

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra September 21 programme complementary content

Domingo Hindoyan launches his third season at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall with an evening full of irresistible melodies from across the pond.

Local lad, superstar pianist Paul Lewis, returns to the Hope Street stage fresh from his triumph at this year's Proms to play Copland and Gershwin. The piano pieces are bookended by a pair of *Symphonic Dances* – both written on American shores.

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.

Paul Lewis

Superstar pianist [Paul Lewis](#) has performed at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall many times since his debut with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra back in 1996.

But despite that, it appears the experience has never lost its lustre – or for that matter, he reveals, a frisson of nerves.

“Liverpool Philharmonic is a very special place for me,” he smiles. “It’s the concert hall that I have the longest connection with, and whenever I go back there it just feels very special. And in a way there’s something in there where I feel the nerves of that little boy, going for the first time to this huge and incredibly impressive space.”

His latest appearance, launching the new 2023/24 season alongside Chief Conductor Domingo Hindoyan, is set to be a rather different experience to his last visit in May 2021, when he performed Beethoven’s *Piano Concerto No. 1* to a socially distanced audience as part of an hour-long concert staged within Covid restrictions.

While he seems happy to recall that occasion, he admits that he’s “blocked quite a lot of that time out really...playing to sparse audiences or worse, no audiences at all.”

Paul’s earliest pandemic performances were at Wigmore Hall in June 2020 – and the hall was empty.

“That was quite significant in a way,” he says. “Because it felt like a statement – OK, we’re still here. But it was after that really, continuing to [live] stream from empty halls. I remember there was one in particular where I just thought if I have to keep on doing this, I think I’ll just find another job. I hated it, it was just pointless really. Because that’s not where the experience is. You can go on YouTube and watch a video of a concert, or you can put on a CD if you want to listen to music that way. The experience is in the hall, it’s social interaction. It needs people to bounce off, you need the energy of having people in the space really, that’s how it thrives, that’s what live music is about. And I’m just so glad that we’ve got back to it.”

That is certainly the experience a young Paul got when he first started to attend Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra concerts with his parents in the early 1980s.

While he loved exploring the classical [LP collection at his local library in Huyton](#), it seems nothing prepared him for the visceral experience of hearing those same pieces played live by a symphony orchestra.

“The first few times my parents took me to Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra concerts, [the high lasted a week after coming home](#),” he recalls. “I struggle to explain what it felt like, but there was a high coming off that experience that was like nothing else. And it stayed with me, even now. I can remember Marek Janowski conducting the first bars of Beethoven’s *Leonore No. 3* (Overture), and I was 11! It was electrifying and that was when it really struck me that there’s a huge difference in that experience and what it means to be in the space where it’s actually happening.”

It turns out, however, that those early concerts weren’t the first time Paul had been inside the Hall.

As an eight-year-old he made his debut on the Hope Street stage, not at the piano, but playing cello as part of the Knowsley Youth Orchestra.

Although he enjoyed it and had some early idea of being a cellist, he admits “I was rubbish so that was never going to happen”. He now leaves that to his wife, the acclaimed Norwegian cellist Bjørg Lewis.

Instead, Paul found his real affinity with the piano, albeit he only started learning the instrument properly at the age of 12.

During his professional career, he’s become particularly well-known for his performances of Beethoven and Schubert – he’s currently in the middle of a Schubert piano sonata series across 25 locations worldwide.

It’s his third Schubert ‘cycle’, with them coming every decade.

“I don’t consciously make it a ten-year journey,” he considers of the timing, “but when I was around 40 I spent two years with Schubert, and when I was 30 I did a very similar series to the one I’m doing now, with all the completed sonatas. So maybe ten years on I feel that there’s something different that I want to do, the music feels a little bit different, there are other things I can maybe express with it.”

In this latest appearance in Liverpool, he will play two pieces from the American classical canon, including the little performed Copland *Piano Concerto* – “it’s a fun piece and I imagine it will go down well – at least I hope it does!”

If lockdown had any positive side, it gave Paul the chance to explore and extend his already wide-ranging repertoire, including learning the American’s 1926 work. “When I was at Chetham’s School of Music in the 1980s they had this end of year concert, and one of the kids would play a concerto,” Paul explains. “At the end of my first year there, there was a pianist who was a bit older and who played the Copland *Piano Concerto*. So I’d known it and I’d wanted to play it since I was 15. I’m 51 now and I’ve finally got round to it!”

It was his idea to pair the piece with Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*.

He says: “They were written within a year or two in the mid-20s, they’re both American piano concertos influenced by the same thing, by jazz and blues, but sounding very different. Gershwin made that bridge from the popular music of the time to classical music, he created that connection, but Copland just took it and pushed it in a very modernist, cutting-edge direction. But you can still hear what binds these two pieces together.”

While Copland is new to his repertoire, Gershwin is an old friend that he played a lot in his 20s.

“About five years ago I decided to bring it back,” he says. “*Rhapsody in Blue* is just a piece that feels so right, in terms of what it is, it sits comfortably in its skin. It’s entirely its own language. And I do love playing it.”

The concert – and a repetition of the programme with the Orchestra in Gateshead on September 22 – sits in the middle of a busy time for the in-demand virtuoso.

In July, he [opened the Proms season](#) at the Royal Albert Hall playing Grieg’s *Piano Concerto* in a concert that attracted the attention of banner-unfurling Just Stop Oil protesters. The Oslo-based pianist completed his own performance without incident though.

From Gateshead, he’s off to Prague and Tampere, then continues his Schubert odyssey in a quartet of concerts in Britain and Europe. Then, he heads for the States to work his way through all five of Beethoven’s concertos.

First though, there is a return to the Hall where he fell in love with classical music – and 40 years after they took him to his first concerts, his parents will be in the audience once again.

“To keep coming back to the place I was born, and to play with the orchestra I grew up with, feels very special.”

Domingo Hindoyan

[Domingo Hindoyan](#) was born in Caracas in 1980 to a violinist father and a lawyer mother. He started his musical career as a violinist in the ground-breaking Venezuelan music education programme El Sistema.

He studied conducting at [Haute Ecole de Musique in Geneva](#), where he gained his masters, and in 2012 was invited to join the Allianz International Conductor’s Academy, through which he worked with the London Philharmonic and the Philharmonia Orchestra and with conductors like Esa-Pekka Salonen and Sir Andrew Davis.

He was appointed first assistant conductor to [Daniel Barenboim](#) at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin in 2013 and in 2019, he took up a position as principal guest conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra.

In the same year, he made his debut with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and was appointed as the Orchestra’s new Chief Conductor in 2020, taking up this position in September 2021. In July he announced he had extended his contract until 2028.

Leonard Bernstein

By the time he came to compose [West Side Story](#) in 1957, [Leonard Bernstein](#) had already written the ballet *Fancy Free*, musical (*Candide*) and, of course, his ebullient, irresistible Manhattan-based *On The Town*.

West Side Story brought him back to New York, although not to the tourist hotspots enjoyed by his three roistering sailors-on-shore-leave, but rather to the working-class immigrant communities of the city’s Upper West Side.

More than 65 years on, the moving and uplifting take on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (conceived and directed by choreographer Jerome Robbins and with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim) remains the late composer and conductor’s masterpiece.

The film version of *West Side Story* was released in 1961, and earlier that year Bernstein drew together what became his [Symphonic Dances](#) for a fundraising concert for the New York Philharmonic.

The nine movements include sections of dances like a mambo and cha-cha along with Tony's song *Maria* and the duet *Somewhere*, but don't follow the chronological route of the source material.

Did you know? Audrey Hepburn was originally offered the role of Maria in the film of *West Side Story* but turned it down because she was pregnant. The part went to Natalie Wood – but her singing voice was dubbed by Marni Nixon, who then later dubbed Hepburn's numbers in *My Fair Lady*.

Leonard Bernstein conducts the [Symphonic Dances](#) from *West Side Story*.

Aaron Copland

[Aaron Copland](#) was a 25-year-old not long returned from Paris – where he had studied with Nadia Boulanger – when he was commissioned to compose a new *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*.

The commission came from [Serge Koussevitzky](#), the Russian-born musical director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who forged a reputation as a champion of contemporary composers and modern music.

Copland set to work on the concerto, made up of two linked movements, and completed it around the time of his 26th birthday in November 1926.

Contemporary George Gershwin had also composed a piano concerto the year before, but while both composers were influenced by jazz, Copland's work trod its own path.

Its young composer, when asked about any comparison with Gershwin, described how his idea was to use jazz [“cubistically – to make it more exciting than regular jazz”](#).

The piece, which would be Copland's only piano concerto, was premiered by Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony on January 28, 1927, with its composer acting as the soloist and his parents, who had travelled from Brooklyn for the occasion, in the audience.

If Copland was expecting a rapturous response, he was to be disappointed. Some audience members responded to its avant-garde strangeness with laughter, while critics panned the piece.

It would eventually be [championed by admirer Leonard Bernstein](#) who included it in the New York Philharmonic's popular broadcast Young People's Concerts during the 1950s and 60s.

Watch Aaron Copland [play his own Piano Concerto](#), introduced and conducted by Leonard Bernstein, in 1964.

George Gershwin

It's the unmistakable opening to George Gershwin's most famous work. But the glorious, spine-tingling clarinet glissando which heralds the start of the sublimely inventive [Rhapsody in Blue](#) isn't Gershwin's at all.

The composer himself wrote the opening bars as a trill followed by a 17-note scale. It was clarinetist Ross Gorman, experimenting during rehearsals for its premiere, who created the sound we know today.

Still, the rest of course is pure [Gershwin](#) and almost a century after its birth, it continues to evoke for its listener a heady sense of the time (the Roaring 20s) and place (New York City).

Rhapsody in Blue was premiered at the [Aeolian Hall on February 12, 1924](#) as part of an Experiment in Modern Music concert organised by bandleader [Paul Whiteman](#), and with its 25-year-old composer at the piano.

Listen to a recording of [George Gershwin playing his Rhapsody in Blue](#) with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in New York in 1924.

Sergei Rachmaninov

[Sergei Rachmaninov](#) spent the last 25 years of his life in exile in the United States.

And yet his *Symphonic Dances*, completed in October 1940, was the only work which he composed in its entirety while in America.

After leaving Russia in the wake of the 1917 Revolution, he had become in demand as a conductor and pianist, maintaining a punishing schedule of appearances in the US and abroad which left him little time to compose.

It wasn't until the early 1930s, when he built himself a summer home – [Villa Senar](#) on the shores of Switzerland's Lake Lucerne – that he took up his pen again. And it was there he created his *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* and his Third Symphony.

While *Symphonic Dances* became the last piece of music Rachmaninov wrote before his death in 1943, it actually had its roots in a rejected ballet score called *The Sythians*, composed 25 years earlier.

[Symphonic Dances](#) was composed at Rachmaninov's home on Long Island and premiered by conductor Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra on January 3 1941.

Enjoy [an excerpt of Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances](#), performed by the Berlin Philharmoniker under the baton of Sir Simon Rattle.

About the Music

Leonard Bernstein (1918-90): Symphonic Dances, West Side Story

Prologue (Allegro moderato) – Somewhere (Adagio) – Scherzo (Vivace e leggiero) – Mambo (Meno presto) – Cha-cha (Andantino con grazia) – Meeting Scene (Meno mosso) – Cool Fugue (Allegretto) – Rumble (Molto allegro) – Finale (Adagio)

Composed: 1960

First performed: 13 February 1961, Carnegie Hall, New York, NY Philharmonic, cond. Lukas Foss

The world premiere of Leonard Bernstein's Broadway musical *West Side Story* in 1957 was a sensation. His previous shows, *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town* and *Candide*, had shown that Bernstein had the talent and the energy to expand the range and capabilities of the musical as never before, but with *West Side Story* it was finally conceded that he'd produced a masterpiece – perhaps this was the Great American Opera that the country had been longing for, better even than Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, but on a different kind of stage.

The music is a wonderful portrait of New York, its life and music. It explodes with vitality and colour, but it's less manic, more reflective than *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town*. Most surprising of all – and how un-Broadway is this? – it has a tragic ending. The two lovers Maria

and Tony, like Romeo and Juliet caught up in violent community rivalries, dream that ‘there’s a place for us’ (‘Somewhere’), but it seems that, ultimately, the only place they can truly be together is in death. Yet Bernstein manages to embody all of this in exciting and touching music without ever creating the feeling that he’s pushed the bounds of American Musical form too far.

West Side Story was such a success that Bernstein eventually decided to extract the wonderful dance scenes and weave them together as a kind of orchestral symphony. As a great Mahlerian conductor, Bernstein revered Mahler’s ability to ‘embrace everything’ in his symphonies. In embracing the whole of New York, Bernstein takes in popular music (Mambo), jazz and even Schoenbergian serialism (Cool Fugue), at the same time embodying the tragedy of human longing and pointless conflict. The Symphonic Dances are truly Mahlerian, even if they sound thoroughly modern-American. There’s no need to know the story of the musical to enjoy this superb musical sequence, but it’s hard to miss the implications of the ending. New York may be a paradise for some, but not for everyone.

Aaron Copland (1900-90): Piano Concerto

1. Andante sostenuto
2. Molto moderato

Composed: 1926

First Performed: 28 January 1927, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Aaron Copland (piano), cond. Serge Koussevitzky

Few people are scandalised these days when a new classical piece includes elements of jazz. But when Aaron Copland wrote his Piano Concerto in the 1920s, jazz was viewed as primitive, dangerous and morally corrupting by many ‘respectable’ white Americans. Antonín Dvořák’s proclamation back in the 1890s, that the music of Black Americans might form the backbone of the nation’s emerging classical tradition, was a long way from being widely accepted at that time. If it did feature in classical music, it was usually in a tamed, domesticated form. The challenge thrown down by George Gershwin in his *Rhapsody in Blue*, just two years before Copland’s Concerto, had been received enthusiastically, but there was still resistance in some quarters, particular in the musical press.

Even Gershwin, to a certain extent, had ‘classicised’ the jazz elements he used. But Copland wanted raw jazz. It was too much for the concerto’s first audience, and the reviews were either dismissive or acidic. For a long time, Copland’s Piano Concerto remained unperformed – until the young conductor Leonard Bernstein took it up in one of his popular Young People’s Concerts, and then recorded it. People now began to see the concerto for what it was: a great blast of wild, barely refined energy, gorgeous (if slightly monstrous) in its Hollywood-esque opening, but increasingly anarchic in the jazz section that follows without a break. In later masterpieces, such as the ballets *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid*, Copland’s view of America’s life and music became calmer, sometimes even rose-tinted. But in the Piano Concerto he seems to sense the darkness and tension deep within the country’s can-do culture, to which the music of Black American jazz eloquently testifies. It clearly left a deep impression on Bernstein’s *West Side Story*. There is a case for regarding it as Copland’s most profoundly ‘American’ work.

George Gershwin (1898-1937): *Rhapsody in Blue*

Composed: 1924

First Performed: 12 February 1924, Aeolian Hall, New York, George Gershwin (piano), cond. Paul Whiteman

Initially, Gershwin didn't want to write *Rhapsody in Blue* – or indeed anything like it. When the bandleader Paul Whiteman had asked him for an extended jazz composition, on classical concerto models, Gershwin had politely turned him down. Gershwin's brother Ira saw an anonymous article in the New York Tribune which announced that Gershwin was at work on 'a jazz concerto' for Whiteman. It seems Whiteman was playing a clever long game here. When Gershwin rang him to protest, Whiteman mentioned that his rival Vincent Lopez was planning to put on something similar with another composer. This was too much for Gershwin. He set to work immediately, even though Whiteman's planned concert was only five weeks away. But pressure can be a wonderful stimulant. With time to spare, Gershwin finished what turned out to be one the defining masterpieces of American music.

Gershwin claimed that the idea for *Rhapsody in Blue* came to him on a train to Boston. The train's 'steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang' set him thinking in terms of musical patterns. 'I suddenly heard – and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end.' The 'plot' of the piece as he called it, was 'a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.' While the audience cheered, the reviews were mostly cool to negative. But for some time now, *Rhapsody in Blue* has been accepted as a musical symbol of New York, its 'pep' and its 'metropolitan madness'. Its use as the backtrack to Woody Allen's film *Manhattan* – particularly its famous opening clarinet slide – has established it effectively as the city's theme tune.

Incidentally, that famous 'glissando' slide wasn't Gershwin's idea. Whiteman's clarinetist did it that way in rehearsal as a joke, but Gershwin loved it so much he told him to keep it in, and to add as much 'wail' as possible. And now it's impossible to imagine that opening without it.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943): *Symphonic Dances, op 45*

1. Non allegro
2. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)
3. Lento assai - Allegro vivace

Composed: 1940

First Performed: 3 January 1941, Philadelphia Orchestra, cond. Eugene Ormandy

By 1940, Rachmaninov already had three fine symphonies to his name. But writing a piece called 'Symphonic Dances' rather than 'Symphony' allowed him to forget about conforming to the traditional symphonic model, and to indulge his fabulous orchestral imagination to the full. Rachmaninov would surely never have allowed himself to use a saxophone in 'a proper' symphony, but here this instrument sings an unmistakably 'Russian' song as the centrepiece of the first dance – an outpouring of homesickness, no doubt, from an unhappy exile in the USA.

Rachmaninov's original working title was 'Fantastic Dances', and there were hints of a descriptive programme: the three movements were to have the subtitles 'Morning', 'Twilight' and 'Midnight'. These were eventually dropped, but the music fits well with the implied youth-to-death outline. At the end of the initially vigorous first dance there's a quiet reminiscence of Rachmaninov's First Symphony, whose catastrophic premiere in St Petersburg in 1897 had plunged Rachmaninov into a profound depression (the score was subsequently withdrawn). But here he seems to look back on it with a kind of forgiving tenderness.

As for 'Twilight', this music is dominated by waltz rhythms – a symbol of the opulent, decadent old world into which Rachmaninov, as a member of the Russian gentry, had been born, and which had been so violently swept aside by the 1917 Revolution. This waltz music has a definite sinister side: there is a serpent in this paradise.

If the final dance is 'Midnight', it is the Midnight of the Soul. A driven dance soon begins, whose main theme resembles the old Catholic funeral chant *Dies irae* ('Day of wrath'), a grim favourite of Rachmaninov's. After a slow central section, the dance begins a long final ascent, in which a life-and-death struggle begins between fragments of the *Dies irae* and an almost literal quotation (low strings and woodwind, brass and pattering side drum) from Rachmaninov's magnificent setting of the Russian Orthodox All-Night Vigil service. In the manuscript at this point Rachmaninov wrote the word, 'Hallelujah'.