

Elim Chan: Bartók, a New Oboe Concerto and Rachmaninoff's Symphonic Dances

Sunday, February 8, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Elim Chan, conductor · Olivier Stankiewicz, oboe

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BARTÓK 1881–1945 <i>Dance Suite, BB 86</i>	17'
2	MATTHEWS b. 1946 <i>Oboe Concerto (world premiere, LSO commission)</i>	20'
3	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Symphonic Dances, Op. 45</i>	36'
TOTAL MUSIC		73'

Béla Bartók

1881–1945

Dance Suite, BB 86

17 minutes

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the way the six movements flow into one another as a continuous span, and for the gentle, lyrical ritornello, a relaxed, slightly nostalgic ‘Hungarian’ tune that keeps returning between the dances like a familiar face in a crowd. It is the thread that binds the whole suite together and brings it home at the end.

Within that frame, savour the contrast of the dances themselves: the heavy, lurching, almost primitive stamp of the opening; the swirling, exotic woodwind writing with its sinuous, ‘Arab’-flavoured arabesques and snapping percussion; quicker, scurrying folk-dance episodes; and a broad, warm slow section before the finale. Listen for Bartók’s brilliant orchestral colour (earthy low brass and bassoons, chattering clarinets, glinting percussion) and for the relentless rhythmic energy that drives

the music. The suite gathers all its ideas into a jubilant final movement that recalls earlier themes and ends in a blaze: a concise, exhilarating tour of Bartók's folk-inspired imagination.

Colin Matthews

20 minutes

b. 1946

Oboe Concerto (world premiere, LSO commission)

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Approach this one with open, curious ears: you are among the first people ever to hear it. Without recordings to anticipate, simply follow the soloist: listen for how Matthews uses the oboe's distinctive voice, by turns singing and plangent, nimble and brilliant, and for the conversation between the solo line and the orchestra around it.

Listen for the things a composer can do with a concerto: passages where the oboe sings long, expressive melodies above the orchestra; quicker, more virtuosic writing that shows off the soloist's agility; moments where the solo instrument is set against, echoed by or absorbed into the orchestral woodwind; and the overall shape of the piece: how it builds, contrasts and resolves across its span of around twenty minutes. Above all, listen to Olivier Stankiewicz, the player for whom every note was written, and to the sense of occasion in hearing a new work step into the world for the first time.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

36 minutes

1873–1943

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first dance (Non allegro) drives forward on a terse, march-like rhythm, but at its heart is one of Rachmaninoff's most beautiful inspirations: a long, yearning melody given to a solo alto saxophone over gentle woodwinds; listen for that unmistakable, melancholy voice. Then, in the hushed coda, listen for the serene string melody that glows briefly before the end: that is the self-quotation from his First Symphony, his secret backward glance.

The second dance is a waltz, but an uneasy, shadowy one: an elegant, swaying triple-time dance repeatedly disturbed by ominous brass fanfares and a sense of menace beneath the glamour, like a ball haunted by ghosts. The finale is the dramatic core: listen for the grim, chant-like Dies irae motif stalking through the music, set against the surging, life-affirming theme drawn from his All-Night Vigil. The two ideas battle across the movement until the 'resurrection' theme breaks through in blazing triumph, driving to a tremendous, bell-clanging close, the final affirmation of a composer signing off his life's work with thanks. Listen, too, throughout, for the dazzling orchestration: the biting rhythms, the glittering percussion, the rich strings and the inventive, surprising instrumental colours of Rachmaninoff's last and in some ways most modern masterpiece.



CONCERT PROGRAMS

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