

Welcome



I am delighted you could join us this evening for a concert that contrasts the established with the new. We begin the evening with a magical work by Olivier Messiaen. As Katherine Wren mentions on p18, music by Messiaen isn't part of the "standard" repertoire but the sound world he creates is extremely intense. This might be because he could "see" colours in the music due to his synaesthesia (a neurological condition where people involuntarily perceive sounds as colours), or it might be because he seems able to infuse the music with spirituality in such an emotive way. In either case, *Les offrandes oubliées* is one of my favourite pieces and I'm sure you'll love it, too.

We then welcome back our good friend Nikolai Lugansky. His innate pianistic talent simply cannot be denied and tonight he performs one of Beethoven's best-loved works, the *Emperor* Concerto. Then, after the interval, we end the concert on a high with Rachmaninov's dramatic, profound and brilliant *Symphonic Dances*.

Music Director

Les offrandes oubliées

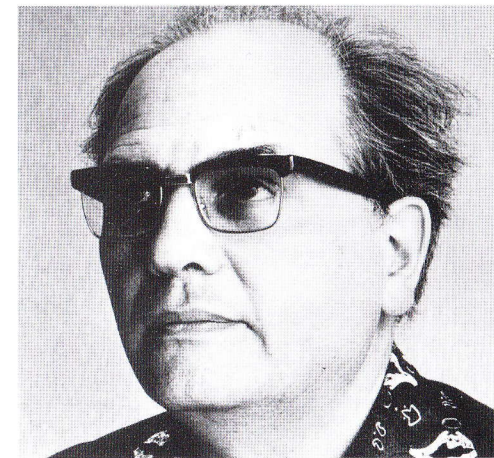
Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Religious mystic, expert ornithologist, synesthete – Olivier Messiaen was also one of the twentieth century's most influential musical figures. Composers including Xenakis, Stockhausen, Boulez and George Benjamin flocked to study with him, both during his decades-long tenure as professor of harmony at the Paris Conservatoire and elsewhere. And his rethinking of such fundamental concepts as rhythm, harmony and musical time had a profound impact well beyond his own works.

Spirituality in music

That might sound hard-going, and Messiaen's music certainly has its complexities, but it's seldom forbiddingly avant-garde. Instead, his profound spirituality – he was a devout Catholic, and organist at La Trinité church in Paris from 1931 until his death in 1992 – gives his often religious-themed works a sometimes naive directness and an often overwhelming power. And in bringing together the glittering colours that he experienced when hearing sounds, and the birdsong that he considered God's music, Messiaen's compositions joyfully celebrate the wonders of creation.

Les offrandes oubliées (The Forgotten Offerings) is Messiaen's earliest published orchestral work, written when the composer was just twenty-two, fresh from his studies at the Paris Conservatoire (which he had entered as something of a prodigy at the age of just eleven). But already, Messiaen set his sights on a profoundly religious subject – nothing less than mankind's descent into sin, and salvation through the suffering of Jesus Christ. Right from the start, Messiaen was keen to turn his back on what he considered the rather frivolous Parisian music of the previous decades – think Poulenc, Ibert, Milhaud, and others – in favour of a serious-



mindful, even mystical style. As with many of Messiaen's religious pieces, though, you don't have to be a believer to be moved by its power and beauty.

The music

The piece is in three parts, with two slow outer sections surrounding a tumultuous middle episode. The anguished opening, which Messiaen referred to as "The Cross", depicts Christ's agony at his crucifixion in a slow-moving yet restless string melody against heavily perfumed harmonies in the brass. This angular melody is taken up in basses and bassoons to lead to the central section, "Sin", which represents mankind's precipitous descent into the abyss in fiercely rhythmic music, with aggressive, dissonant chords and stuttering trumpet fanfares. In the final section, "The Eucharist", we glimpse the salvation offered by Christ in an ethereal violin melody that soars ever higher against ecstatic harmonies, coming to rest on a stratospheric chord of infinite sweetness.

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Piano Concerto No5 in E flat major Op73 *Emperor*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro

Adagio un poco mosso

Rondo: Allegro

"What a destructive, unruly life around me! Nothing but drums, cannons, human misery of every sort!" So wrote Beethoven from war-torn Vienna to his Leipzig publisher Gottfried Christoph Härtel in July 1809.

Turbulent Vienna

To say that life was tough for the composer at the time he wrote the *Emperor* Concerto would be an understatement. Napoleon's forces had invaded Vienna in May 1809, and at one stage the fighting grew so frighteningly close that Beethoven was forced to take shelter in the basement of a poet friend's home – where he covered his head with pillows in the hope of protecting what precious hearing he had left. And with the city's finances heavily affected by the conflict, the annual payment that he'd been promised by several of the city's noblemen was severely reduced.

It's a wonder that Beethoven was able to write music at all, let alone produce his longest, grandest and most ambitious concerto, whose nobility and virtuosity encapsulates the heroic style of his middle period. It was also the first of his piano concertos that Beethoven didn't premiere himself – the honour went to Friedrich Schneider, with Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra in November 1811, to great acclaim. By that time, Beethoven's deafness had progressed to such an extent that for him to perform as a soloist was out of the question.

Musical nickname

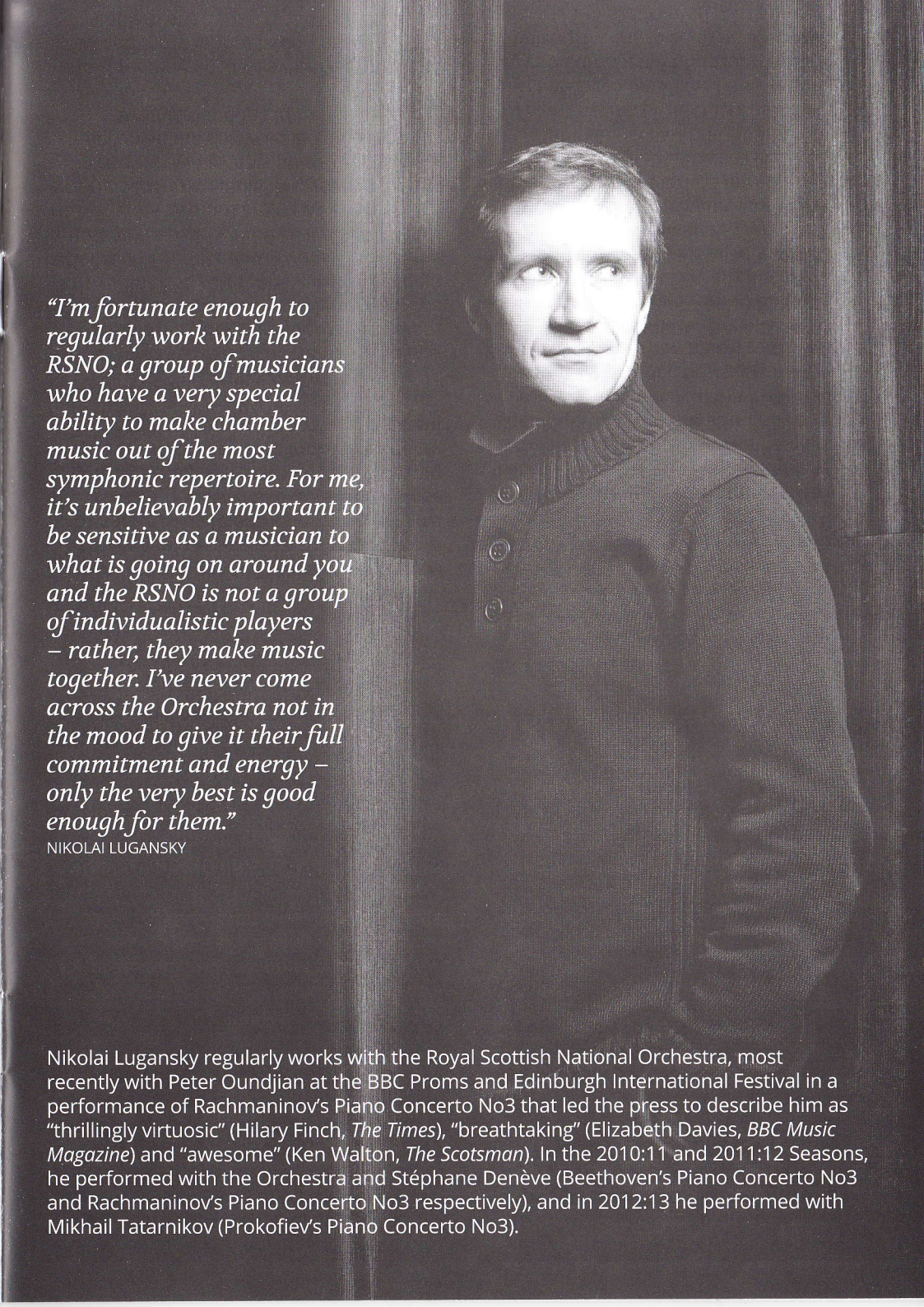
Nor does the work's "Emperor" nickname have anything to do with Beethoven. In fact, it's highly unlikely he would have approved: he would have seen the word as an unavoidable reference to the invader Napoleon, who had plummeted from the composer's esteem. Where it came from is unclear: some say it was coined by the work's English publisher, John Cramer, to sell more copies. In any case, the word perfectly encapsulates the piece's grand vision, which looks forward to the virtuosic pianism of later figures such as Liszt.

The Concerto's opening

The broad chords of the expansive first movement's opening would have been strikingly original in Beethoven's time, as would the cascading scales and trills with which the piano answers them. The soloist then falls silent as the orchestra reveals the movement's two main themes – the first on violins, the second taken up nobly on horns – before returning with its own visions of the same melodies, which are developed throughout the rest of the movement.

The calm, reflective slow movement is one of Beethoven's most tender creations, with the piano floating filigree song melodies over a serene string chorale. It leads directly into the boisterous final movement, the soloist hesitantly trying out its dance-like main theme before suddenly bursting forth with it loudly and confidently.

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"I'm fortunate enough to regularly work with the RSNO; a group of musicians who have a very special ability to make chamber music out of the most symphonic repertoire. For me, it's unbelievably important to be sensitive as a musician to what is going on around you and the RSNO is not a group of individualistic players – rather, they make music together. I've never come across the Orchestra not in the mood to give it their full commitment and energy – only the very best is good enough for them."

NIKOLAI LUGANSKY

Nikolai Lugansky regularly works with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, most recently with Peter Oundjian at the BBC Proms and Edinburgh International Festival in a performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No3 that led the press to describe him as "thrillingly virtuosic" (Hilary Finch, *The Times*), "breathtaking" (Elizabeth Davies, *BBC Music Magazine*) and "awesome" (Ken Walton, *The Scotsman*). In the 2010:11 and 2011:12 Seasons, he performed with the Orchestra and Stéphane Denève (Beethoven's Piano Concerto No3 and Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No3 respectively), and in 2012:13 he performed with Mikhail Tatarnikov (Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No3).

Symphonic Dances Op45

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Non allegro
Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)
Lento assai – Allegro vivace

When Sergei Rachmaninov fled Russia after the 1917 Revolution, aged forty-four, he left behind his estate, his considerable fortune, and most importantly his way of life. As he boarded a sled to Helsinki with his wife and two daughters, taking with him just a few notebooks of sketches and a couple of scores, he was facing an uncertain future, and abandoning his highly successful musical career in Russia. His symphonies, chamber music, piano pieces and three piano concertos, including the poignant second, of *Brief Encounter* fame, had established his reputation as one of the last of the great Russian Romantic composers, and he was also highly respected as a conductor and as one of the finest pianists of his time.

An unsettled existence

Rachmaninov lived an unsettled existence between Switzerland and the United States during the 1920s, finally moving to the US permanently in 1936, where he had to rely on exhausting concert tours to support his family. He was well aware of his predicament, writing: "Perhaps the incessant practice and eternal rush inseparable from life as a concert artist takes too much toll on my strength; perhaps I feel that the kind of music I care to write is not acceptable today. And perhaps my true reason for adopting the life of an interpreter rather than that of a creator is none of these. For when I left Russia, I left behind the desire to compose: losing my country I lost myself also. To the exile whose musical roots, traditions and background have been annihilated, there remains no desire for self-expression."



A new symphonic piece

However, Rachmaninov's passion for composing didn't disappear for long. In late 1940, he shocked his friend, conductor Eugene Ormandy, with a letter: "Last week I finished a new symphonic piece, which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra. It is called "Fantastic Dances". I am beginning the orchestration." Recovering from a minor operation in a Long Island estate, Rachmaninov had completed his last composition, and the only piece that he wrote entirely in the

USA. He finished the orchestration just in time for the work's premiere on 3 January 1941, by Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. By then Rachmaninov had changed the title to "Symphonic Dances" and dropped the individual movement titles, "Noon", "Twilight" and "Midnight", that he had originally intended. He later admitted to a newspaper reporter: "It should have been called just "Dances", but I was afraid people would think I had written dance music for jazz orchestra."

Dance music, though, the piece definitely is, as its strong focus on rhythm makes abundantly clear throughout. This idea – unusual for Rachmaninov – had perhaps come about following choreographer Michel Fokine's successful translation of the composer's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* into a ballet in 1939. The two men even discussed the possibility of turning the *Symphonic Dances* into a ballet: Fokine was enthusiastic, but died suddenly in 1942 before the project could be developed.

Nevertheless, with its three substantial movements, the piece is also a symphony in all but name – or perhaps, with its strong focus on individual instrumental colours (from a crooning saxophone to a clattering xylophone), more of a concerto for orchestra. And in it, Rachmaninov seems to finally lay to rest his yearning for the homeland he left behind, indulging in a nostalgia for the beloved Russia that he had known as a young man with folk-influenced melodies and snatches of Russian chant. Furthermore, he uses the *Symphonic Dances* to sum up his own achievements as a composer, quoting from several of his pieces in a moving farewell to composition. Rachmaninov died two years after the work's premiere, and had worked on no further pieces.

The first movement

Violins establish the first movement's chugging martial rhythms right from the start, and the woodwind gradually build

up a descending three-note melody that grows into the movement's unmistakable main theme. The music slows for a calmer, quieter section dominated by woodwind, whose melodies intertwine with a saxophone theme that has the distinctive flavour of Russian folk song. A sudden intervention from the bass clarinet brings back the fast-paced opening material, and near the end, the strings sing a Russian chant-like melody over glittering accompaniment from piano, harp and glockenspiel. This is a theme from Rachmaninov's First Symphony, and his reference to this beloved work of his youth was originally intended to be secret – Rachmaninov was sure that the score of the symphony had been destroyed following its disastrous premiere. But when a set of parts was unearthed in Leningrad shortly after the composer's death, his secret was revealed.

The second movement is a fantastical waltz that evokes an uneasy atmosphere with its strange, dream-like harmonies. The ominous brass fanfares that begin the movement return throughout the piece to break its flow, until it finally disappears in a puff of smoke.

The finale

The dramatic third movement seems to describe nothing less than mankind's struggle for life, in a battle between the "Dies irae" plainsong from the Latin Requiem mass, representing death, and a Russian Orthodox melody from Rachmaninov's own *Vespers*, which represents resurrection. Its propulsive dance rhythms build inexorably to a resolutely triumphant climax.

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