

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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

ABOUT THE WORK

Bartók's Dance Suite is one of his most accessible and joyful orchestral works, a six-movement celebration of folk music written for a grand civic occasion. In 1923 the Hungarian capital marked the fiftieth anniversary of the union of the three towns of Buda, Pest and Óbuda into a single city, Budapest, and the municipal authorities commissioned festive works from the country's three leading composers: Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi, Zoltán Kodály and Bartók. The result was a memorable gala concert on 19 November 1923, at which Dohnányi conducted his Festival Overture, Kodály unveiled his great Psalmus Hungaricus, and Bartók contributed this Dance Suite. Of the three it was Bartók's piece that travelled fastest and furthest, quickly establishing itself across Europe and becoming one of his most-performed scores.

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

b. 1946

Oboe Concerto (world premiere, LSO commission)

20 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

This concert gives the world premiere of a brand-new Oboe Concerto by Colin Matthews, written specially for the London Symphony Orchestra's own Principal Oboe, Olivier Stankiewicz, and commissioned by the orchestra. As a first performance it comes without the cushion of familiarity that surrounds the Bartók and Rachmaninoff on either side of it: there are no famous recordings to recall, no received wisdom about how it 'should' sound. That is part of the occasion: an audience hearing a major new work for the first time, brought to life by the very player for whom it was conceived.

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

1873–1943

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

36 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

The Symphonic Dances are Rachmaninoff's last completed work, a glorious valediction from the great Russian Romantic, written in 1940 when he was sixty-seven and living in exile in the United States. It is the only major piece he composed entirely in America, sketched on Long Island, at an estate in Centerport where he spent the summer, and dedicated to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, who gave the premiere in January 1941. Though cast as a set of three

‘dances,’ it is in effect a late symphony: large in scale, symphonic in argument, and shot through with the autumnal melancholy, the long-breathed melody and the obsession with death and remembrance that mark Rachmaninoff’s final years.

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 af-

firmation 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.

Tonight's artists

Olivier Stankiewicz *oboe*

Colin Matthews's Oboe Concerto was written for Olivier Stankiewicz, the LSO's own Principal Oboe, and he gives its world premiere here: a piece conceived from the first note for his sound and his artistry. Celebrated for the beauty and refinement of his tone and for a technique honed in international competition, Stankiewicz is not merely the soloist but the work's originating voice, stepping out from the section he leads to introduce a new concerto written for him.

Olivier Stankiewicz has been Principal Oboe of the London Symphony Orchestra since 2015 and is a professor at the Royal College of Music. He won First Prize at the International Oboe Competition in Japan and was selected by the Young Classical Artists Trust in 2016. He has appeared as a soloist with orchestras including the Orchestre de Lille and the Tokyo Sinfonietta, and has commissioned and premiered works by Benjamin Attahir, Tonia Ko and Laurent Durupt. Admired for the refinement and beauty of his tone and for his technical command, he is active as a soloist, chamber musician and recording artist as well as orchestral principal, and the natural dedicatee of Colin Matthews's new concerto, written expressly for him.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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Version 3, 30 September 2026