JOHN WILSON CONDUCTS RACHMANINOFF

Symphony Hall, Birmingham
Wednesday 1 December 2021, 2.15pm

CONCERT PROGRAMME: £4
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JOHN WILSON
CONDUCTS
RACHMANINOFF

Symphony Hall, Birmingham
Wednesday 1 December 2021, 2.15pm

John Wilson – Conductor
Ning Feng – Violin

Gershwin Porgy and Bess: Symphonic Picture 23’
Glazunov Violin Concerto 21’
Interval
Rachmaninoff Symphony No.3 38’

There will be a 20-minute interval during this performance, which will end at approximately 3.45pm

To ensure that everyone enjoys this performance, please make sure your mobile phone is switched off or set to silent. Any noise (such as whispering or coughing) can be very distracting – the acoustics of the Hall will highlight any such sound. If you use a hearing aid in conjunction with our infra-red hearing enhancement system, please make sure you have collected a receiver unit and that your hearing aid is switched to the ‘T’ position, with the volume level appropriately adjusted.

Audiences are welcome to take photographs before and after the concert, and during breaks in the music for applause. If you would like to take photos at these points please ensure you do not use a flash, and avoid disturbing other members of the audience around you. Please note that taking photographs or filming the concert while the orchestra is playing is not permitted as it is distracting both for other audience members and for the musicians on stage.

If you have any queries about the CBSO please visit our Information Desk situated in the centre of the ICC Mall. CBSO staff are available from 30 minutes before the concert and again at the interval, and will be happy to help.
George Gershwin (1898-1937) (arr. Robert Russell Bennett)

_Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture_

Alexander Konstantinovich Glazunov (1865-1936)

_Violin Concerto in A minor, Op.82_

_Moderato – Andante –
Cadenza –
Allegro_

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

_Symphony No.3 in A minor, Op.44_

_Lento – Allegro moderato
Adagio ma non troppo
Allegro_

On 12 February 1924 at Aeolian Hall, New York, a panel of international experts gathered for an unusual concert. It was entitled “What is American Music?”, and as the young composer-pianist George Gershwin took his place in front of Paul Whiteman’s famous dance-band and a solo clarinet swelled into a wailing upwards slide, that question was about to receive its definitive answer. Gershwin’s _Rhapsody in Blue_ was the music of a new world. Everyone present sensed the change – from the performers and audience, to the critics and the expert panel: which included the superstar violinists Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz, the conductor Leopold Stokowski, and the composers Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

By now, Rachmaninoff was used to new starts. He had had his first in St Petersburg in 1897, when the premiere of his First Symphony had gone disastrously wrong despite the best efforts of its conductor, Rachmaninoff’s fellow composer Alexander Glazunov. The next, and more permanent, transformation occurred in 1917: the year of the Bolshevik revolution. Both men would die in exile; Glazunov in Paris, Rachmaninoff in Beverly Hills. But meanwhile life continued. Rachmaninoff was something of a jazz fan; Glazunov was
more reserved, but just as thrilled by the reception that he received when he visited America in 1929. Both of them were aware of the astonishing talent of the young George Gershwin – for the simple reason that, as a musician in jazz-age America (or Paris), it was impossible not to be.

On Catfish Row
Still, Gershwin admitted that his decision to compose an opera took a certain (his word) chutzpah. And it took a long time for *Porgy and Bess* to overcome the prejudices that beset its premiere in Boston on 30 September 1935. But *Porgy and Bess* really is an opera, not a musical. In the impoverished African-American fishing community of Catfish Row, Charleston, the crippled Porgy shows tenderness to another outsider, Bess. Some judge their love; others show compassion – but this is a world where any happiness is fragile, and Gershwin’s music never hold back.

This orchestral sequence of highlights from *Porgy and Bess* was created in 1942 by the legendary Broadway arranger Robert Russell Bennett (1894-1981). Bennett had orchestrated three of Gershwin’s Broadway shows and was so respected in showbusiness that when Stravinsky had a ballet on Broadway, he received a telegram from the producer reading “YOUR MUSIC GREAT SUCCESS. COULD BE SENSATIONAL SUCCESS IF YOU WOULD AUTHORIZE ROBERT RUSSELL BENNETT RETOUCH ORCHESTRATION”. (Stravinsky replied: “SATISFIED WITH GREAT SUCCESS”). Bennett’s “Symphonic Picture” begins with a panorama of Catfish Row on a balmy evening, with the cries of strawberry-sellers and crab vendors, before whirling back round to the opera’s energetic prelude and Clara’s great lullaby of still waters and sweltering heat: *Summertime*.

Porgy enters with *I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin’* before Act Two’s deadly hurricane strikes Catfish Row and we hear the tender love duet Bess, *You is My Woman Now*. The cheerful bustle of the church picnic on Kittiwah Island is marred by the cynicism of the smooth-talking Sportin’ Life (*There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York, It Ain’t Necessarily So*). And finally, in one last...
swell of heartbroken hope, comes the opera’s finale: *Oh Lawd, I'm On my Way* – as Porgy, in his goat cart, calls for divine help as he sets out to rescue Bess. At the final New York performance, Gershwin just sat there in tears.

“The audience was astonished when, in response to calls for the composer, a boy took the stage in his school uniform.”

**The Russian Mozart**

A lifetime earlier on the other side of the world, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov never forgot the day in December 1879 when he first met the 15-year old Alexander ‘Sasha’ Glazunov. “He was a charming boy, with beautiful eyes, who played the piano very clumsily. Elementary theory proved unnecessary for him … His musical development progressed not by the day, but literally by the hour.” Before long there was talk of a “Russian Mozart”, and Glazunov premiered his First Symphony at the age of 17. “The audience was astonished” recalled Rimsky-Korsakov “when, in response to calls for the composer, a boy took the stage in his school uniform.”

As an adult composer, Glazunov’s technical skill was breathtaking. He taught himself to play almost every orchestral instrument to a professional standard, and his only Violin Concerto – written in the summer of 1904, at his country dacha at Ozerki outside St Petersburg – was recognised immediately as one of the most gloriously songful showpieces for that instrument since Mendelssohn. Glazunov knew better than anyone how to make an orchestra sparkle and how to make a melody sing. And from the very first bars of the Violin Concerto, that’s precisely what he does.

Over pulsing woodwind chords, the violin sings: a smoky, syncopated melody, deep on the violin’s lowest string. It doesn’t stay there long, and as woodwinds call and respond, the solo violin sinks into a melting second theme. The orchestra joins in, rapturously; the triangle jangles in
celebration, and the music unwinds into a completely new subject – a languorous Andante. The music grows more complex, but no matter how craggy the climax, or how nimble the violin’s response, the music never stops singing. The opening themes sail by once more, and with a hanging chord, the orchestra falls away, leaving the violin alone in the concerto’s central Cadenza.

This is the turning point of the Concerto, as the violin, unaccompanied, works through everything we’ve heard so far. The violin spirals upwards, and then, with a drumroll and a ringing fanfare, the time for singing is over – we’re about to dance. The violin leads the orchestra in a lilting jig; the woodwinds pirouette, the glockenspiel sparkles, the horns whoop for joy, and finally orchestra and soloist break into a headlong, brilliant run for the finish. Cymbals burst like fireworks over the closing bars.

**Symphonies and Speedboats**
13 years later, in December 1917, Sergei Rachmaninoff left Russia forever (Glazunov stayed on for another decade, determined to protect his students – who included the teenage Shostakovich – from the worst of Soviet cruelty). As he pursued a new career as an international piano virtuoso this stern, serious man evolved into that very 20th century phenomenon: a celebrity. In 1931 he began to build his family a new home, “Senar” – a gleaming modernist villa above Lake Lucerne, equipped with all mod cons and a speedboat, which Rachmaninoff drove so fast that it nearly capsized. Four years later in May 1935, he quietly began work on a new large-scale piece, and a year later, on 30 June 1936, it was complete. He wrote to his sister-in-law Sophia Satina:

“Yesterday morning I finished my work and you are the first to be notified of it. It is a symphony... With all my thoughts I thank God that I was able to accomplish it!”

He intended the symphony for the conductor Leopold Stokowski and his Philadelphia Orchestra. With its dazzling precision and silken strings, the “Philadelphia sound” was world famous, and there’s an American energy – a big-band swagger – about the Third Symphony. Although it was composed in Switzerland, in a sense it’s Rachmaninoff’s symphony from the New World.

**Old Worlds for New**
The Third Symphony was premiered in Philadelphia on 6 November 1936, and you don’t need to know much about Rachmaninoff’s life to guess a lot more. The ghost of a Russian Orthodox chant opens the symphony, but it’s palely coloured – like a distant memory. And then with a great orchestral flourish and a pounding rhythm, the symphony thunders into life, with a bittersweet song for two oboes. Next the cellos sing out: a soaring melody, backed by glowing horns. Passion builds, the music explodes and as cymbals crash and Hollywood trumpets blaze across the sky, the whole orchestra sinks back, sighing, against a starlit panorama of glittering woodwinds.

That’s the start. Past and present? Nostalgia and optimism? Rachmaninoff, like Mozart or Beethoven, jumps back to the beginning and repeats these ideas
straight through before developing them in music that’s first nervous, and then shatteringly violent. But it’s the chant that haunts the closing bars. “The whole world is open to me, and success awaits me everywhere.” Rachmaninoff told a journalist in 1930. “Only one place is closed to me, and that is my own country – Russia.”

So if that helps, think of it throughout the Adagio – as harp and solo horn sing a sorrowful incantation, and a solo violin launches a long melancholy ballad. There’s a shudder, a start, and suddenly this slow music transforms itself into a bristling scherzo, glistening with chimes and cymbals, that gradually accelerates into a warlike gallop. It disintegrates with a crash; and that ghostly chant theme picks its way ominously through the twilight.

The Finale sweeps the blues away in a sudden burst of bustling energy. Well, that’s how it begins, anyway: the energy ebbs amid aching string melodies and moments of eerie calm. Rachmaninoff tries everything to get the music moving again. In the end, it’s a playful little theme for the flute – sounding very like a Russian folkdance – that saves the day. It accelerates, the orchestra crashes and jangles; and there’s a sudden blissful glimpse of blue skies and freedom before that opening chant blazes out on the brass and the symphony slams, full speed, into the final bar.

Programme notes © Richard Bratby

“The whole world is open to me, and success awaits me everywhere. Only one place is closed to me, and that is my own country – Russia.”
We know that not everyone wants to drive or get public transport into Birmingham – especially during the darker, winter months – and the CBSO is very fortunate to have dedicated volunteer group bookers from within our audience who organise various coach and group trips throughout the Season for us. This friendly service currently sees coaches run from Lichfield and Cheltenham, enabling people to attend who wouldn’t otherwise be able to do so.

You can find a full list of the coaches running this Season on our website at cbso.co.uk/coaches

If you would like to find out more about bringing a group to our concerts from your local area or feel you might have the time to work with us as a volunteer to bring a group on a coach from a new area of the West Midlands, then we’d love to hear from you.

Please email marketing@cbso.co.uk to find out more. Groups of 8 or more can make use of a ticket reservation facility through the Box Office and receive a 20% discount on ticket prices, plus 2 free tickets if buying 20+ tickets for one concert.
JOHN WILSON
CONDUCTOR

John Wilson is in demand at the highest level across the globe, regularly guest conducting the world’s finest orchestras. In recent seasons these have included the London Symphony, London Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Budapest Festival, Oslo Philharmonic, Bavarian Radio Symphony, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic and Sydney Symphony orchestras, and productions at English National Opera and Glyndebourne Summer Festival.

For many years Wilson appeared widely across the UK and abroad with the John Wilson Orchestra and in 2018 he relaunched the Sinfonia of London, with whom he has recorded several award-winning CDs covering a huge range of repertoire, from Respighi through to Britten and Dutilleux. In 2021 Wilson and the Sinfonia of London made their much-anticipated debut performance at the BBC Proms, and were described by The Guardian as “truly outstanding”.

Wilson has a large and varied discography, and the most recent recordings with the Sinfonia of London have received exceptional acclaim. The Respighi Roman Trilogy recording won the Orchestral category in the BBC Music Magazine Awards 2021 and was described by The Observer as “Massive, audacious and vividly played”. Of the Dutilleux disc, the Financial Times said the recording is “bewitchingly played and imaginatively directed by Wilson…. This disc of early works by the fastidious French composer Henri Dutilleux succeeds beyond expectation”.

Born in Gateshead, Wilson studied composition and conducting at the Royal College of Music where, in 2011, he was made a Fellow. In March 2019, Wilson was awarded the prestigious ISM Distinguished Musician Award for his services to music and in 2021 was appointed Henry Wood Chair of Conducting at the Royal Academy of Music.
NING FENG
VIOLIN

Ning Feng is recognised internationally as an artist of great lyricism, innate musicality and stunning virtuosity. He performs across the globe with major orchestras and conductors, and in recital and chamber concerts in some of the most important international series and festivals.

Feng has toured Europe, Asia and Australia with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra under van Zweden, he has toured China with many orchestras including the Budapest Festival Orchestra and Iván Fischer, with whom he has also performed several times in Budapest, with the Berlin Konzerthaus Orchester under Lawrence Foster, and with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra with whom he has also worked many times.

In China, Ning Feng is held in the highest regard, appearing with all the major Chinese orchestras, visiting international orchestras and in recital. In 2020/21 he was Artist-in-Residence with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and in the same season he performed the Beethoven Violin Concerto with Shanghai Symphony, Guangzhou Symphony and China Philharmonic Orchestras.

In chamber music Feng has performed many times with Igor Levit at the Schubertiade Festival, and across Germany and London, including both Wigmore Hall and Barbican Centre. He has performed at Kissinger Sommer Festival, and has collaborated with artists including Edgar Moreau, Daniel Müller-Schott and Nicholas Angelich.

Feng records for Channel Classics and his most recent disc, Virtuosismo, was released in 2019. As well as his acclaimed recording of Bach’s complete solo works for violin, his discography also includes concerti by Elgar, Finzi, Tchaikovsky, Bruch (Scottish Fantasy), works for violin and orchestra by Sarasate, Lalo, Ravel and Bizet/Waxman and, with the Dragon Quartet, works by Schubert, Dvořák, Borodin, Shostakovich and Weinberg.

Born in Chengdu, China, Feng studied at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music with Weimin Hu, the Hanns Eisler School of Music (Berlin) with Antje Weithaas and the Royal Academy of Music (London) with Hu Kun, where he was the first student ever to be awarded 100% for his final recital. The recipient of prizes at the Hanover International, Queen Elisabeth and Yehudi Menuhin International violin competitions,

Feng was First Prize winner of the 2005 Michael Hill International Violin Competition (New Zealand), and in 2006 won first prize in the International Paganini Competition.

He plays the 1710 Stradivari violin known as the “Vieuxtemps Hauser”, by kind arrangement with Premiere Performances of Hong Kong, and plays on strings by Thomastik-Infeld, Vienna.
Under the baton of its Music Director Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) is the flagship of musical life in Birmingham and the West Midlands, and one of the world’s great orchestras.

Based in Symphony Hall, Birmingham, in a normal year the orchestra performs over 150 concerts each year in Birmingham, the UK and around the world, playing music that ranges from classics to contemporary, film music and even symphonic disco. With a far-reaching community programme and a family of choruses and ensembles, it is involved in every aspect of music-making in the Midlands. But at its centre is a team of 75 superb professional musicians, and a 100-year tradition of making the world’s greatest music in the heart of Birmingham.

That local tradition started with the orchestra’s very first symphonic concert in 1920 – conducted by Sir Edward Elgar. Ever since then, through war, recessions, social change and civic renewal, the CBSO has been proud to be Birmingham’s orchestra. Under principal conductors including Adrian Boult, George Weldon, Andrzej Panufnik and Louis Frémaux, the CBSO won an artistic reputation that spread far beyond the Midlands. But it was when it discovered the young British conductor Simon Rattle in 1980 that the CBSO became internationally famous – and showed how the arts can help give a new sense of direction to a whole city.
Home and Away
Rattle’s successors Sakari Oramo (1998-2008) and Andris Nelsons (2008-15) helped cement that global reputation, and continued to build on the CBSO’s tradition of flying the flag for Birmingham. As the only professional symphony orchestra based between Bournemouth and Manchester, the orchestra tours regularly in Britain – and much further afield. The CBSO has travelled to Japan and the United Arab Emirates in previous seasons, and in December 2016 made its debut tour of China. And its recordings continue to win acclaim. In 2008, the CBSO’s recording of Saint-Saëns’ complete piano concertos was named Best Classical Recording of the last 30 years by Gramophone.

Now, under the dynamic leadership of Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Associate Conductor Michael Seal and Assistant Conductor Jaume Santonja Espinós, the CBSO continues to do what it does best – playing great music for the people of Birmingham and the Midlands.

Meet the Family
The CBSO Chorus – a symphonic choir made up of “amateur professionals”, trained by Simon Halsey CBE – is famous in its own right. The CBSO Children’s Chorus and Youth Chorus showcase singers as young as six. Through its unauditioned community choir – CBSO SO Vocal in Selly Oak – the CBSO shares its know-how and passion for music with communities throughout the city. The CBSO Youth Orchestra gives that same opportunity to young instrumentalists aged 14-21, offering high-level training to the next generation of orchestral musicians alongside top international conductors and soloists.

These groups are sometimes called the “CBSO family” – over 650 amateur musicians of all ages and backgrounds, who work alongside the orchestra to make and share great music. But the CBSO’s tradition of serving the community goes much further. Its Learning and Participation programme touches tens of thousands of lives a year, ranging from workshops in nurseries to projects that energise whole neighbourhoods. And everyone’s welcome at CBSO Centre on Berkeley Street. As well as being a friendly, stylish performance venue for the lunchtime concert series Centre Stage and contemporary jazz concerts by Jazzlines, the CBSO’s rehearsal base is home to Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Ex Cathedra. Having recently enjoyed it’s 100th birthday, the CBSO, more than ever, remains the beating heart of musical life in the UK’s Second City.

The CBSO recently announced that Kazuki Yamada has been appointed as its Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor with effect from 1 April 2023.


CITY OF BIRMINGHAM SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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List correct as at 25 November 2021
Thursday 9 December 2021, 7.30pm
Symphony Hall, Birmingham

New Worlds
Gergely Madaras – Conductor
Sir Simon Keenlyside – Baritone
Raphael Wallfisch – Cello

Sibelius Finlandia 8’
Dove In Exile (CBSO Centenary Commission: UK Premiere) 30’
Dvořák Symphony No.9 (New World) 40’

Grand passions, glorious tunes: Sibelius’ Finlandia and Dvořák’s New World are two classics that just never get old (even if the Hovis advert was nearly 50 years ago now!). But tonight, we’re creating new memories too, with the UK premiere of In Exile by Jonathan Dove: a heartfelt musical journey for two great British soloists, written specially for us by one of our most communicative – and brilliant – living composers.

Thursday 13 January 2022, 7.30pm
Symphony Hall, Birmingham

Sibelius: Symphony No.2
Ryan Bancroft – Conductor
Clara-Jumi Kang – Violin

Coleridge-Taylor Solemn Prelude 10’
Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in E minor 27’
Sibelius Symphony No.2 43’

Sibelius’ Second Symphony begins quietly – even playfully. But by the time it’s run its course, trumpets are raising the roof and the air is ringing with a melody that sweeps everything before it. It’s a thrilling climax to a concert that opens with the soul-stirring music of a forgotten English romantic, and stars the extraordinary Clara-Jumi Kang in a violin concerto that always sounds fresh.
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Get closer to the music, the orchestra and its musicians – we’d love you to be part of it.

Joining as a member will not only provide vital support to help the CBSO recover from the Covid crisis but your gift will also be matched pound for pound thanks to the generous support of a CBSO member of our campaign board. Visit cbso.co.uk/membership for more information and to join online.
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