

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'

18 minutes

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 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.

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

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

23 minutes

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 com-

plete. 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.

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

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

36 minutes

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.

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, homesick 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 carefree, 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 Emelyanichev 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.

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