Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
July 3 programme complementary content

Hear the blazing fanfares that open Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony? For Tchaikovsky they symbolised Fate, and the whole symphony simply bursts with melody and emotion. If you've already heard Vasily Petrenko conduct Russian music, you won't need telling twice: things are about to get exciting in a concert that begins with the flying fiddles of Weinberg's *Moldavian Rhapsody* and features the unforgettable tunes of Shostakovich's irreverent *Suite*. Trust us, you'll know them when you hear them!

Vasily Petrenko *conductor*

Vasily Petrenko needs little introduction to Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra audiences. The multi-award-winning Leningrad-born conductor returns to the Hope Street stage in his role as Conductor Laureate, and in what for many years was an annual concert programme celebrating the music of his homeland around the date of his own birthday.

Petrenko left the city in the summer of 2021 after 15 years at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and is currently Music Director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra – where he has **extended his contract to 2030** – and Associate Conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León.

He also served from 2015-24 as the Chief Conductor of the European Union Youth Orchestra, Chief Conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic (2013-20), and Principal Conductor of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain from 2009-13.

In 2021, Petrenko stood down as the Artistic Director of the State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia 'Evgeny Svetlanov'.

Engagements this season have included performances with the Hong Kong Philharmonic, Montreal Symphony, New Zealand Symphony, and Sydney Symphony.

Mieczysław Weinberg *Rhapsody on Moldavian Themes*

Nearly three decades after his death, the 20th Century Polish-Moldovan composer **Mieczyslaw Weinberg** is enjoying something of a renaissance. His work is being programmed more regularly by ensembles worldwide including here in Liverpool where, most recently, Sheku Kanneh-Mason performed his ***Cello Concerto*** with the Orchestra in April 2024.

And Weinberg enjoyed a prolific – if eventful – career during which he composed, among others, 22 symphonies, seven operas, three ballets, more than 200 songs and 60 film scores. Yet it could have been very different if the 19-year-old Mieczyslaw hadn't left Poland when he did in 1939.

Born into a Jewish family in Warsaw in December 1919, Weinberg's mother, originally from Odesa, was an actress and his father – a violinist, composer and conductor – was also active in Yiddish theatre in the city. Shmuel Weinberg had moved to Poland from Bessarabia (modern day Moldova) where his parents and grandparents had been killed in the pogroms in the early years of the 20th Century.

Weinberg joined the Warsaw Academy aged 12 and graduated in 1939. He had been offered the opportunity to go to Philadelphia, but on September 1 1939, **the Germans invaded Poland**, and just six days later the teenager and his sister left home to try and reach safety in the Soviet Union. While Weinberg managed to escape, his sister turned back and he never saw her or his parents again, later discovering **they were all murdered** in a Nazi concentration camp.

He settled first in Minsk, and then when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union two years later, he moved to Tashkent, finally arriving in Moscow in 1943. It was there he would become a victim of the 1948 purge against 'musical formulism', with several of his works censured.

Rhapsody on Moldavian Themes, a medley of folk tunes, was composed in 1949, and received its premiere in Moscow on November 30 the same year. But in February 1950, after attending another performance of the work, he was arrested in a night-time raid on his home and imprisoned in the infamous Lubyanka until Stalin's death three years later.

Listen to Weinberg's ***Rhapsody on Moldavian Themes***.

Dmitri Shostakovich *Suite for Variety Orchestra*

Also known as *Jazz Suite No.2*, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Suite for Variety Orchestra* features some of the composer's well-known tunes in one delightful 20-minute orchestral piece. But there's a chance it wasn't actually written by Shostakovich at all.

It's thought the *Suite* was arranged from his theatre, ballet and film music by a contemporary – possibly his close friend, the composer and arranger **Levon Atovmyan,** whom Shostakovich had known since the 1930s and who had also scored other concert suites from his film music. Over the course of four decades from 1929 onwards, Shostakovich composed the scores for nearly 40 cinematic releases.

The *Suite for Variety Orchestra*, in eight movements, dates from some time in the 1950s but was only given its first performance in 1988 when Rostropovich conducted the London Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican. The 'variety' of the title refers to the inclusion of instruments like a guitar, accordion and saxophones, giving it the feel of a dance or jazz band – hence its other name.

Enjoy a performance of Shostakovich's ***Suite for Variety Orchestra***.

Did you know? Waltz II from the *Suite* was used on the soundtrack of Stanley Kubrick's last film *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky *Symphony No.4*

The year 1840 was a busy one at home and abroad. Here, Queen Victoria married her cousin Prince Albert, the foundation stone of the new Houses of Parliament was laid, the world's first stamp (the Penny Black) was released and, closer to home, Cunard's first steamer RMS Britannia entered service. Even closer to home, on January 10 the **Liverpool Philharmonic Society** was founded.

Then in May, 2,850 miles east of the Mersey, **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** was born in the town of Votinsk where his father worked in the Department of Mines. Which makes Liverpool Philharmonic and Tchaikovsky both 185 years old this year.

The Russian's *Symphony No.4 in F minor* was composed over the course of 1877 with Tchaikovsky writing to his patron Nadezhda von Melk in May that he was **"engrossed in a symphony"**. While the bones of it were mostly completed by the start of the summer, Tchaikovsky was distracted from it first by composing *Eugene Onegin* and then by preparing for his (brief, ill-fated) marriage to music student Antonina Milyukova, and it wasn't until December that he had a finished manuscript.

It was premiered in a concert in February 1878, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein, and became a lifelong favourite of its composer who described it as his 'child' and 'my best symphonic work'.

In recent years, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra recorded a Tchaikovsky cycle with Vasily Petrenko on the Onyx label, with the Fourth Symphony described in a review as **"a white-knuckle ride, speedy with dramatic hairpin dynamics"**.

Watch Vasily Petrenko talk about **Tchaikovsky and his music** in 2016.

About the Music

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-96): Rhapsody on Moldavian Themes

Composed: 1949
First Performed: 30 November 1949, Moscow, All-Union Radio Symphony Orchestra, cond. Alexander Gauk

Amid the horrors of World War Two, the Polish-born Jewish composer Mieczysław Weinberg fled to the USSR. He thus escaped the German prison camps (his sister wasn't so lucky), and when he was befriended and taken up by Dmitri Shostakovich his future looked bright. But attitudes to Jews were worsening as Stalin became increasingly paranoiac about 'enemies within'. Then, in 1948, came the notorious 'Zhdanov Decree', in which prominent Soviet composers (Shostakovich included) were denounced for such unspeakable crimes as 'bourgeois individualism' and 'anti-people formalism'. The emphasis was now on 'popular' music, and Weinberg's Rhapsody on Moldavian Themes was very much written to fulfil that brief. Moldavia was where Weinberg's parents had been born, and at the time there had been a large Jewish population, so it's no surprise that that dance tune in the brilliant final section has a strong Klezmer flavour. Things would soon turn nasty for Weinberg (Shostakovich had to intervene to save him from the Gulag), but at first the Rhapsody was a success. It's easy to see why.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75): Suite for Variety Orchestra (arr. Levon Atovmyan)

1. March
2. Dance I
3. Dance II
4. Little Polka
5. Lyrical Waltz
6. Waltz I
7. Waltz II
8. Finale

Composed: 1940-55; arranged: 1956 (?)
First Performed: 1 December 1988, London, Barbican Hall, London Symphony Orchestra, cond. Mstislav Rostropovich

Dmitri Shostakovich wasn't just a composer of profoundly searching symphonies, concertos and string quartets, he also had a wonderful flair for instantly likeable, melodically appealing light music. If that seems hard to believe, just wait till you get to the seventh movement of this deliciously flavoursome Suite, 'Waltz II'. Since André Rieu recorded it in 1994 it's never been off the classical pop playlists. The Suite was put together sometime during the later 1950s, when Shostakovich's reputation in Soviet Russia and across the world was on the rise again, his public denunciation and fall from official grace in 1948 now conveniently forgotten. It was Shostakovich's friend Levon Atvomyan who compiled the Suite from ballet, theatre and film scores Shostakovich had composed over a number of years, the earliest dating from 1940. Was it ever performed in Russia in this form? We don't know, but when it was first heard in the West three decades later it was an instant hit. If the words 'Shostakovich' and 'fun' don't automatically go together in your mind, prepare to be pleasantly surprised!

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-93): Symphony No 4 in F minor, op. 36

1. Andante sostenuto - Moderato con anima
2. Andantino in modo di canzone
3. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato. Allegro
4. Finale. Allegro con fuoco

Composed: 1877-78
First Performed: 22 February 1878, Moscow, Russian Music Society cond. Nikolai Rubinstein

In 1877, Tchaikovsky astonished his friends and family by suddenly marrying one of his students - surely, they'd thought, Tchaikovsky was a 'confirmed bachelor', with all the implications that phrase normally carried. The marriage lasted nine weeks, after which Tchaikovsky fled, attempted suicide and experienced a serious mental collapse. The Fourth Symphony was evidently conceived as an attempt to come to terms with the whole disastrous episode. In a letter to his patron and confidante, Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky claimed that the symphony was dominated by the image of 'Fate', the implacable force that 'hangs over your head like the sword of Damocles, and unwaveringly, poisons the soul'.

So, is it all pure emotional outpouring – a kind of intense therapy session in music? In fact, the Fourth is one of Tchaikovsky's most brilliantly engineered creations. The starkly memorable horn fanfare, labelled 'Fate' in Tchaikovsky's sketches, not only proclaims the music's tragic character superbly, it sets out the terms on which the big first movement's musical argument is based. It embodies the archetypal Wheel of Fate, which carries the music forward with grim inevitability to its catastrophic conclusion. After this comes the songlike, deeply melancholic slow movement. But the Scherzo takes us somewhere else entirely: each section of the orchestra keeps to its own allotted themes, ideas rotating like a musical mobile, until the three elements are combined triumphantly at the end. The Finale then throws itself into wild, headlong rejoicing. Fate makes one dramatic attempt to spoil the party, but the merry-making returns with heightened vigour. In Tchaikovsky's own words, 'To live is still possible!'