

Classics by Rachmaninoff: Paganini Rhapsody and Symphonic Dances

Wednesday, January 20, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Maxim Emelyanychev, conductor · Alexander Melnikov, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	LANGER b. 1974 <i>Suite from 'Figaro Gets a Divorce'</i>	18'
2	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43</i>	23'
3	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Symphonic Dances, Op. 45</i>	36'
TOTAL MUSIC		77'

Elena Langer

b. 1974

Suite from 'Figaro Gets a Divorce'

THE COMPOSER

Elena Langer was born in Moscow in 1974. She studied at the Gnessin college and then composition at the Moscow Conservatory before moving to London in 1999, where she continued her studies at the Royal College of Music with Julian Anderson and at the Royal Academy of Music, working with Simon Bainbridge. Opera and music theatre have been at the centre of her work from early on. In 2002 she became the first Jerwood Composer in Association at the Almeida Theatre in London, for which she wrote the short operas *Ariadne* and *The Girl of Sand* to texts by the poet Glyn Maxwell, and the two later collaborated on *The Lion's Face*. *Four Sisters*, a one-act comedy, was written for Bard College in New York in 2012. For Welsh National Opera she composed *Figaro Gets a Divorce* (2016), to a libretto by David Pountney, and the suffragette comedy *Rhondda Rips It Up!*. Her music has also been heard at the Royal Opera House, Zurich Opera and Carnegie Hall.

ABOUT THE WORK

What happened to Figaro and Susanna after the wedding? Beaumarchais himself wrote a third Figaro play, *The Guilty Mother*, to follow *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, and in 1936 the playwright Ödön von Horváth took the same characters into exile in

18 minutes

his Figaro Gets a Divorce, with a revolution behind them and an uncertain border ahead. In 2016 Welsh National Opera had the idea of completing the story on the opera stage. It commissioned a new work to be performed alongside Rossini's Barber and Mozart's Figaro as a trilogy, with a libretto by the company's artistic director David Pountney drawing on both the Beaumarchais and the Horváth plays, and music by Elena Langer. Figaro Gets a Divorce opened in Cardiff on 21 February 2016.

In Pountney's version the household of the Count and Countess has fled a revolution and washed up in a provincial town in what feels like the Europe of the mid twentieth century. Figaro and Susanna leave the Count's service to run a hair salon, and quarrel because she wants a child and he does not. Cherubino, the lovesick boy of Mozart's opera, has become 'the Cherub', proprietor of a seedy nightclub. A sinister Major, a double agent, has designs on the Count's ward Angelika, who loves the Countess's son Serafin. Langer has described the piece as a mixture of Beaumarchais and dark comedy, set in a turbulent twentieth-century Europe.

The orchestral suite draws six movements from the opera and lasts about eighteen minutes. According to the Boston Symphony Orchestra's programme note it was commissioned by the Seattle Symphony, which gave the first performance in January 2020, conducted by Maxim Emelyanychev. He therefore returns tonight to a score he introduced. The scoring is for a medium-sized orchestra with a large and colourful percussion section, piano and celesta, and an accordion, which lends the music the flavour of a Central European café or cabaret. The style refers to many kinds of music without settling into pastiche: lyrical passages sit next to sharp dissonance and nervous rhythm.

It is a fitting companion for the Rachmaninoff works that follow. Both composers left Russia and made their careers abroad, and the Symphonic Dances, like Langer's opera, look back on a vanished world from a distance.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The six movements are short and sharply contrasted, and their titles tell the story.

The **Opening** is the most abstract of them, a picture of a world that has lost its footing. The **Love Song** belongs to the young couple Angelika and Serafin; its lyricism is repeatedly interrupted, a sign of the dangers around them. **The Escape** is frantic music for refugees on the run.

The Major carries the marking ‘jazzy, sleazy’, and is the place to listen for the accordion, along with solos for violin and piano that paint a thoroughly untrustworthy character. **Susanna and Cherubino**, which Langer subtitles ‘less of a love song’, comes from the scene in the Cherub’s nightclub.

The finale, **A Mad Day**, takes its name from the subtitle of Beaumarchais’s *Marriage of Figaro*. It runs on a syncopated repeating figure taken from the nightclub act, and sums up the opera in a few minutes of driving rhythm.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873–1943

23 minutes

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism, a composer of sweeping, melancholy lyricism and a piano virtuoso of legendary gifts. His early career was nearly derailed by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, which plunged him into a years-long depression; he recovered, with the help of therapy, to write the hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and went on to create the works for which he is loved: the piano concertos, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, the symphonies, the songs and the great piano pieces. After the Russian Revolution he left his homeland forever, settling eventually in the United States and supporting himself largely as a touring concert pianist, composing far less but with undiminished mastery. His music’s combination of long-breathed melody, rich harmony and deep, nostalgic emotion has made it among the most beloved of all.

ABOUT THE WORK

Rachmaninoff wrote little in his years as a Russian émigré, when he earned his living chiefly as a touring pianist, and the Rhapsody is the most brilliant of the few works he did complete. He composed it at the Villa Senar, his summer home in Switzerland, and dated the score from 3 July to 18 August 1934. He gave the first performance himself in Baltimore on 7 November that year, with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski, and the same forces recorded it a few weeks later.

The theme is the last of Paganini's 24 Caprices for solo violin, a tune that Paganini had already varied himself and that Liszt and Brahms, among others, had used before Rachmaninoff. In spite of the title the piece is not a loose fantasy. It is a set of 24 variations, tightly organised, and in practice a piano concerto in one movement. The variations fall into three groups that correspond to the usual movements: a fast opening group in A minor, a slower and more wandering middle section that reaches its goal in the famous eighteenth variation, and a finale that returns to the home key and gathers speed to the end.

Rachmaninoff adds a second theme of his own choosing, the *Dies irae*, the medieval chant for the dead that appears in several of his works. It enters in the seventh variation and returns later. Writers have connected it with the old legend that Paganini owed his powers to a pact with the devil.

The eighteenth variation, the best-known passage in the work and one of the best-known melodies Rachmaninoff ever wrote, is made by a simple trick: he turns Paganini's theme upside down, slows it and moves it into the warm key of D-flat major. He seems to have been well aware of its appeal, and is said to have remarked that this one was for his agent.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece begins with a joke of construction. After a few bars of introduction the orchestra plays the first variation, a bare skeleton of the harmony, before anyone has heard the theme. Only then do the violins state Paganini's tune, with the piano picking out single notes.

The early variations are quick, dry and witty, all in strict time. With **Variation 7** the tempo broadens and the piano solemnly intones the *Dies irae* in chords, while bassoon and cellos mutter fragments of Paganini beneath it. A little later the chant returns as a grotesque march, like slow funeral bells.

Variation 11, a reflective cadenza for the piano over a mysterious accompaniment, opens the middle section. From here the music leaves A minor and travels through several keys, by way of a minuet (Variation 12) and darker, more searching pages, until the piano alone begins **Variation 18**. Listen to the melody rise instead of fall, then to the strings taking it over in full voice.

The last six variations return to A minor and build one long crescendo of speed and difficulty. In the final variation the brass blare out the Dies irae at full strength. The ending is a surprise: after all the thunder, the piano signs off quietly with a last scrap of Paganini's theme.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873–1943

36 minutes

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism, a composer of sweeping, melancholy lyricism and a piano virtuoso of legendary gifts. His early career was nearly derailed by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, which plunged him into a years-long depression; he recovered, with the help of therapy, to write the hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and went on to create the works for which he is loved: the piano concertos, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, the symphonies, the songs and the great piano pieces. After the Russian Revolution he left his homeland forever, settling eventually in the United States and supporting himself largely as a touring concert pianist, composing far less but with undiminished mastery. His music's combination of long-breathed melody, rich harmony and deep, nostalgic emotion has made it among the most beloved of all.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Symphonic Dances are Rachmaninoff's last composition, and the only one he wrote from start to finish in the United States. He composed them in the summer of 1940 at Orchard Point, an estate at Centerport on Long Island Sound, four years after his Third Symphony, and finished the orchestration that October while already on tour as a pianist. The score is dedicated to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, who gave the first performance on 3 January 1941. Reviews were mixed (one critic called the work a rehash of old tricks), and it took some decades to win its present place among his finest music.

Rachmaninoff first thought of calling the piece Fantastic Dances and of naming its three movements after times of day, an image that easily reads as youth, maturity and death. He dropped the titles, but the music keeps the sense of a life looked back upon. It is full of memories, some of them private. Near the end of the first dance he quotes the main theme of his First Symphony, whose disastrous premiere in 1897 had silenced him as a composer for several years. Almost nobody in 1941 could have recognised it, since the symphony was

then unpublished and believed lost. In the Symphonic Dances the theme, once stern and in the minor, comes back transformed into a calm melody in the major.

The finale brings together two kinds of chant that had preoccupied him all his life. One is the Dies irae from the Latin Mass for the dead, which he used in work after work. The other comes from the Russian Orthodox tradition: a melody from his own All-Night Vigil of 1915, from the movement that tells of the Resurrection. The two contend through the movement, and at the point where the Orthodox chant gains the upper hand Rachmaninoff wrote the word 'Alliluya' in the score. At the end of the manuscript, by one account, he added the words 'I thank thee, Lord'.

He died a little over two years later, in March 1943, without writing another work.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Non allegro. After a few quiet bars that hint at the rhythm to come, the orchestra launches a stamping, march-like dance built on a three-note figure. The middle section could not be more different. The woodwinds are left alone, and over a gently rocking accompaniment an alto saxophone sings a long, home-sick melody. The march returns, and in the coda, as the key turns from C minor to C major, listen for the broad, consoling string melody: the theme of the First Symphony, laid to rest.

II. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse). A waltz, but an uneasy one. Its chromatic melody, which the violins play in parallel thirds, is melancholy where a Viennese waltz would be care-free, and the sweetness has a sour edge, as if a ballroom were being remembered long after the dancers had gone.

III. Lento assai, Allegro vivace. The finale is a battle of chants, driven by sharp syncopations. Fragments of the Dies irae flicker through the fast music. A slow central section mourns, and then the dance returns with the Orthodox melody gaining strength. In the last pages it takes over completely, and the work ends in a blaze of rhythm with the full percussion.

Tonight's artists

Alexander Melnikov *piano*

Alexander Melnikov is known for thinking hard about the sound and style of whatever he plays, on old pianos and new, and for treating concertos as chamber music on a larger scale. The Paganini Rhapsody rewards that approach. For all its brilliance it is a tightly argued set of variations in which the piano spends as much time in dialogue with single instruments as in front of the full orchestra. He has worked with Maxim Emelyanychev before, and the two share a background in period performance as well as in the Russian repertoire.

Alexander Melnikov, born in 1973, is a Russian pianist who graduated from the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied with Lev Naumov. An early meeting with Sviatoslav Richter was among his formative experiences, and Richter went on to invite him regularly to his festivals in Russia and France. He was a prizewinner at the Robert Schumann Competition in Zwickau in 1989 and at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels in 1991. Alongside the modern piano he has a long-standing interest in historical instruments and performance practice, shaped by his work with Andreas Staier and Alexei Lubimov, and he appears regularly with period-instrument orchestras. He is a devoted chamber musician, above all with the violinist Isabelle Faust and the cellist Jean-Guihen Queyras. His recording of the complete Beethoven violin sonatas with Faust won a Gramophone Award, and his set of Shostakovich's Preludes and Fugues received the BBC Music Magazine Award in 2011. He records mainly for Harmonia Mundi.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Rachmaninoff**

Geoffrey Norris, Oxford University Press 2000

A compact life-and-works volume that gives clear accounts of both the Paganini Rhapsody and the Symphonic Dances within the story of Rachmaninoff's years of exile.

ACCESSIBLE **Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings**

Max Harrison, Continuum 2006

Harrison follows the composer, the pianist and the recording artist side by side, which suits a programme of two late works that Rachmaninoff himself introduced in America.

DEEPER **Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor**

Barrie Martyn, Routledge 2016

The most detailed study in English of Rachmaninoff's three careers, with work-by-work analysis of the late scores heard here.

SOURCES

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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-01-20-emelyanychev>

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