

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra February 9 programme complementary content

Kaleidoscopic colour and epic melody combine in this unmissable Thursday night concert at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall.

The all-Russian programme includes Rachmaninov's mighty Second Piano Concerto, alongside enticing works by Mussorgsky and the lesser-known Nikolai Miaskovsky.

Watch Stephen Johnson talking about the concert programme [here](#).

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.

Kahchun Wong

Singapore-born conductor [Kahchun Wong](#) first came to international attention in 2016 when he won the prestigious [Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition](#).

He played the cornet in his primary school brass band, and later the trumpet in the Singapore Armed Forces band during his national service, before taking up composing and then conducting. He studied at the Yong Siew Conservatory of Music and then at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler Berlin.

In 2016, along with [Marina Mahler](#), he co-founded Project Infinitude – an inclusive arts initiative that works with children with special needs in underserved communities and from diverse backgrounds.

Wong was chief conductor of the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra from 2018-22 and has been principal guest conductor of the Japanese Philharmonic since 2021. Next season he will take over the post of [chief conductor](#).

He last appeared at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall in December 2018, when he conducted the [Sorcerer's Apprentice](#).

Benjamin Grosvenor

Multi award-winning pianist [Benjamin Grosvenor](#) is recognised for his sonorous lyricism and understated brilliance at the keyboard.

Essex-born [Grosvenor](#), whose mother is a piano teacher, started learning the instrument at the age of six and within 18 months he was playing Grade 8-standard pieces.

He went on to study at the Royal Academy of Music, graduating with the Queen's Award for Excellence for the best all-round student of the year.

Grosvenor won the keyboard final of the *BBC Young Musician* competition at age 11, and in 2011, aged 19, he was invited to perform at the [First Night of the BBC Proms](#).

In demand as a soloist and recitalist by orchestras across the world, his forthcoming engagements include concerts with the Madison Symphony Orchestra, San Diego Symphony and a recital in Stoke-on-Trent.

Watch Benjamin Grosvenor perform Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQ6kScUwbnE>

Nikolai Miaskovsky

Despite sometimes being referred to as the 'Father of the Soviet Symphony', [Nikolai Miaskovsky](#) is perhaps relatively unfamiliar to most classical music audiences today.

Born in 1881 near Warsaw, in what was still part of the Russian Empire, his father was an engineer officer in the Russian army, while his paternal aunt was a singer at the St Petersburg Opera.

Although musical in his youth, Miaskovsky followed his father into the military, but hearing a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony* inspired him to compose.

He entered the [St Petersburg Conservatory](#) in 1906 where he forged what would be a lifelong friendship with Sergei Prokofiev, and was taught by Liadov and Rimsky-Korsakov.

A teacher and music critic as well as a composer, during his career Miaskovsky composed 27 symphonies and won the Stalin Prize five times.

His *Symphony No 21 in F-sharp minor*, composed in 1940, is one movement arranged in sonata form. It was a commission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to celebrate its 50th anniversary.

Listen to the Oslo Philharmonic and Vasily Petrenko perform Miaskovsky's *Symphony No 21 in F-sharp minor*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cohU4wQCCQM>

Sergei Rachmaninov

In 1897, the 23-year-old [Sergei Rachmaninov](#) premiered his First Symphony in St Petersburg – and it was [a disaster](#).

Whether conductor Alexander Glazunov was drunk, as some reports suggest, whether he was inept, or whether the critics simply just disliked Rachmaninov's work, it was roundly panned, breaking the confidence of the young Russian composer and pianist.

He tore up the score, and it would be three years before he once again put pen to manuscript. But what a return.

In June 1900, Rachmaninov finally sat down to write something new, a piano concerto. He began the work while staying in Italy, and – fired with new-found enthusiasm – he continued with it on his return to Russia.

Finishing the second and third movements, he premiered them at a concert in Moscow in December 1900 to warm approval, and the finished work was completed and performed, again [by its composer](#), at a Moscow Philharmonic Society concert in November 1901.

The lyrical masterpiece revived Rachmaninov's reputation and career, and over the last 120 years it has become one of the most popular and recognisable concertos in the classical repertoire.

Did you know? Rachmaninov dedicated the concerto to Dr Nicolai Dahl, a Russian neurologist and musician who gave him daily sessions of hypnosis and positive

suggestion therapy, enabling Rachmaninov to recover from his breakdown and begin composing again.

Watch the Good Old Rachmaninov dream scene from *The Seven Year Itch* starring Marilyn Monroe and Tom Ewell.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCiwEO_6xSo

Modest Mussorgsky

The son of a Russian landowner, **Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky** was born in the village of Karevo in 1839 and received his first piano lessons from his mother.

At the age of ten, Mussorgsky was taken, along with his brother Floret, to St Petersburg to prepare for a military career. But the young Modest also showed a talent for composition.

Joining the aristocratic **Preobrazhensky Guards**, the teenager befriended a fellow officer – one Aleksander Borodin. The pair would later become two members of the so-called ‘The Five’ – a group of influential composers who dedicated themselves to creating a national school of Russian music free of the influence of European musical forms.

Mussorgsky composed ***Pictures at an Exhibition*** after attending an art exhibit in commemoration of his friend, the architect and painter Viktor Hartmann, who had died suddenly of an aneurism in 1873 aged just 39.

It is a musical depiction of ten of Hartmann’s drawings and watercolours, originally written for piano. This version is an orchestral transcription made by Maurice Ravel in 1922.

Listen to ‘The Great Gate of Kyiv’ from *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tKdf8isVPI>

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 prevailingly 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 Rachmaninov (1873-1943): Piano Concerto No 2 in C minor, Op. 18

1. Moderato
2. Adagio sostenuto
3. Allegro scherzando

Composed: 1900-1901

First Performed: Moscow Philharmonic Society, 9 November 1901, soloist, Rachmaninov, cond. Alexander Siloti

In 1897, the 24-year-old Sergei Rachmaninov suffered one of the worst humiliations ever endured by a composer of genius, when his First Symphony was premiered in St Petersburg. The performance was atrocious, and the critics were savage. Rachmaninov now found himself completely unable to compose, and he sunk into increasingly alcoholic depression. Eventually, in 1900, a friend recommended a hypno-therapist named Nikolai Dahl. It was an inspired choice: before long, Rachmaninov was working on his Second Piano Concerto, which he dedicated to Dr Dahl in gratitude. This time the premiere was a triumph, with even some of the very critics who had damned the First Symphony hailing the new concerto as a masterpiece.

One would never guess that the Second Concerto was the product of an extreme crisis of confidence. From its rock-like beginning to its brilliant, roof-raising ending, it exudes majestic assurance. The piano writing is superb, dazzlingly virtuosic but never just showy; it's always intensely expressive, whether in the surging, swirling textures of the first big tune, the delicate, nocturnal intimacy of the gorgeous slow movement melody or the brilliant and strenuous virtuoso acrobatics of the finale. Certainly there are dark passions in this music, but Rachmaninov transforms them into something deliciously enjoyable, and the end is a blaze of pure triumphant light.

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-81): Pictures at an Exhibition (orch. Maurice Ravel)

Promenade – The Gnome – Promenade – The Old Castle – Promenade – Tuilleries (Childrens games and quarrel) – Cattle – Promenade – Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks – Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle (Two Jews, one rich, the other poor) – Promenade – The Market in Limoges – Catacombs (Roman Tomb) – 'With the dead in a dead language' – The Hut on Hen's Legs (Baba Yaga) – The Bogatyr Gates (The Great Gate of Kiev)

Composed: 1874 (Ravel's orchestration: 1922)

First performed: (original piano version) 1886?, (Ravel's orchestration) 19 October 1922, Orchestre de Paris, cond. Serge Koussevitzky

Few composers can have caused their friends more heartache than Mussorgsky. It was clear from the start that this brilliant, wonderfully individual young man could be a major force in the

building of a truly Russian national style. So long as he remained focused, Mussorgsky would work quickly: *Pictures at an Exhibition* was written in a three-week creative spurt in the summer of 1874. But he was easily distracted – especially if there was a bottle of vodka to hand. In the end, his drinking killed him: he had only just turned forty-two.

Fine as it was, there were things about *Pictures at an Exhibition* that bothered his friends. Mussorgsky wrote *Pictures* for solo piano. He was a fine, but somewhat eccentric pianist, and he loved doing musical impressions at the keyboard: it's said that his impersonation of 'a young nun playing *A Maiden's Prayer* on an out-of-tune piano' could reduce his audience to helpless laughter. If we could have heard Mussorgsky himself play *Pictures*, no doubt it would all have made sense. But since Mussorgsky's death, more and more people began to feel that the music needed to be orchestrated. Various composers attempted this, but it was only when Maurice Ravel made his orchestral version in 1922 that *Pictures* stuck in the repertoire for good.

The 'Exhibition' of the title is an imaginary one, but the pictures are real. Mussorgsky had become a close friend of the painter Victor Hartmann, who also died young. *Pictures at an Exhibition* was written as a memorial to Hartmann, in which Mussorgsky groups together musical impressions of ten of his friend's paintings, linked by a series of five 'Promenades', in which Mussorgsky represents his own thoughts and feelings as he walks around the gallery. The titles are listed above: follow them if you like, but perhaps it is best to let these vivid, flavoursome musical 'pictures' speak for themselves.