

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra July 9 complementary content

Vasily Petrenko

[Vasily Petrenko](#) needs little introduction to Liverpool Philharmonic audiences. The multi-award-winning Leningrad-born conductor returns in his role as Conductor Laureate in what for many years was an annual concert 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 with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra 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’.

Along with conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra he is in demand by the world’s leading orchestras and festivals. Recent appearances include European Union Youth Orchestra concerts in Austria, Germany and Italy, the Aspen Music Festival with Sheku Kanneh-Mason, and a trio of concerts in Australia earlier in October, while future engagements this season include the Oslo Philharmonic with pianist Nobu Tsujii, and a tour of the United States with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Johan Dalene

Winner of the 2019 prestigious Carl Nielsen Competition, Swedish Norwegian violinist [Johan Dalene](#) “is not just a virtuoso like many others, he is a voice. He has a tone, a presence” (*Diapason*). Still in his mid-20s, he has performed with leading orchestras and in celebrated recital halls both at home and abroad. His ability to “make his Stradivarius sing like a master” (*Le Monde*), coupled with his refreshingly honest musicality and engagement with musicians and audiences alike, has won him countless admirers. In 2022, he was [named Gramophone’s Young Artist of the Year](#).

An advocate for new music, this season Dalene has showcased Thomas Adès' '*Concentric Paths*' *Concerto*, notably with the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra and Jukka Pekka Saraste and Netherlands Radio Philharmonic and Andrew Manze. He has also played Rautavaara's *Serenades*, notably with the London Symphony Orchestra and Thomas Adès, as well as the Niels Viggo Bentzon *Concerto* with the Copenhagen Philharmonic and Thomas Dausgaard. He previously premiered the concerto written for him by Tebogo Monnakgotla, including with the Berlin Radio Symphony and Giedrė Slekyte, having given the world premiere with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic and John Storgards in April 2023.

Following residencies with the Royal Philharmonic, [Royal Liverpool Philharmonic](#) and Gavle Symphony, Dalene has made recent debuts with the NSO at the Kennedy Center, Detroit Symphony and Tampere Philharmonic, and has returned to the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Other recent highlights include debut performances with the Minnesota Orchestra and Thomas Sondergaard, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and Sakari Oramo and San Francisco Symphony and Esa-Pekka Salonen. Dalene is equally passionate about chamber music and has performed a string of recitals throughout the UK with Jeneba Kanneh-Mason, including London's Wigmore Hall, where he is now a regular guest. He has played at celebrated festivals such as Verbier and Rosendal and in halls like Carnegie Hall.

Recording exclusively for BIS, he released his fifth album on the label in October 2024: entitled *Souvenirs*, it is a recital disc comprising Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir d'un lieu cher*, Ravel's *Tzigane* and a collection of short pieces by Amanda Rontgen-Maier. His previous recording featured the Nielsen and Sibelius *Concerti*, with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic with John Storgards, and garnered Dalene his third coveted 'Editor's Choice' from Gramophone Magazine, as well as a prestigious Swedish Grammis Award. Dalene plays a 1736 Stradivarius.

Nikolai Miaskovsky

What do César Cui, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Nikolai Miaskovsky have in common? The answer is, they all studied at military engineering college in St Petersburg. But while everyone has heard of Dostoevsky, and many people know the name of Cui (as one of the Five, also known as

‘the Mighty Handful’), the chances are you won’t have stumbled across Miaskovsky too often in the concert hall – despite him enjoying a prolific career which led him to be dubbed ‘Father of the Soviet Symphony’.

Miaskovksy – or Myaskovsky - was born in 1881 in the fort town of Novo-Georgievsk (Polish name Modlin) in the Warsaw administration district, then part of the Russian Empire, where his father Yakov was a senior military engineer. Following his mother Vera’s death when he was nine, Nikolai and his siblings were looked after by their aunt who became his first music teacher.

Miaskovsky’s father insisted he study military engineering, but what the young Nikolai really wanted to do was follow his musical passion. He started formal music studies aged 22, and for a time he tried to run two parallel careers but in 1906 he enrolled in the St Petersburg Conservatory where he was taught by Rimsky-Korsakov and Anatoly Lyadov. It was also there that he met the much younger Sergei Prokofiev, and the pair became **lifelong friends.**

Miaskovsky’s earliest works were influenced by Tchaikovsky and Scriabin, while as a music critic he was supportive of Stravinsky’s early career. After serving in the First World War and subsequently in the Red Army, in the early 1920s he joined the staff of the Moscow Conservatory where his students included Aram Khachaturian and Rodion Shchedrin. Such was his reputation that Shostakovich also considered moving to Moscow to study with him. His prolific output over a 40-year composing career included no fewer than 27 symphonies, orchestral works including concertos for both, violin and cello, piano and chamber music, choral works and many songs.

In the 1920s and 30s his music became well-known and much played in Western Europe, while at home over the course of 10 years from 1941 (when he was acclaimed for his *Symphony No.21*) he was the recipient of five Stalin Prizes – despite, in 1947, being accused of writing music which was ‘formulistic’ or anti-Soviet. Miaskovsky died of cancer in 1950.

Sergei Prokofiev

Like many of his fellow composers, **Sergei Prokofiev** could be included in the category of child prodigy. Born in modern day Ukraine in 1891, his keen amateur pianist mother spotted the young Sergei’s early promise,

which included playing the piano, and at five, starting to compose. At eight he produced his first opera, *The Giant*. In 1904, aged 13, Prokofiev was accepted into the St Petersburg Conservatory, the youngest student ever to be admitted. He studied piano, composition and conducting, his tutors including Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Anatoly Liadov.

A decade later, the young avant-garde composer met the great Sergei Diaghilev. In the same year he also started working on what became his first full-length opera, *The Gambler*, based on a novella by Dostoyevsky. It had taken six years of writing and heavy revision, but in 1921 his first completed ballet *Chout* was staged by the Ballet Russes in Paris with the composer conducting.

In the meantime, revolution at home had turned the world upside down. Prokofiev had been initially enthusiastic – he was a member of the Council Workers in the Arts. However, in 1918 he decided (with an official nod) to seek opportunities abroad. While he retained his connection with the new Soviet Union, he spent more than 15 years living and working in Europe and the United States. In the late 20s, he started to make trips back to Russia and [in 1936](#) he decided to come home for good. In America he had resisted the lure of Hollywood, but in the Soviet Union he composed the score for Sergei Einstein's 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*, and in 1945 for *Ivan the Terrible*. His later work also included the much-loved 'symphonic tale for children' *Peter and the Wolf*, and the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* which was performed by the Kirov in 1940.

A flagbearer for the Modernist movement of the 1900s, Prokofiev's work across ballet, orchestral suites, concertos and symphonies embraced lyrical melodies and vivid storytelling, but also dramatic shifts in dynamics, dissonance, chromaticism and rhythmic propulsion. The composer suffered a brain haemorrhage and died in Moscow on March 5, 1953, at the age of 61. He wasn't the only major Soviet figure to die that day. Eight miles away, Joseph Stalin – who had been all but comatose since a stroke several days earlier – also drew his last breath.

Sergei Rachmaninov and Ottorino Respighi

In 1911, composer and violinist [Ottorino Respighi](#) took up the role of teacher of composition at his old alma mater the Liceo Musicale in the north Italian city of Bologna.

The 32-year-old succeeded his former teacher – and musicologist mentor – Luigi Torchi in the post, which the younger man then held for two years until he moved on to a similar post at the Liceo in Rome.

Meanwhile just over 1,000 miles away, in October 1911 a 38-year-old [Sergei Rachmaninov](#) could be found here in Hope Street, making his Liverpool debut at the old Philharmonic Hall – where he played his *Piano Concerto No.3* and his *Preludes in C sharp minor and G minor* with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and also conducted the evening which included his *Symphony in E*. He arrived in Liverpool having not long finished work on the first of his *Études-Tableaux* for the piano, which he composed at Ivanovka, his country estate. The remainder date from the middle of the First World War.

There's no evidence that the two men ever met in person. But they did strike up a fascinating – and illuminating - correspondence over the Russian composer's 'study pictures' when, in 1929, the great conductor Serge Koussevitzky asked Respighi if he could arrange the piano works for a performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Illuminating because Rachmaninov was famous for not giving much away about his inspiration, but in this case, he made an exception.

The [Cinq Études-Tableaux](#) were given their world premiere in Boston on November 13, 1931, opening a concert programme which also featured works by Florent Schmitt, Brahms, and the American premiere of a work by Riccardo Pick-Mangiagalli.

Listen to a performance of the [Cinq Études-Tableaux](#)

Ottorino Respighi

Just as with several of his fellow composers, Italian [Ottorino Respighi](#) started life as a violinist (and viola player), juggling performance commitments with building a composition career.

It's said this, as well as a remarkable ear, helped make him a master orchestrator. That ear also helped him learn no fewer than 11 languages. The polyglot was also a musicologist with an interest in early music, including the Renaissance and Gregorian Chant, bringing these centuries old works to the attention of modern audiences in his own 20th Century musical language.

Respighi was born in Bologna in 1879 into an artistic family. Although his father was a postal worker, he also taught music at the

city's Accademia Filharmonica, while Ottorino's grandfather had been a cathedral organist. Members of his mother's family meanwhile were renowned sculptors. His father was his earliest teacher, but the talented young Respighi also studied with violin and viola at Bologna's Liceo Musicale, composition with [Giuseppi Martucci](#) and about the early history of music with musicologist Luigi Torchi.

[He is best known](#) for his so-called 'Roman Trilogy' of tone poems – *Fountains of Rome*, *Pines of Rome* and *Roman Festivals* – composed between 1916 and 1928 and which were all inspired by elements of the landscapes, streets and sounds of the Italian capital which he called home from 1913 onwards.

Other well-received work includes *The Birds*, inspired by harpsichord composers of the 17th and 18th Centuries and which imitates everything from a hen to a nightingale; the 1921 violin work *Concerto Gregoriano* and the three suites of *Ancient Airs and Dances*. He also wrote 12 operas and composed for the ballet along with vocal, orchestral and chamber music.

Respighi died in Rome in 1936 at the age of 56, leaving his widow Elsa – a mezzo-soprano and fellow composer - to champion his work and protect his legacy. In 1962 she published a biography of her late husband.

Watch Vasily Petrenko conduct the National Youth Orchestra in a performance of Respighi's [Roman Festivals](#) at the BBC Proms.

About the Music

Nikolai Miaskovsky (1881-1950): *Symphony No.21 in F-sharp minor, Op 51*

Composed: 1940

First Performed: 6 November 1940, Moscow, USSR State Symphony Orchestra, cond. Alexander Gauk

Unlike his younger contemporaries Prokofiev and Shostakovich, Nikolai Miaskovsky shied away from the ballet and opera theatres, and his vocal output is small. Introverted and melancholic by nature, he preferred to concentrate on symphonies and string quartets, where he could express himself in pure music. Of course, being a composer in Stalin's Soviet

Union he was often called upon to 'explain' his music and justify it in terms of so-called 'Socialist Realism'. But the music speaks for itself, less dramatically or brilliantly than that of Shostakovich or Prokofiev, but often with deep feeling, shaped with assured craftsmanship.

Of his 27 symphonies, this one is probably the best place to start. Just twenty minutes long, it is in one continuous movement, and as a portrait of its composer it could hardly be bettered. An energetic Allegro, full of contrast but always purposeful, is framed by a slow, haunting introduction and epilogue, both coloured by the darkly expressive, lonely clarinet solo heard at the start. Despite its prevailing elegiac, sadly contemplative mood, the symphony won its composer a Stalin Prize, First Class. But even that didn't protect Miaskovsky from being denounced viciously, along with Prokofiev and Shostakovich, in 1949. Sadly, unlike the two younger composers, he didn't live to see Stalin's death in 1953, or his music's subsequent rehabilitation.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): *Violin Concerto No.2 in G minor, Op 63*

1. Allegro moderato
2. Andante assai
3. Allegro, ben marcato

Composed: 1935

First Performed: 1 December 1935, Teatro Monumental, Madrid, Madrid Symphony Orchestra, Robert Soetens (violin), cond. Enrique Fernández-Arbós

In 1935, Prokofiev finally came to a decision that puzzled many of his friends – he decided to move back to his homeland. Russia was approaching the height of 'Terror', a period of public denunciations, terrifying show trials, of countless executions and late-night arrests. Why then, of all times? In fact, the Soviet Union had been courting him for some time, exploiting his growing disillusionment with life in Paris and America, his weariness with his career as a concert pianist and his evident acute homesickness. There were also rumours of heavy gambling debts, effectively cancelled by his move to Communist Russia. The Second Violin Concerto was written at a time when Prokofiev's

rootless professional lifestyle was proving excessively trying, however much he might have tried to make light of it. 'The number of places in which I wrote the Concerto shows the kind of nomadic concert-tour life I led then', he wrote. 'The main theme of the 1st movement was written in Paris, the first theme of the 2nd movement at Voronezh, the orchestration was finished in Baku, and the premiere was given in Madrid.'

Perhaps the music itself provides the answer. The first movement's opening theme may have been born in Paris, but for many it cries out 'Russia!' The violin leads off unaccompanied with what could easily be a Russian folk song. Edgy humour obtrudes from time to time, but much of the music is tender, reflective. This mood intensifies in the wonderful *Andante assai*, built around repetitions of a long, high-soaring violin melody, singing out above a kind of slow waltz accompaniment. A three-in-a-bar dance tempo dominates the finale too, though this is far too comically harsh and vibrant to be a sophisticated Viennese waltz, and the addition of clicking castanets indicates that Prokofiev had Spain very much in mind, where the Concerto would soon have its hugely successful premiere. It has been a concert favourite ever since.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943): *Études-Tableaux*, arr. Ottorino Respighi

2. *La mer et les mouettes* (The sea and the seagulls), Op 39 No 2
3. *Le Chaperon rouge et le loup* (Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf), Op 39 No 2
5. *Marche* (March), Op 39 No 9

Composed: 1916-17 (piano versions); arranged by Respighi, 1929
First Performed (in Respighi's arrangement): 20 November 1931,
Boston, Symphony Hall, Boston Symphony Orchestra, cond. Serge Koussevitzky

The title means 'Study Pictures' – but pictures of what? In public, Rachmaninov was evasive: the two cycles of solo pieces he'd entitled *Études-Tableaux* were 'musical evocations of external visual stimuli',

and for the rest – well, work it out for yourself. But when the American conductor Serge Koussevitzky asked him to select a set of *Études-Tableaux* for the composer Ottorino Respighi to orchestrate, Rachmaninov not only agreed (he selected five), but he took the Italian composer into his confidence about the nature of those mysterious ‘external visual stimuli’. Respighi duly gave his arrangements titles based on what Rachmaninov told him.

The three pieces in this concert all come from the second set of *Études-Tableaux*, published as Op 39. They’re the last things Rachmaninov wrote before leaving Russia for good in 1917. The sea in *La mer et les mouettes* is a calm one, mostly, but the mood is melancholy, enhanced by the plaintive cries of the seagulls. The hungry growls of the wolf, and Little Red Riding Hood’s attempts to flee, are easy to make out. But who wins in the end? In contrast to the original fairy-tale, it sounds as though the wolf does! Finally, we have the brilliant, ultimately joyous March.

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936): *Feste Romane*

1. ‘Circences’ (The Circus Maximus)
2. ‘Il Giubileo’ (The Jubilee)
3. ‘L’Ottobrata’ (The October Festival)
4. ‘Le Befana’ (The Epiphany)

Composed: 1928

First Performed: 21 February 1929, Carnegie Hall, New York, New York Philharmonic Orchestra, cond. Arturo Toscanini

When it comes to bravura orchestration and vivid tone-painting, nothing written in the twentieth century upstages Ottorino Respighi’s ‘Roman Trilogy’. These three spectacularly colourful symphonic poems – *Pines of Rome* (1917), *Fountains of Rome* (1924) and *Feste Romane* (‘Roman Festivals’) evoke the moods, sights and sounds of what is now the Italian capital city, Respighi’s home since 1913. Back in 1900, the 21-year-old Respighi had spent five months studying orchestration in St Petersburg with the acknowledged master of the art, Nikolai Rimsky-

Korsakov, and it shows. Respighi mixes his instrumental colours and creates luxurious musical aromas with the panache of a master chef.

Feste Romane is the wildest of the three pieces. It's also the most demanding for the orchestral players, and to a certain extent for the audience – the opening is quite a sonic onslaught! But brace yourself for the ride and you're in for a thrilling experience. The first movement depicts the often-grisly games of the Circus Maximus, where many gladiators and ancient Christians met their deaths. To a background of frenzied trumpet fanfares, we hear the chants of the martyrs, and even the growls and snarls of the lions to whom they were sacrificed. Christianity triumphant is then celebrated in 'Il Giubileo', with echoes of an old German Easter hymn (heard first of clarinets and bassoons). 'L'Ottobrata' portrays Roman harvest festivals, with a mandolin playing unmistakably Italian love serenades, and finally 'La Befana' gives us pomp and grandeur mixed with earthy popular merrymaking. In all this there is a serious point too: it is that extraordinarily rich mixture of pagan and Christian that makes Rome the fascinating, abundantly alive city it is today. Having completed *Feste Romane*, Respighi concluded that he'd employed 'the maximum of orchestral sonority and colour', and that he'd never be able to match it – from now on he turned to smaller, more intimate ensembles. He was probably right. In so many ways, *Feste Romane* is 'peak tone poem!'