

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
February 8 programme complementary content

A ruthless sultan, his beautiful young wife, and 1001 nights of stories from beyond the imagination. That was the inspiration behind Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*: a glittering, wide-screen orchestral epic, and the climax of a concert that opens with a postcard from sunny Italy and then features the deliciously tuneful piano concerto that Shostakovich wrote as a present for his teenage son.

It's a joyous showcase for two real rising stars - conductor Paolo Bortolameolli and the award-winning pianist Elisabeth Brauss.

Paolo Bortolameolli

Chilean-Italian conductor [Paolo Bortolameolli](#) is making his Liverpool debut in this concert. Bortolameolli is music director of Mexico's Orquesta Sinfonica Azteca and the National Youth Symphony Orchestra in Chile, and principal guest conductor of the Filharmonica de Santiago.

A force on the podium and with an insatiable artistic curiosity, he has conducted every significant orchestra in Chile and been awarded prizes five times by the Arts Critics Association as symphonic and opera conductor of the year. He has also led ensembles and built relationships with orchestras around the world.

Bortolameolli studied piano at Universidad Catolica de Chile and conducting at the Universidad de Chile, and holds a Master of Music degree from Yale School of Music.

Elisabeth Brauss

Pianist [Elisabeth Brauss](#) has been praised by *Gramophone Magazine* for "the maturity and sophistication of her thoughtful interpretations [which] would be the pride of any pianist twice her age". Born in Hanover in 1995, Brauss – the daughter of pianist, conductor and professor Martin Brauss – started playing the piano at the age of four and went on to study at Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media.

Along with winning first prize at the International Steinway Competition in Hamburg, and the International Grotrian Steinweg Piano Competition in Braunschweig, she was awarded the Prätorius Musikpreis Lower Saxony Prize in 2012. Further accolades include awards at the TONALi Grand Prix in Hamburg (2013) and first prize at the Kissinger KlavierOlymp (2016).

A former member of the BBC New Generation Artists scheme, she continues to appear regularly in solo, chamber and concerto engagements across the UK. In 2021 she made her *BBC Proms* debut, playing Mozart's [Piano Concerto No.23](#).

Future engagements include the world premiere of a new work by Annersley Black with conductor Pablo Gonzalez and the Staatsorchester Stuttgart.

Watch Elisabeth Brauss play [Shostakovich's Piano Trio No.1](#) with Noa Wildschut and Alexander Warenberg.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

What do Verdi, Prokofiev, Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Sibelius and Tchaikovsky have in common? Well, apart from being great composers, they were all also inspired by the work of [William Shakespeare](#).

Tchaikovsky was a 29-year-old professor at the Moscow Conservatory when he sat down to write what would become one of classical music's most famous love themes. The idea for what became the [Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture](#) came initially from fellow composer Mily Balakirev. It seemed a good fit for a young composer with a turbulent private life and tortured by unrequited love.

But at first Tchaikovsky was bereft of musical ideas for the piece, [writing to Balakirev](#) that he was “played out completely” and “not a single tolerable little musical idea” would pop into his head. The fog seemed to lift after he chewed over the idea with his younger [brother, Modest](#), and soon Tchaikovsky had done enough to send the very critical Balakirev its main themes. The score was extensively revised in the summer of 1870, and the definitive version was created a decade later, presenting audiences with a masterpiece of dramatic flourishes and an achingly sweet love theme.

Did you know? When Tchaikovsky conducted, he held his chin with one hand because terrible stage fright led him to fear his head might fall off.

Listen to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra play the [Fantasy Overture](#) from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Dmitri Shostakovich

It's always a bit of a problem. Just what do you give a 19-year-old for his birthday? [Dmitri Shostakovich](#) solved the conundrum by presenting his teenage son with a specially composed new piano concerto.

It was 1957, and [Maxim Shostakovich](#), who was studying at the Moscow Conservatory, had been badgering his father to compose a piece for him for some time. The short, sunny and effervescent piece (with its repeated scale passages for all good piano students!) stands in contrast to the epic 10th and 11th Symphonies which bookended it.

The [Second Piano Concerto](#) was premiered on May 10 in the Conservatory's Great Hall, with the future concert pianist and acclaimed conductor joined by the USSR Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Nikolai Anosov. In turn, Maxim would go on to conduct his own son Dmitri playing the piece.

Listen to the 'Andante' from Shostakovich's [Piano Concerto No.2 in F major](#) performed by Dmitri Shostakovich's grandson, Dmitri.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

It's a magical tale where the fictional Persian king Shahryar, angry to find his first wife has been unfaithful, vows to take a new bride every day – and behead her the next morning before she can dishonour him.

After decimating the ranks of the nobility and running out of suitable brides, Scheherazade steps forward and volunteers to marry him. But the tales she spins each evening captivate the king and after 1,001 nights he finds he has fallen in love with her and instead of decapitation he makes her his queen.

[Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov](#) was similarly captivated by these folk stories and in 1888 he immortalised the storyteller at the heart of [One Thousand and One Nights](#) in a symphonic suite.

[Scheherazade](#) springs to life in evocative and iridescent fashion through four kaleidoscopic movements. The suite was composed over the summer months at a dacha south of St Petersburg and premiered in the city in November 1888 with its composer conducting.

Watch a trailer for the 1947 Hollywood film [Song of Scheherazade](#).

About the Music

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93): Fantasy Overture, *Romeo and Juliet*

Composed: 1870, revised 1880

First Performed: March 16 1870, Moscow, cond. Nikolai Rubinstein; Final revised version: 10 September 1880, Tbilisi, Georgia, cond. Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov

The idea of composing an orchestral piece that tells the basic story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* didn't come from Tchaikovsky himself. It was the composer Mily Balakirev who suggested it (Balakirev liked telling other composers what they should write), in the process providing Tchaikovsky with a complete musical ground plan: the kind of structure Tchaikovsky might use, how he might deploy the themes associated with the main characters, even which keys to use for which scenes and emotions. Surprisingly, Tchaikovsky didn't find this limiting: instead it inspired him to create one of the most gripping, stirring tone poems in all music.

It is quite possible to enjoy *Romeo and Juliet* simply as a gripping symphonic drama – it doesn't need any kind of programmatic crutch to prop it up. All the same it helps to have the outlines of the musical story. A hymn-like tune introduces Friar Lawrence, the young couple's counsellor, while anxious strings convey his forebodings. The hair-trigger tension between the Montague and Capulet families emerges in the following Allegro, with rhythmic cymbal clashes depicting furious swordplay. Eventually the music calms down, and the famous love theme begins, magically conveying the lovers' emotions and the beauty of the night, with an underlying hint of unease. Conflict returns, and eventually so does the love theme, but it now feels embattled, and the driven Allegro music sweeps back in, with unmistakably tragic consequences. A ghost of the love theme hovers above funereal drums, Friar Lawrence's hymn-tune comments for the last time, then the love theme returns, radiantly transfigured. Love, it seems to say, is stronger than death.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75): Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major, Op 102

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Allegro

Composed: 1957

First performed: 10 May 1957, Moscow Conservatory, Great Hall, USSR Symphony Orchestra, Maxim Shostakovich (piano), cond. Nikolai Anosov

Judging from Shostakovich's most popular works, you might think that he was purely a tragic composer – darkly probing, emotionally cathartic symphonies, concertos and string quartets probably spring to mind. But he also composed wonderful light music and popular, uplifting film scores, and this piano concerto is one of the most joyous things in the modern concerto repertory. When you know why it was composed, it all makes sense. Shostakovich wrote it as a 19th birthday present for his son Maxim to play at his graduation concert at the Moscow Conservatory (like his

father, Maxim was a fine pianist). It's beautifully conceived for a young student pianist to play – in other words, there's plenty of the kind of writing Maxim would have practised in his technical studies, and although it sounds dazzlingly brilliant at times, it's not actually terribly difficult to play. Far from sounding academic, it's full of life, and bursting with the kind of memorable themes for which Shostakovich always had such a gift.

The first movement is a lively discussion between two themes, the first almost cheekily upbeat, the second more lyrical and reflective, but it is that seemingly gentler second theme that returns in spectacular triumph at the climax, leading to a showcase solo for the piano. High spirits prevail at the end, which means that the Andante, with its soothing hymn-like string theme comes as a refreshing contrast. The piano's following solo recalls the rapturous slow melodies of Chopin and Rachmaninov, but with little twists and turns that could only be Shostakovich. Then the finale erupts with a rapid dance tune, followed by a folk-like theme in seven beats to the bar (One-two One-two One-two-three): you may hear hints of balalaikas in the strings' accompaniment. The ending is guaranteed to bring the house down – one can imagine Shostakovich's pride in his son's admirable achievement.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*, Op 35

1. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship
2. The Kalendar Prince
3. Young Prince and Young Princess
4. Festival at Baghdad. The Sea. The Ship breaks on a rock surmounted by a bronze horseman

Composed: 1888

First performed: 28 October 1888, St Petersburg, cond. Rimsky-Korsakov

No composer knew the value of a good story better than Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. His inspiration for this brilliantly colourful and atmospheric 'Symphonic Suite' *Scheherazade* was the 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 treachery of all women, the Sultan vows to execute each one he takes to wife after their first night together. But the wily Scheherazade gets the better of him by telling him stories, expertly finishing each one with an enticing cliff-hanger. Gradually the Sultan's heart melts, and he renounces his vow. The stern opening theme, enhanced by bass brass, stands for the Sultan, while the soaring solo violin and harp theme that follows is 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, and the vividness with which he evokes exotic settings. 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 the Kalendar (wandering mystic) Prince, while any pair of star-crossed lovers will do for 'Young Prince and Young Princess'. 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, with a touch of true poetic justice, the last word is left to Scheherazade herself.