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# Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

## Programme Notes Online

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- informative programme notes, many newly written
- photos and brief biographies of conductors and soloists
- a list of contract orchestra members
- texts or translations of sung items
- a list of choir members, where appropriate
- at many events a separate list of the players at that particular event will be available

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Sunday Afternoon Classics

## Russian Passion

Sunday 19 May 2019 2.30pm

### PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

#### Cossack Dance from *Mazeppa*

Based on a narrative poem by Pushkin called *Poltova* (1829), Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa* was first performed in Moscow in 1884 and received its British premiere here in Liverpool four years later. Set in seventeenth-century Ukraine, it mainly concerns Mazeppa's plot against Tsar Peter the Great, though as so often in opera, there are also various love interests and other intrigues involved, including abduction.

In Act I of the opera there is a celebration when various groups arrive to entertain Mazeppa. Among them is a troupe of Cossack dancers, whose vodka-fuelled athleticism is superbly captured in this short piece. Yet Tchaikovsky had an unerring instinct for dance forms and the effectiveness of the whole comes from its deft contrast between its virtuosic physicality (there is some very busy string writing) and its more lyrical and flowing elements, all so colourfully orchestrated in Tchaikovsky's inimitable fashion. It was certainly quite a party!

### SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

#### *Sinfonia Concertante*, Op.125 for cello and orchestra

*Andante* / At a walking pace

*Allegro* / Fast

*Andante con moto* – *allegretto* – *allegro marcato* / At a walking pace, with movement – quite fast – fast and with emphasis

Prokofiev's *Sinfonia Concertante* is fascinating for various reasons. Not only does it derive from two very distinct phases of its composer's career but it is the product of two of the Soviet Union's finest musical minds.

In 1918 Prokofiev had left the Soviet Union, with the agreement of its authorities, to live and work in the West, mainly in Paris. Here he established himself as a leading avant-garde musical voice. Shortly before leaving Paris to return to his homeland in 1933 Prokofiev had made sketches for a cello concerto. It was not until 1938, however, that he fully realised the composition though its premiere was a flop. “First-rate music, but somehow it doesn’t quite come off”, wrote fellow composer Nikolai Miaskovsky. The concerto was laid aside.

Subsequently, in 1949 came along the staggeringly talented 22-year-old cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, one of the finest musical performers of the 20th century. Having written a cello sonata for this remarkable talent, Prokofiev was then inspired to further explore the cello’s potential as a solo instrument and the pair spent some weeks at Prokofiev’s country home during the summer of 1951 where together they rigorously revised the original concerto. Prokofiev continued work on the piece over the next few months and it was eventually completed the following year. Its premiere took place in February 1952. Naturally Rostropovich was the soloist with Sviatoslav Richter on the podium (the only time the great pianist conducted a major public concert).

As a result of this rather complex and drawn out creative process the piece is something of a hybrid between Prokofiev’s early, more experimental Western European style and the more populist idiom he adopted on his return to the Soviet Union. The first movement has the sense of a slow march, though it contains shimmering effects too, the considerable presence of the orchestra in its central section justifying the work’s title as a ‘Symphonic Concerto’. The second movement is simply fiendish in its virtuosity (Rostropovich was definitely up for a challenge) and the third contains a theme celebrated by Prokofiev’s biographer’s Israel Nestyev as “one of the greatest, broadest and most powerful that Prokofiev ever wrote”.

## **ALEXANDER GLAZUNOV (1865-1936)**

### **Raymonda: Suite Op.57a**

*Introduction*

*Fantastic Waltz*

*Grand Adagio*

*Act III Variations*

*Dance of the Arabian Boys – Entrance of the Saracens*

*Spanish Dance*

For much of the 20th century, including the last decades of his life, Glazunov was widely regarded as an anachronism, a composer too steeped in the tradition of 19th-century Russian nationalism to have much relevance in the era of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Indeed, in the words of the latter (who was actually a one-time pupil and great admirer of Glazunov), “For today’s young musicians, Glazunov is like some Slavic wardrobe from Grandfather’s furniture”. Today, however, Glazunov can be heard with less prejudiced ears and understood as a significant, albeit conservative link in the Russian musical tradition.

Glazunov was born in St Petersburg in 1865 and from an early age displayed outstanding musical ability. At fifteen he began lessons with Rimsky-Korsakov and by the age of sixteen had completed the first of his nine symphonies (the relationship with Rimsky-Korsakov was an enduring one, and the pair went on to edit and complete a number of works by their great Russian predecessors, Mussorgsky and Borodin). In 1905 Glazunov became Director of the St Petersburg Conservatoire, a post he was to hold throughout the years of war and subsequent revolution, apparently fortified by illicit vodka procured by the father of his student, Dmitri Shostakovich. In 1928 Glazunov left what was by then the Soviet Union to fulfil concert engagements as a conductor and finally made his home in Paris, where he died in 1936.

*Raymonda* is one of three ballet scores Glazunov composed for performances in St Petersburg around the turn of the 20th century, productions choreographed by the great Marius Petipa. It tells the tale of Raymonda who loves two men: the crusader knight Jean de Brienne, to whom she has been betrothed since childhood, and the Saracen Abderakhman, who woos and tries to seduce her. Although Jean kills Abderakhman, leading to a splendid wedding feast at the ballet's climax, Raymonda will never forget her encounter with Abderakhman. This attractive and vibrant suite from the ballet shows why it is widely regarded as an equal to those of Tchaikovsky. A Spanish Dance – not normally performed as part of the suite – provides a wonderfully ambient conclusion.

## ARAM KHACHATURIAN (1903-1978)

### **Spartacus: Suite**

*Variation of Aegina and Bacchanalia*

*Scene and Dance with Crotalums*

*Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia*

*Dance of Gaditanae and Victory of Spartacus*

Khachaturian was a highly influential Soviet composer, the writer of nationalistic music that often drew on the influence of the folk songs of his native Armenia. His score for the ballet *Spartacus* won him the Lenin Prize in 1954, its subject matter – a slave revolt led by Spartacus against the imperialist Romans – was wholly in accord with Stalinist ideology. Nevertheless, despite being an enthusiastic communist himself, along with fellow composers Shostakovich and Prokofiev, Khachaturian was at one time denounced by the fickle Soviet authorities and forced to make a public apology for supposedly being ‘anti-popular’. This now seems absurd.

The ballet remains popular in Russia and elsewhere to this day, but Khachaturian also formed four suites of music from his ballet score that work superbly in their own right as concert pieces. Tonight’s sequence opens with the quite intoxicating ‘Variation of Aegina and Bacchanalia’, referring as it does to the Roman god of wine. Suitably inebriated, it is full of wonderful percussion effects and unpredictable twists and turns in its musical progress. ‘Scene and Dance with Crotalums’ (a crotalum in Ancient Greek being a percussion instrument, a sort of clapper or castanet) begins with a slow introduction dominated by strings and horns. Thereafter Khachaturian’s Armenian dance roots come to the fore in the most ebullient and rhythmically infectious manner, though the movement eventually fades away into silence.

‘Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia’ – famously used as the theme tune for the nautical 1970s TV series *The Onedin Line* – has become one of the most well-liked pieces of classical music ever written. As well as its seafaring associations, the Adagio has featured in films, figure-skating routines, gymnastics, and even became the hit Andy Williams song, ‘Journey’s End’. Certainly this particular piece could hardly be described as anti-popular! Two extended renditions of its gloriously expansive main theme frame a more agitated central section.

The initial slow tread of ‘Dance of Gaditanae’ gives way to a masterfully controlled exercise in gradual musical acceleration. The process culminates in the triumphant ‘Victory of Spartacus’ as the slaves overcome their Roman overlords – music that can barely contain its own uproarious energy.

Programme notes by Anthony Bateman © 2019