

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra December 7 programme complementary content

Conductor Karen Kamensek makes her Liverpool Philharmonic debut in this pre-Christmas concert of delights. Start the evening in the company of Strauss' roistering prankster *Till Eulenspiegel*, then pop on your glass slippers and get ready to have a ball in the company of Prokofiev's *Cinderella*, before finally slipping into a world of enchantment with Tchaikovsky's sublime *Swan Lake*.

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.

Karen Kamensek

Chicago-born [Karen Kamensek](#) has been praised for her dynamic performances across the world. The [Grammy Award-winning](#) conductor's extensive artistry, coupled with her commitment to championing 20th and 21st Century composers, is reflected in her work both on the concert stage and in opera houses including the Met.

She is a renowned Philip Glass specialist and her collaboration with the composer dates back to the 1990s. She appeared at the 2022 *BBC Proms* with the English National Opera Orchestra, and this summer conducted the Welsh National Opera in Leonard Bernstein's [Candide](#) in Cardiff and on tour.

Forthcoming engagements include *Tosca* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and concerts with the Gran Canaria Philharmonic, Montpellier Occitanie National Orchestra and Colorado Symphony.

Richard Strauss

While [Richard Strauss](#) became the most significant German opera composer of his time, it was his songs and tone poems which initially brought him to public attention in Europe and beyond.

The first of these was his 1888 triumph *Don Juan*, which chronicled the exploits of Spanish literature's legendary libertine in dashing and colourful fashion – and which the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra played at the tail end of last season.

Perhaps the most famous remains his 1896 work *Also sprach Zarathustra*, inspired by Nietzsche's philosophical novel of the same name and which Stanley Kubrick turned to when it came to underscoring his epic film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The tone poem *Till Eulenspiegel* – or [Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks](#) to give it its full title – was composed over the winter of 1894-5 and showcases not only Strauss' masterly treatment of colour and melody but also his sense of humour.

[Till Eulenspiegel](#) was a roguish medieval peasant folk hero who loved to play practical jokes on the people around him, using his wit to fool and cheat fellow citizens and those with puffed up opinions of their worth or who try to insult or exploit him. The work was given its first performance in Cologne in 1896, and 20 years later it was turned into a [ballet](#) with choreography by Nijinsky who performed it with the Ballet Russes in New York.

Enjoy a performance of Strauss' [Till Eulenspiegel](#).

Sergei Prokofiev

[Sergei Prokofiev](#) wrote prolifically across a wide range of musical genres during his career, from symphonies to songs and sonatas to film scores.

It was when – in early 1914 on a visit to London – he met his fellow countryman, the impresario and founder of the groundbreaking Ballet Russes [Sergei Diaghilev](#), that he started to make a foray into the world of dance.

Prokofiev's first commission came the following year, for the ballet *Ala / Lolli* which ultimately became his *Scythian Suite* after Diaghilev rejected the score.

The composer did go on to create several more successful scores for the Ballet Russes, including the 1921 work *Chout*.

But his two best-known, and best-loved, ballets come from the latter part of his career and were composed as commissions (initially at least in one case) from the Soviet Union's most prestigious and famous pair of ballet companies.

Prokofiev wrote [Romeo and Juliet](#) for the Kirov although eventually the finished ballet was premiered not in Leningrad, but by Czech dancers at the National Theatre in Brno in December 1938. It wasn't until January 1940 that it was finally staged at the Kirov itself.

It was also in 1940, as the Second World War raged across Europe, that the composer put pen to manuscript again to tell the greatest fairytale of them all, *Cinderella*, this time for the Bolshoi.

It took Prokofiev four years to complete the score (he broke off in the middle to concentrate on his opera *War and Peace*) and *Cinderella* was finally premiered at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre in November 1945 to critical acclaim.

Did you know? Prokofiev composed his first piece at the age of five. It was called Indian Gallop.

Listen to [Cinderella's Waltz](#) from Prokofiev's *Suite from Cinderella*.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky

Almost 70 years separate the premieres of Prokofiev's *Cinderella* and [Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake](#) – albeit on the same stage at the Bolshoi in Moscow's Theatre Square.

The first and still most famous of Tchaikovsky's triumvirate of dance masterpieces, [Swan Lake](#) has become a ballet behemoth since its first performance in March 1877.

But it wasn't the first time the composer had visited the idea of swans gliding on a lake. In 1871, the then 31-year-old Tchaikovsky was staying with his elder sister Aleksandra and her young family at Kamenka (now Kam'yanka, southeast of Kyiv in Ukraine) when he is [said to have](#) written a short fairytale dance piece for his nephew Yuri and nieces Tatyana and Anna, based on the legend of, and titled, *The Lake of the Swans*.

At least one part of that family ballet is believed to have ended up in the much more famous work in the form of its yearning *Swan Theme*.

Watch the finale of Matthew Bourne's [Swan Lake](#).

About the Music

Richard Strauss (1864-1949): *Till Eulenspiegel*

Composed: 1894-5

First Performed: 15 November 1895, Cologne, cond. Franz Wüllner

Richard Strauss loved stirring up controversy. Authority figures, from his musician father to Kaiser Wilhelm, tried reining him in, but Strauss knew that a bit of scandal would do his reputation - and his bank balance - no harm at all. It wasn't just that he liked ambitious, provocative subjects for his tone poems and opera; the music brought them to life with tremendous zest and daring opulence. And no work of his embodies the inspired prankster side of his nature more than *Till Eulenspiegel*: 'Owlglass', the name of a gleefully anarchic hero in medieval German folklore. It's possible to enjoy *Till Eulenspiegel* as a tremendous musical romp, full of colour and wild humour; but it's fun to follow the story too – all you need to know are the broad outlines. Two themes represent Till himself: a forward racing horn theme and a tiny motif that sound like mocking laughter (high clarinet and low oboes). We then hear him causing pandemonium in a market, mocking the clergy (a smugly comfortable tune on violas and clarinets), flirting – and maybe more – with country girls (violins with languishing downward swoops) and provoking serious academics (bassoons). The mood darkens as Till is arrested and sentenced to death for blasphemy. We hear his hapless protests (high clarinet again), and the moment of his death, as the clarinet shoots impossibly skywards, is genuinely scary. But is Till really dead? Can you kill the spirit of subversive humour? The ending seems to say... well, let's leave that for the performance.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): *Suite from Cinderella*

Composed: 1940-44

First Performed (complete ballet): 21 November 1945, Moscow, Bolshoi Theatre, cond. Yuri Fayer

Controversy also came naturally to Sergei Prokofiev. Boos and catcalls seemed to delight him as much as thunderous applause. Faced with a furious audience at the premiere of his brilliantly outrageous Second Piano Concerto (1913), he bowed politely, sat back down at the piano and dashed off an encore. But after his return to Russia from exile in 1936, Prokofiev found he had to tread more carefully: even international stardom might not save him from Stalin's gulags. Prokofiev wrote his ballet *Cinderella* during the Second World War, at the same time when he was working on an appropriately patriotic epic, his opera *War and Peace*. But he'd always love fairy tales, and the story of Cinderella Volkov and her two frightful sisters, enriched and enlivened by Nikolai Volkov, gave him a kind of safe space to let loose his sense of satirical fun.

'What I wished to express above all in the music of Cinderella' Prokofiev wrote, 'was the poetic love of Cinderella and the Prince, the birth and flowering of that love, the obstacles in its path, and finally the dream fulfilled. The fairy tale offered a number of fascinating challenges for me as a composer – the atmosphere of magic surrounding the Fairy Godmother, the twelve fantastic dwarves that pop out of the clock as it strikes twelve and dance a chechotka, reminding Cinderella that she must return home; the swift change of scene as the Prince journeys far and wide in search of Cinderella; the poetry of nature personified by the four fairies symbolizing the four seasons...'

The 'atmosphere of magic' was something that was second nature to Prokofiev, as the music testifies over and over again. And the subject matter – even more than in *War and Peace* – gave him the opportunity to indulge his wonderful gift for long-breathed, tender melody. As for the absurd antics of the Ugly Sisters – might Prokofiev have had one or two self-preening Soviet officials in mind? If so, it didn't prevent *Cinderella* from being a huge success at its Moscow premiere. For the moment, at least, Prokofiev and his reputation were safe.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-93): *Swan Lake* (excerpts)

Composed: 1875-6

First Performed: 4 March 1877, Moscow, Bolshoi Theatre, cond. Stepan Ryabov

Today Tchaikovsky is loved throughout the world for his ballet music, especially those magical, gloriously tuneful masterpieces *The Nutcracker* (1892) and *Swan Lake*. His ability to create music that seems to demand compelling physical movement has been equalled only by those two other Russian ballet Titans, Prokofiev and Igor Stravinsky. But initially Tchaikovsky didn't find the prospect of writing ballet music appealing. Most of the music he heard struck him as shallow and formulaic (he wasn't entirely wrong), but when he heard Léo Delibes' *Sylvia*, he confessed, he felt 'ashamed'. Here was wonderful melody, exciting rhythm, rich harmony – exactly the kind of elements he was to raise to even higher levels in *Swan Lake*. Add an intoxicating pinch or two of Wagner (the name of the hero, Siegfried, is a bit of a giveaway), and he was ready to create one of the repertoire's defining masterpieces.

No one really knows where the choreographer, Julius Reisinger, found the story. Very probably it was a mixture of several folk tales, with a version of Wagner's famous 'Liebestod' ('Love's Death') thrown in at the climax. But Tchaikovsky was soon working enthusiastically on his score. The idea of transgressive love (a human prince falls for – a swan?) which can only find fulfilment in death was just the kind of thing to add attraction for Tchaikovsky, a homosexual in a world where being 'out' was socially impossible. But despite the passion and enthusiasm he put into the music, *Swan Lake* was a flop at its premiere. The music was attacked as too intense and 'symphonic' (it is, but that's one of its main strengths), and one critic even objected to the 'Wagnerian' use of the famous Swan motif – one of the few classical themes just about everybody knows today. Reisinger pronounced some of the music 'undanceable' (!), and tried to substitute music by other composers, and Tchaikovsky had to fight for his own score. It was only after Tchaikovsky's own mysterious and shocking death, at just 53, that *Swan Lake* really came into its own. So is there a disguised personal element in the story? There almost always is with Tchaikovsky.