

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Jasdeep Singh Degun

October 9 programme notes

Jasdeep Singh Degun *sitar*

Composer, arranger and improviser; consummate soloist and generous collaborator; custodian of tradition and restless innovator, multi-award winning sitarist Jasdeep Singh Degun is an anomaly indeed. Unconstrained by genre, the Leeds-born virtuoso's extraordinary skill and creativity are reshaping the musical landscape for his peers, and for generations to come.

Amid artist residencies and fellowships, an international concert schedule, royal command performances and the well-deserved laurels of recent years, Jasdeep's lifelong training in gayaki ang – a lyrical approach to the sitar that mimics the human voice – has remained his anchor and his passion. "In our tradition, you're always a student", he explains. "My teacher, Ustad Dharambir Singh MBE, shows me how big the music is, and how much we still have to explore".

As Artist in Residence at Opera North in 2022, Jasdeep continued in pursuit of his vision to combine the scale of orchestral music with the spontaneity of Indian classical improvisation. The tapestry of Indian and European music that he wove as composer and co-music director on a new staging of Monteverdi's opera *Orpheus* thrilled audiences and critics alike. 2023 saw him take home the Asian Achievers' Art and Culture Award, and Best Newcomer at the Songlines Awards, then in 2024 Jasdeep received the Royal Philharmonic Society's Award for Best Instrumentalist, the first sitar player, and the first British Asian musician, to be so recognised.

"It's really not a matter of different worlds meeting", he reflects. "It's just me: as much as I'm immersed in Indian classical music, I'm a product of this country; I'm a British composer". Whether completing his sitar concerto during a residency at Benjamin Britten's home in Aldeburgh, working simultaneously in raag and western counterpoint in the *Orpheus* rehearsal room, or trading quicksilver improvisations in the moment with an Indian classical percussionist, his approach to music-making is always instinctive, organic, and unprejudiced.

(Credit: Rowland Thomas)

Harish Shankar *conductor*

Hailed for his exacting technique and passionate conducting, Malaysian-born Harish Shankar enjoys a growing global presence on the podium. A prize winner at the 6th International Jorma Panula Conducting Competition, Harish is Chorus Master of the Theater Regensburg. Previously held positions include 1st Kapellmeister of the Staatstheater Meiningen and Resident Conductor of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra.

Harish has previously led orchestras across Europe, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Opera North, the Düsseldorfer Symphoniker, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Philharmonisches Orchester Erfurt. Operatic engagements include Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* at the Theater Aachen, Bizet's *Carmen* at the Meininger Staatstheater and at the Landestheater Coburg, Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at the Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz in Munich, as well as *La Bohème* at the Stadttheater Bremerhaven.

As assistant conductor he has worked closely with renowned conductors including Sir Andrew Davis, Vasily Petrenko, Eckehard Stier and Juanjo Mena, and collaborated with the BBC Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and Auckland Philharmonia orchestras. After graduating from the prestigious Weimar Conservatoire in Germany under the tutelage of Professor Gunter Kahlert, Harish Shankar also received mentorship from Sir Mark Elder, Clark Rundell and Mark Heron with masterclasses from Paavo Järvi, Nicolás Pasquet, Leonid Grin and Mark Stringer.

As a strong believer in music education, his early studies with Maestro Eiji Oue subsequently led to an invitation to lead the orchestra of the award-winning El Sistema project in Peru. During his tenure with El Sistema, he conducted projects aiming to engage a growing classical music scene and to bring together children from all walks of life. In his free time, Harish serves as an emergency pedagogue with the Friends of Waldorf Education, using music to help children in areas of conflict cope with trauma.

Harkiret Bahra *tabla*

Harkiret Bahra has been a student of tabla for more than thirty years under the tutelage of noted tabla artists from Giani Gian Singh Surjit Ji to his current teacher Ustad Harkirat Singh Rayatt. During his tabla education, he has been fortunate to take learnings from the legendary late artist Pandit Shankar Ghosh Ji. Amongst the most distinguished UK-based tabla players and now himself a devoted teacher, his music has taken him to perform internationally and collaborate across genres with an array of virtuoso instrumentalists.

Sergei Prokofiev *Classical Symphony*

Sergei Prokofiev's earliest musical influence was his mother, who would play piano in the evenings at home.

He was five when he started composing, and at nine had written his first opera. The young Prokofiev was encouraged by his mother, who arranged trips to the opera in Moscow.

In 1904, at the age of 13, he entered the St Petersburg Conservatory (after being urged to apply by future conservatory director Alexander Glazunov) where he would spend a total of 10 years. His time there is said to have inspired his *Symphony No.1* – or 'Classical' Symphony – quite considerably.

As part of his studies, Prokofiev was instructed in conducting Classical composers, and his First Symphony certainly features flavours of great figures of that era, such as Haydn and Mozart. It is however, most definitely a reinterpretation of the Classical style. The work is airy and sunny, plus it's scored for a Classical-period sized orchestra, but Prokofiev's own style remains, as he inserts a handful of modernist twists into the piece. In the past, he'd angered professors by breaking Classical traditions, so here he embraces them, exaggerates them, but his unmistakable flair remains.

Ludwig van Beethoven *Symphony No.2*

The first years of the nineteenth century were somewhat testing for Beethoven – the musical landscape was shifting, and so was life as he knew it. His Second Symphony seems to reflect that too. The work signified that Beethoven was starting to move away from the Classical tradition embodied in his *Symphony No.1*, and instead head towards the groundbreaking Romantic style embraced in his Third Symphony, *Eroica*.

His *Symphony No.2* was mostly composed while Beethoven was staying in the Austrian village of Heiligenstadt during the summer of 1802, just months after he had written a letter to his brothers (to be read after his death) in which he shared his enormous pain around his deteriorating hearing. While his Second Symphony is largely warm and upbeat – a determined act of artistic resilience and optimism – its dramatic dynamics and surprising key changes perhaps hint at Beethoven's growing despair. And of course, this foreshadows what would come in his later symphonies, mirroring the musical evolution taking place at that time.

The contrasting themes of the symphony weren't particularly well received at its premiere, with one critic claiming that it sounded 'as if doves and crocodiles were locked up together'. Today, however, with the ideas Beethoven communicates within it and the evolution it represents, the piece stands celebrated within the orchestral repertoire.

About the Music

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): Symphony No.1 in D major, Op 25 ('Classical')

1. Allegro
2. Larghetto
3. Gavotta: Non troppo allegro
4. Finale: Molto vivace

Composed: 1917

First Performed: 18 April 1918, Petrograd (St Petersburg), State Orchestra, cond. Prokof

For many composers, producing an official 'Symphony No.1' is a serious matter – an announcement that a worthy successor to the great Beethoven has arrived on the scene. Sergei Prokofiev however loved to confound expectations.

In his First Symphony, the notorious young modernist now surprised the world in a completely different way: a 'Classical' Symphony, scored for the kind of orchestra the older Haydn or the younger Beethoven would have used, laid out on a (largely) conventional late-18th Century plan, and lasting barely more than a quarter of an hour. Prokofiev's 'Classical' Symphony is at heart an act of homage - the kind of sophisticated irony that marked out the neo-classical works of Stravinsky, *Les Six* and their many imitators is largely absent. It is still very clearly Prokofiev however, as one can hear in the many little flavoursome harmonic and melodic twists, and in the lovely sustained lyricism of the slow second movement. And no composer of Haydn's time would have thought of replacing the conventional three-time minuet with a four-time gavotte – most irregular! A classicist he may be, just for now, but Prokofiev remains very much his own man.

Jasdeep Singh Degun Arya, *Concerto for Sitar and Orchestra*

Arya: Concerto for Sitar and Orchestra is a remarkable and powerful work exemplifying developments in classical music that could only have occurred in modern Britain.

Its title plays on the Italian word 'Aria', meaning a melody sung by a single voice, represented by the sitar itself in this concerto, and an ancient Indian word with a similar pronunciation. Jasdeep explains: "the name 'Arya' in Sanskrit means 'noble', 'precious', or 'valuable', and the idea behind the piece is that the sitar is the 'noble' and 'precious' vessel which takes the audience on a journey through the three movements."

In the tradition of the Romantic concerto, the work introduces the sitar and the orchestra as antagonists, staging a series of confrontations between the two that lead to a conversation and an eventual reconciliation. Jasdeep explains: "The concerto begins with an invocation, introducing the audience to the sound world of the sitar, feeling its way through the new territory of the western orchestra. The sitar is almost finding its feet, and so is the audience. The orchestra is intrigued by this new and unknown instrument.

"As the sitar moves through the piece, the orchestra flexes its muscles and exerts its might; the sitar fights to be heard, and the two trade rapid-fire phrases. Ultimately they reach an understanding and find harmony with one another. There is a certain frivolousness and playfulness in the coming together of the two sound worlds, highlighting the fact that despite their differences, they are bound together by their similarities."

Jasdeep Singh Degun (arr. Gupta) *Lament*

Lament is a new arrangement of one of the pieces from Jasdeep's hugely acclaimed 2022 opera *Orpheus*, a reworking of Monteverdi's 1607 score with newly composed music for baroque and Indian instruments. *Lament* was originally sung by the entire chorus and full orchestra lamenting the death of the main character Eurydice. Based on a beautiful raag called *Sindhi Bhairavi* – usually sung/played in a more semi-classical style such as thumri or ghazal – which deals with “topics of spiritual and romantic love and may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss, or separation from the beloved, and the beauty of love in spite of that pain”, as Jasdeep felt this raag best expressed the outward grief of the family and friends of Eurydice.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): Symphony No.2 in D major, Op 36

1. Adagio molto – Allegro con brio
2. Larghetto
3. Scherzo: Allegro
4. Allegro molto

Composed: 1802

First Performed: 5 April 1803, Vienna, Theater an der Wien, cond. Beethoven

Around the time Beethoven was finishing his Second Symphony, he also wrote his famous *Heiligenstadt Testament*. This fascinating but puzzling document, somewhere between a last will and testament and a suicide note, reveals Beethoven struggling to come to terms with encroaching deafness and the spiritual isolation that comes with it. Should he end his life? ‘The only thing that held me back was my art. Oh, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had produced all the works that I felt the urge to compose.’

But the Second Symphony seems to tell a different story. Yes, there are moments when one senses struggle and turmoil, but overall, it is the will to live that triumphs in the Second Symphony. After an unusually dramatic slow introduction, the *Allegro con brio* that emerges from this establishes a mood of heroic resolution. After this comes one of Beethoven's great lyrical symphonic slow movements, with something of the love of the open countryside Beethoven was to celebrate in his *Pastoral* Symphony (No.6). After this the Scherzo is full of intense, quick-fire dynamic contrast – in the central Trio almost as much as in the outer dance sections. The final *Allegro molto* evidently upset some in its first audience. Towards the end Beethoven delights in hurling musical spanners into his own works: sudden jolting pauses, extreme dynamic contrasts, exciting crescendos that lead to – nothing? The real ending has a fierce, almost violent exuberance unprecedented in symphonic music. The relative safety of the First Symphony is behind him now: from now on Beethoven's audiences must keep pace with him.