

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra November 3 programme complementary content

In 2007, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and its then new conductor Vasily Petrenko made a landmark recording of Tchaikovsky's thrilling and tormented *Manfred Symphony*.

But there's nothing quite like hearing the work performed live, and there's an opportunity to do just that in the hotly anticipated pair of concerts taking place this week – as well as the chance to enjoy listening to the brilliant German cellist Alban Gerhardt.

In addition, this companion page draws together a range of complementary content that we hope will help shine further light on the pieces, the people who composed them and the performers bringing them to life here in Hope Street.

James MacMillan – *For Zoe*

Tonight's concert opens with *For Zoe* – a piece for cor anglais, strings and harp composed by Sir James MacMillan. The piece was written in memory of Zoe Kitson, former Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra Principal Cor Anglais, who sadly passed away earlier this year.

James Macmillan is an acclaimed composer and conductor, hailing from Scotland. He has undertaken several prominent commissions over the years, including composing the anthem *Who shall separate us?* for the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II.

Vasily Petrenko

Vasily Petrenko needs little introduction to Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra audiences.

The Leningrad-born conductor returns to the Hope Street stage for these two autumn concerts in his formal role as Conductor Laureate.

Petrenko left the city in 2021 after 15 years at Liverpool Philharmonic and is currently music director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and chief conductor of the European Union Youth Orchestra.

He is also the new associate conductor at the Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León.

Recent appearances have included concerts in Australia, Colorado and at the Royal Albert Hall, where he conducted Mahler's Eighth Symphony. Forthcoming engagements include concerts in Berlin, Cleveland, Madrid, Barcelona and Amsterdam.

He will also return to Philharmonic Hall in May 2023 to conduct the UK premiere of Bernd Richard Deutsch's new work, along with pieces by Strauss and Scriabin.

Alban Gerhardt

German cellist Alban Gerhardt was born in Berlin in 1969, in his own words, “into a household filled with music”.

The son of a coloratura soprano and a father who played violin in the Berlin Philharmonic, Gerhardt tried to learn violin without success before beginning to study both cello and piano from the age of eight.

His first public performance came aged 18, when he played none other than Haydn’s *Cello Concerto in D major* with a chamber orchestra in the Berliner Philharmonie.

He studied in Berlin and also studied chamber music in Cincinnati for a year. Under tuition from the sought-after Boris Pergamenschikov, he began to win both national and international competitions.

Gerhardt has also become much in demand as a soloist and recitalist.

Outside the concert hall, he has taken part in special projects in schools, hospitals and young offender institutions, as well as live performances on Germany’s rail commuter routes.

Among his many recording accolades he has won three ECHO Klassik Awards, while his Deutsche Grammophon recording of Unsuk Chin’s *Cello Concerto*, which Gerhardt premiered at the BBC Proms, won the BBC Music Magazine Award in 2015.

Forthcoming engagements include performances with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Minnesota Symphony Orchestra.

Anton Rubinstein

Along with his younger brother Nikolai, Anton Rubinstein became one of the most important and influential figures in the development of nineteenth century Russian music.

Together, the brothers founded the country’s two great conservatories – Nikolai in Moscow and Anton in St Petersburg.

But in a way that was the least of Anton Rubinstein’s feats.

Born in 1829 into a prosperous merchant family in Vkhvatinet, in modern-day Moldova, he started learning piano with his mother at the age of five. From those humble beginnings came one of the great piano virtuosos of the century.

But along with being a pianist, teacher and conductor, Rubinstein was also a prolific composer whose canon included almost 20 operas, six symphonies, five piano concertos and a host of chamber music and tone poems.

He composed his Second Cello Concerto in the summer of 1874, a decade after he had written his first and while taking a break from working on his Fourth Symphony and what would become his Fifth Piano Concerto.

It was published in 1875 and dedicated to the Italian cellist Alfredo Carlo Piatti.

Did you know? A 13-year-old Rubinstein performed in England in 1842, where he met Felix Mendelssohn in London. He returned to England as part of a European tour in 1868.

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky

When Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky first heard the pitch for a symphony based on Lord Byron's supernatural poem *Manfred*, he was less than enthused by the idea.

It was fellow composer (and member of 'the Five') Mily Balakirev who had suggested the tale after being sent a scenario by Russian music critic Vladimir Stasov.

But Tchaikovsky's tepid reaction eventually turned much warmer following a sojourn surrounded by the Swiss Alps – the same dramatic landscape which had inspired the exiled Byron's Faustian verse almost 70 years before, and where the Russian's close friend Iosef Kotek was dying from tuberculosis.

Settled in his new manor house home near Klin, where he read, walked, composed and was 'contented, cheerful and at peace', in May 1885 the composer embarked on his epic new work, one which would take him four months to complete.

In a letter to his patron Nadezhda von Meck he admitted: "Never before have I expended such labour and exertion as on the symphony I am now writing."

The symphony, dedicated to Balakirev, was premiered in Moscow in 1886.

About the Music

James MacMillan (1959-): *For Zoe*

You may have heard James MacMillan's wonderful anthem *Who shall separate us?* in the Queen's funeral service recently – quite possibly the hit of the occasion. He's absolutely marvellous at writing not just for chorus, which is one of his specialities, but for public occasions and catching a public mood.

In this case, he's done that rather beautifully. *For Zoe* is a remarkable piece for strings, harp and solo cor anglais which was commissioned in memory of Zoe Kitson, who was the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's Principal Cor Anglais. MacMillan has captured the mood beautifully in this little elegiac piece. You get the impression with a lot of contemporary composers that they're writing about themselves or for themselves, and many of them admit that. But James MacMillan has always had a feeling in his music that he is writing for others, and his ability to capture a mood or answer a need in his music is something that's marked him out as special composer.

Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894): Cello Concerto No.2 in D Minor, Op 96

1. Allegro moderato
2. Andante
3. Allegro

Rubinstein's cello concerto is very interesting because in the 1870s when it was written, cello concertos were incredibly rare. In fact, it's said that when Brahms discovered Dvořák's cello concerto – which he wrote right at the end of the nineteenth century – his reaction was "Oh I wish I'd known that you could write a cello concerto like this, I'd have written one years ago!"

Rubinstein's decision to compose a cello concerto was quite unusual therefore, but there was a cellist called Davydov – who Tchaikovsky called the “Tsar of the Cellists” – and Rubinstein felt that he really needed a good concert piece to show off Davydov's talents as a cellist. It's interesting that this cello concerto is not really a kind of virtuoso display piece. Although there's some quite difficult writing in it, it's much more about the lyrical, soulful side of the cello. Rubinstein clearly sensed that this would be an excellent vehicle for expressing what he, like many other nationalistically-inclined Russian composers, felt about the folk music of Russia, which is music of such strength, feeling and character. Compared to a lot of other folk music, it has an extraordinary depth and power to it, even today. And it's that lyrical, folk-coloured side of the cello that Rubinstein concentrates on most of all in the cello concerto, and it does make a very appealing piece of music. There's some fireworks in the finale of course, because you need to give a virtuoso soloist some chance to show off his acrobatic powers on the instrument, but in the end, it's a piece very much about soul.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-93): Symphony in B minor, *Manfred*, Op 58

1. Lento lugubre
2. Vivace con spirito
3. Andante con moto
4. Allegro con fuoco

Composed: 1885

First Performed: 23 March 1886, Moscow, cond. Max Erdmansdörfer

Manfred, the hero of a long poem by Lord Byron, is the archetypal romantic outsider. Tormented by a sense of guilt he can't fully explain, he wanders the Alps longing for redemption, distraction, or best of all oblivion. It was a subject that appeared guaranteed to appeal to Tchaikovsky, often prone to gloomy, self-tormenting introspection and also tormented by guilt – perhaps due to his suppressed homosexuality, or perhaps the cause was buried in his unconscious (like Manfred's). But when the composer Mily Balakirev suggested to Tchaikovsky that he write a dramatic symphony on the subject, presenting him with a detailed scheme as to how to structure it, Tchaikovsky was evasive. Was this because the subject was potentially too close to his heart?

Eventually Tchaikovsky started work on his *Manfred* Symphony, on a much bigger scale than any of his numbered symphonies and employing the biggest orchestra he'd ever used. The work was gruelling, and Tchaikovsky's opinion of it fluctuated wildly – but then it often did when he was really engaged with a subject. Ever since its premiere in 1886, *Manfred* has divided the crowds: for some it's one of his greatest works, for others it's sprawling and inconsistent, especially in its long finale. But performed with conviction and understanding, it can feel like a uniquely personal revelation, and the thrilling tragic tune that ends the first movement and forms the climax of the finale is one of the greatest Tchaikovsky ever created. Not Byron's Manfred, but Tchaikovsky himself stands before us.

In the first movement, the hero (depicted by the downward-plunging opening motif) wanders alone in the Alps, assailed by memories of his lost ideal love, Astarte, and of nameless crimes. He cries for release, but without hope. In the exquisitely scored Scherzo he encounters the 'Alpine Fairy', a famous optical illusion at mountain waterfalls, but here suggesting occult dimensions. The peaceful regularity of Alpine rural life forms an idyllic contrast in the slow movement – until Manfred's motif returns like the proverbial spectre at the feast. Finally, Manfred enters on a hellish subterranean orgy. Things look bad when he's discovered, but the ghost of Astarte appears and pardons him. The tragic first movement theme returns, but then hymn-like music, enhanced by the organ, leads to peaceful release and the rest Manfred has long sought.