

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

July 7 and 10 programme complementary content

The annual White Nights concert – Vasily Petrenko’s tribute to his Russian homeland – has always been one of the highlights of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra’s summer season.

This year, the maestro leads the programme in his new role as Conductor Laureate. One thing that hasn’t changed, however, is that White Nights is also a birthday celebration for Vasily, this year his big day coinciding with the Thursday night performance.

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.

Vasily Petrenko

Vasily Petrenko needs little introduction to Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra audiences.

Petrenko returns to the Hope Street stage in his new role as Conductor Laureate for what has become an annual concert programme celebrating the music of his homeland.

Petrenko left Liverpool last summer after 15 years at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and is currently music director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and chief conductor of the **European Union Youth Orchestra**.

Forthcoming appearances include concerts in Australia, Colorado and at the Proms, where he will conduct a programme of **Copland, Walker and Prokofiev**.

Simone Lamsma

Dutch violin virtuoso Simone Lamsma last appeared with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in November 2021 when she performed Korngold’s richly textured and lyrically luxurious Violin Concerto.

Lamsma, who has a repertoire of around 60 concertos, first picked up a violin at the age of five and at 11 she moved to Britain to study at the Yehudi Menuhin School and later at the Royal Academy of Music from where she graduated with first class honours and a clutch of awards.

She plays the 1718 ‘Mlynarski’ Stradivarius crafted during what is known as the ‘golden period’ of Antonio Stradivari’s career.

Anatoly Liadov

Born into a family of musicians and actors in St Petersburg in 1855, **Anatoly Liadov** studied composition under Rimsky-Korsakov at the city’s conservatory. He was a less than ideal student, however, and was asked to leave after failing to turn up to classes.

Still, within a couple of years he would find himself employed at the same conservatory – initially as a tutor of elementary theory and later of counterpoint – where his pupils included Sergei Prokofiev.

Mussorgsky described Liadov as an original and a Russian young talent, while his *Canons* was the first textbook Stravinsky read before he received any formal music theory training.

His tone poem *Baba-Yaga* dates from 1904.

In Slavic folklore, the supernatural Baba-Yaga was an iron-toothed ogress who guarded the fountains of the waters of life and kidnapped, cooked and ate her young victims. The popular story had previously also inspired Mussorgsky.

Dmitri Shostakovich

In 1948, **Dmitri Shostakovich** was denounced for the crime of 'formalism' under the so-called **Zhdanov Doctrine**.

The composer had been briefly attacked a decade earlier after Stalin attended a performance of his *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, but had worked his way back into favour with a series of symphonies, starting with his Fifth.

That changed again with the development of the doctrine, which also denounced Prokofiev and Khachaturian, accusing the composers of writing **inappropriate or 'non-Russian' music**.

Most of the trio's works were banned and Shostakovich was dismissed from the Moscow Conservatory, while his family had their privileges withdrawn. The threat of arrest hung over his head.

One of the pieces he had been working on at the time was his First Violin Concerto. It was put in a drawer and would not be premiered until 1955, two years after Stalin's death when Shostakovich was once again in favour.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

An influential teacher and highly regarded conductor as well as a composer, **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** remains one of the most important figures in the history of Russian music.

Born into a wealthy family near Novgorod in 1844 and showing great musical talent (and perfect pitch) from an early age, he started composing at 10. However, he initially continued family tradition and joined the navy, before embarking on a musical career.

Along with **Alexander Borodin**, Modest Mussorgsky, mentor Mily Balakirev and César Cui he was a member of '**The Five**' – the influential group of Russian composers dedicated to creating a national school of Russian music, free of the influence of European musical forms like Italian opera and German lieder.

Rimsky-Korsakov spent the winter of 1887 working to help complete Borodin's *Prince Igor*, following his fellow composer's sudden death from a massive coronary.

He followed it in the spring and summer of 1888 with the composition of two of his own works – the *Easter Festival Overture* (which the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra performed earlier this season) and his symphonic suite *Scheherazade*, based on the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Did you know? Rimsky-Korsakov struck a tall, imposing figure with a bushy beard and blue wire-rimmed glasses.

About the Music

Anatoly Liadov (1855-1914): *Baba-Yaga*, Op 65

Composed: 1904

First Performed: 21 February 1909, St Petersburg, cond. Liadov

Anatoly Liadov is one of classical music's great might-have-beens. Evidently, he was hugely talented and had a vivid imagination, but he was also disastrously lazy, which may have been partly due to depression (there were rumours of serious alcoholism). But when he did stir himself to compose, the results were often magical, as in this little tone poem inspired by one of the grimmest figures in Russian folk-legend – the witch Baba-Yaga. Skeletally thin, she has an unappeasable appetite for human flesh (she's particularly fond of children) which she devours with iron teeth! She lives in a fantastical hut on fowl's legs, deep in a forest, and she hunts her prey in a flying mortar, using the pestle as a rudder. Liadov's vivid score follows her on one of her adventures. Does she succeed in her terrifying quest? That's for the listener to decide.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75): *Violin Concerto No 1 in A minor*, Op 99

Composed: 1947-8

First Performed: 29 October 1955, Leningrad (now St Petersburg), soloist David Oistrakh, Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, cond. Yevgeny Mravinsky

Dmitri Shostakovich was working on his First Violin Concerto when he suffered one of the worst blows of his roller-coaster career. He was publicly denounced by Stalin's 'propogandist-in-chief' Andrei Zhdanov as a 'formalist' – as bad as it got in Soviet ideological terms – and forced to make a public statement of repentance. He was dismissed from his teaching posts and found himself compelled to write propaganda music in order to make a living. Things had been looking difficult for him for some time however, and there is a growing feeling during this remarkable Concerto that it was composed during some 'dark night of the soul'.

It's certainly a very serious work – not so much a virtuoso showcase as a deeply probing symphony led throughout by the violin. David Oistrakh, the outstanding Russian violinist for whom Shostakovich wrote it, described the violin part as 'Shakespearean' in its heroic grandeur and intensity. It begins with a very dark, inward-looking Nocturne – mostly eerily still but with moments of anguish – followed by a demonic Scherzo which features a dance theme with a strong Jewish Klezmer flavour (Shostakovich sympathised profoundly with the plight of the Jewish people). The heart of the Concerto is the magnificent Passacaglia: full of grief, expressed with great dignity. A long solo cadenza (really a movement in its own right) builds steadily from introspection to racing excitement, at last plunging headlong into the wild, dancing finale, full of half-exhilarating, half-crazed dance music. The Concerto had to wait until 1955, two years after the death of Stalin, for its first performance, but it was an instant hit – so much so that the finale had to be repeated!

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*, Op 35

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's inspiration for this brilliantly colourful and atmospheric 'Symphonic Suite' was the famous collection of stories known as 'The Arabian Nights'. In these, we meet the Sultan Shakriar, one of literature's most spectacular misogynists. Convinced of the falsity of all

women, the Sultan vows to execute each one he marries after their first night together. But the wily Scheherazade gets the better of him by telling him stories, each finishing on an enticing cliff-hanger. Gradually the Sultan's heart melts, and he renounces his vow. The stern opening theme, enhanced by bass brass, is surely the Sultan, while the soaring solo violin and harp theme that follows is clearly Scheherazade herself, weaving her poetic spell as she sets the scene for her next tale.

Rimsky-Korsakov had been a midshipman in the Russian navy, which helps explain the vividness of his portrayal of Sinbad's pirate ship ploughing through the waves in the first movement. But having set our imaginations working, Rimsky is happy to leave us to imagine the characters and backdrops as we choose. We can guess for ourselves the heroic adventures of Kalendar Prince, while any pair of star-crossed lovers will do for 'Young Prince and Young Princess', though the 19th century 'oriental' atmosphere is unmistakable. It's possible to follow Rimsky's synopsis stage-by-stage in the finale though (with a loud gong stroke as the ship crashes into the rock), and at the end the symbolism is unmistakable: Scheherazade's free-floating solo violin and the Sultan's stern opening theme are finally united in harmony. Then, the last word is left to Scheherazade herself.