Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra May 26 and 28 programme complementary content

Powerful and romantic music fills this concert programme as we head towards the final chords of the 2021/22 season.

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and its Chief Conductor Domingo Hindoyan are joined by the great Armenian-American virtuoso Sergei Babayan for two unmissable performances.

In addition, this companion page draws together a range of complementary content that we hope will help shine further light on the pieces, the people who composed them and the performers bringing them to life here in Hope Street.

Domingo Hindoyan

Domingo Hindoyan was born in Caracas in 1980 to a violinist father and a lawyer mother. He started his musical career as a violinist in the ground-breaking Venezuelan music education programme, El Sistema.

He studied conducting at **Haute école de musique in Geneva**, where he gained his masters, and in 2012 was invited to join the Allianz International Conductor's Academy, through which he worked with the London Philharmonic and the Philharmonia Orchestra and with conductors like Esa-Pekka Salonen and Sir Andrew Davis.

He was appointed first assistant conductor to **Daniel Barenboim** at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin in 2013 and in 2019, he took up a position as principal guest conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra.

In the same year, he made his debut with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and was appointed as successor to Vasily Petrenko in 2020, taking up this position last September.

Sergei Babayan

Multi award-winning pianist **Sergei Babayan** was born into a musical family in Armenia in 1961 and started playing the piano at the age of six. He studied with Georgy Saradjev and later at the Moscow Conservatory.

Babayan, who first discovered Rachmaninov when his father brought him a recording of *Piano Concerto No 2*, moved to America in 1989.

He subsequently won first prize in the 1989 Robert Casadesus International Piano Competition (now the Cleveland International Piano Competition), going on to win the Palm Beach International Piano Competition, as well as the Hamamatsu and Scottish international competitions.

As a soloist, he has performed with many of the world's leading orchestras and at major venues and festivals, and his concert repertoire includes more than 50 concertos.

His future commitments include concerts with the Philharmonie de Paris at Palais Montcalm in Quebec and an appearance at this summer's **Gstaad Menuhin Festival** with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Vasily Petrenko.

The 61-year-old is a member of the piano faculty at the Juilliard School and at the **Cleveland Institute of Music** , where he has worked since 1992 and is an artist in residence.

Felix Mendelssohn

When, in 1839, **Felix Mendelssohn** was asked to write an overture and a song for a production of Victor Hugo's torrid **Ruy Blas**, he declared the play 'detestable'.

However, the cultured 30-year-old was persuaded – at first to write a song and later to complete the overture, which he reportedly did at breakneck speed for a performance in Leipzig .

Mendelssohn had accepted the role of director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835 after its conductor, Christian August Pohlenz, was dismissed. He dedicated what would be the last 12 years of his life to raising the standard of orchestral playing, as well as making the town the musical capital of Germany.

In 1836, he premiered his oratorio Paulus (St Paul) there, while in 1843 he founded **Leipzig's Conservatorium of Music**– the first of its kind in Germany - where he taught composition alongside Robert Schumann.

Sergei Rachmaninov

These days, when we think about **Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninov**, it's primarily for his luscious and expressive Romantic melodies.

But during his lifetime, the Russian composer and conductor was just as well known for his virtuoso playing, which made him one of the finest and most important pianists of his generation.

Born into a musical family near Semyonovo in 1873, Rachmaninov started learning piano at the age of four and at 10 he entered the St Petersburg Conservatory.

Later he transferred to the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied piano with Nikolay Zverev and composition with **Anton Arensky**. He was friends with fellow student Alexander Scriabin and at 15, won a Rubinstein scholarship.

His fame and popularity as both a composer and concert pianist would be cemented by a pair of pieces: *Prelude in C sharp minor* in 1892, and – in 1901, four years after the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony – his masterpiece, the ***Piano Concerto No 2 in C minor***.

Rachmaninov himself premiered the concerto at a concert in Moscow with his cousin – and former tutor – **Alexander Siloti** conducting.

Did you know? Rachmaninov made his first appearance with the Liverpool Philharmonic Society on October 24, 1911, when he played his *Piano Concerto*

***No 3,* as well as conducting the Orchestra in a programme which included his *Symphony in E minor*.**

Johannes Brahms

One of classical music's 'three Bs' alongside Bach and Beethoven (according to conductor Hans von Bülow at least), **Johannes Brahms** was one of the key figures of the mid-Romantic period.

The young German composer certainly felt the weight of expectation on his shoulders, as well as the constant presence of the greats who had gone before him.

Thus, while being openly lauded as the natural successor to Beethoven, Brahms famously declared in a letter to **conductor Herman Levi**: "I'll never write a symphony! You can't have any idea what it's like always to hear such a giant marching behind you."

It's perhaps no surprise then that it took him almost 14 years to **complete his First Symphony**, which then had to wait a further eight years until it was finally premiered in Karlsruhe in 1876.

What is a surprise, given his outburst, is that rather than spurning the spectre of Beethoven, Brahms seemingly decided to musically embrace it instead.

About the Music

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47): Overture, *Ruy Blas*

Composed: 1839

First Performed: Leipzig Theatre, 11 March 1839, cond. Mendelssohn

Victor Hugo's play, *Ruy Blas,* is vintage Romantic blood-and-thunder stuff, with a body count to rival Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When the Leipzig Theatre asked Mendelssohn to write an overture for their new production, he refused, declaring Hugo's play to be 'detestable'. But his pride was stung when it was suggested that in any case there wasn't enough time. Mendelssohn got to work, finishing the Overture in three days.

The Overture begins with slow, sombre wind chords which clearly stand for Fate, and we can feel its icy touch whenever those chords return. But the tempo of the Overture is mostly very fast, its character mostly nervous, agitated or even furious – until the end that is. Hugo's play may conclude in grim tragedy, but the mood turns triumphant at the end – well, for Mendelssohn at least, composing the Overture to a play he hated in just three days *was* a triumph!

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943): Piano Concerto No 2 in C minor, Op. 18

Composed: 1900-1901
First Performed: Moscow Philharmonic Society, 9 November 1901, soloist, Rachmaninov, cond. Alexander Siloti

In 1897, the 24-year-old Sergei Rachmaninov suffered one of the worst humiliations ever endured by a composer of genius, when his First Symphony was premiered in St Petersburg. The performance was atrocious, and the critics were savage. Rachmaninov now found himself completely unable to compose, and he sunk into increasingly alcoholic depression. Eventually, in 1900, a friend recommended a hypno-therapist named Nikolai Dahl. It was an inspired choice: before long Rachmaninov was working on his Second Piano Concerto, which he dedicated to Dr Dahl in gratitude. This time the premiere was a triumph, with some of the very critics who had damned the First Symphony hailing the Concerto as a masterpiece.

One would never guess that the Second Concerto was the product of an extreme crisis of confidence. From its rock-like beginning to its brilliant, roof-raising ending, it exudes majestic control. The piano writing is superb – dazzlingly virtuosic but never just showy, it's always intensely expressive, whether in the surging, swirling textures of the first big tune or the delicate, nocturnal intimacy of the gorgeous slow movement melody. Certainly, there are dark passions in this music, but Rachmaninov transforms them into something deliciously enjoyable, and the end is a blaze of light.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Symphony No 1 in C minor, op 68

Composed: 1855(?)-1876

First Performed: Karlsruhe, Germany, 4 November 1876, cond. Felix Dessoff

'I shall never write a symphony', grumbled Johannes Brahms in 1870, gesturing to the bust of Beethoven scowling in the corner of his studio. 'You've no idea what it feels like with such a giant marching behind you.' Truth was, he'd actually been working on a symphony for around fifteen years, but despite encouragement from friends – especially his close confidante, composer and pianist Clara Schumann – self-doubt held him back. Fortunately, those friends persisted, and eventually, in 1876 Brahms did at last finish his *Symphony No 1*. It was heard for the first time later that year, and it was a sensational success. Critics were soon referring to it as 'Beethoven's Tenth' – a huge compliment, but one that must have given Brahms mixed feelings.

The ghost of Beethoven does stalk the stormy, often anguished, first movement, but there's nothing derivative here – it's all authentic Brahms. Then, in contrast to Beethoven's two great minor-key symphonies, the middle two movements bring heart-easing lyricism and mostly relaxed, engagingly tuneful dance music – we're a long way here from the dance energy of Beethoven's Titanic scherzos. The finale plunges us back into darkness and uncertainty, but then a noble horn theme sounds through shimmering strings like a ray of sunlight through storm clouds, apparently composed as a tribute to Clara Schumann. Then comes a confident, striding tune – echoes here of the famous 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's

Ninth Symphony, but again it's Brahms who's speaking here. More struggles follow, but this time hope prevails, and the symphony ends with a dance of triumph.