, lures me to go on'. Finally the sea of 'The Swimmer' is altogether stormier. We hear 'the swirl of the surges livid, the seas that climb and the surfs that comb'. Elgar's masterly orchestration brings everything to vividly briny life.

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
Symphony No.3 in E flat, Op.55 'Eroica'

Allegro con brio / Fast, with vigour
Marcia funebre (adagio assai) / Funeral march (very slow)
Scherzo: allegro vivace / Scherzo: fast and lively
Allegro molto – poco andante, con espressione / Very fast – at a gentle walking pace, with expression

What's in a name?
Two chords slam out. Ludwig van Beethoven seizes the score of his newly-completed 'Bonaparte Symphony', tears off its title page and, furious, hurls it to the floor. Few moments in music are more powerful than the opening of Beethoven's Third Symphony, and few musical christenings have been more dramatic. Napoleon Bonaparte was just one year older than Beethoven. His rise from humble roots to become the most brilliant military leader of his age – and his devotion to the revolutionary ideals of Liberty,

Equality and Fraternity – thrilled the composer. In February 1804, Beethoven completed his musical homage, a symphony of unprecedented energy, scale and ambition.

And then, on 18 May, Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor. "So he, too, is just a man like the rest!" exclaimed Beethoven. "Now he will trample on the rights of humanity, pursue his own ambitions and become a tyrant!" On the manuscript of the symphony, you can still see the tear where Beethoven scratched out the dedication to Napoleon. He renamed the work *Sinfonia eroica, composta per festiggiare il souvenire di un grand 'Uomo* – 'Heroic Symphony, composed to celebrate the memory of a great man'.

Napoleon Symphony
The *Eroica* was never a literal musical portrait of Napoleon. But Beethoven had spoken of his determination to find a 'new path' for music – and in the Third Symphony he blasts that path wide open. After the *Eroica*, music would never again be a polite entertainment. Classical rules would come second to inspiration, music would express the ideals of the composer, and the orchestral symphony would reign supreme in western music for over a century. The *Eroica* does for music what Napoleon did to the old European order – and more. "It's a shame I don't understand the art of war as well as I do the art of music," Beethoven remarked a few years later. "I would conquer him!"

Revolution
Unsurprisingly, many have heard the symphony as a musical biography of Napoleon, or some classical hero – an idea that comes unstuck when, in the symphony, the hero's funeral march comes two movements *before* the triumphant conclusion! The best approach is to let the music tell its own story. Those two opening chords set the agenda immediately – yet within seconds, Beethoven's throwing 'wrong' notes into the mix. The movement climaxes with a series of huge, pounding dissonances, and moments later, as the orchestra waits breathlessly for the grand return of the opening theme, the second horn suddenly jumps in early. The *Eroica* is full of such 'mistakes'. In this new world of music, what was once 'wrong' is now gloriously right – and with such epic verve that it's impossible to resist.

War and peace
So why shouldn't the *Marcia funebre* come second? Beethoven is making his own rules now, taking the muffled drums and keening woodwinds of French Revolutionary march music and turning them into an expression of mourning on a universal scale – one that breaks, mid-flow, into the most heartfelt personal emotion. Does the *Scherzo* represent the ceremonial sports after the death of a classical hero, or the cheerfully bawdy song of an army marching home from victory? Or just the joyous, natural musical reaction to the intensity of the Funeral March? Take your pick. The central *Trio* section, scored for three horns (most classical symphonies only had two), is both surprising and stirring.

A new-created world
But there's a bigger surprise in store as, after a grand opening flourish, Beethoven launches his *finale* with – well, what? It's not even a theme at all, just a bare sequence of notes in the bottom of the orchestra. They're repeated, and the orchestra ventures the odd (very odd) comment, gradually building the music up from those bare bones until, at last, the theme itself glides gracefully in. It's a dance from Beethoven's 1801 ballet *Prometheus* – a story of an ancient hero leading humanity to enlightenment and freedom – and he didn't choose it just because it was a pretty tune. Is this symphony really just about one great soldier, or an idea as simple as Revolution? Decide for yourself, as Beethoven slows the music to a serene, expressive *Andante* (it's been described as a "vision of Elysium") before drums and trumpets sweep this 'Heroic Symphony' to a jubilant finish.

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