

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
April 25 programme complementary content

Shostakovich called his Fifth Symphony “a Soviet artist’s response to just criticism” – but every note tells a much darker truth. From its savage opening to final, blazing chords, this is music that really is a matter of life and death.

It will make an explosive finish to a concert that begins with Roussel’s whirlwind *Bacchus and Ariadne* (fast becoming a Domingo Hindoyan signature following the release of his critically-acclaimed first album in 2022) and stars powerhouse pianist – and the 2021 Leeds International Piano Competition winner – Alim Beisembayev, in a gorgeous new concerto by the Jamaican-born British composer Eleanor Alberga.

Eleanor Alberga’s *Piano Concerto*, the result of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society Contemporary Prize at the 2021 Leeds International Piano Competition, is supported by the Vaughan Williams Foundation.

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. He has now extended his contract until 2028.

Alim Beisembayev

Born in Kazakhstan in 1998, [Alim Beisembayev](#) started playing the piano aged five and in 2010 he moved to Britain to attend the Purcell School for Young Musicians.

Beisembayev won first prize at the [Leeds International Piano Competition in 2021](#), performing Rachmaninov’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and conductor Andrew Manze. He also took home the Medici.tv Audience Prize and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society Prize for contemporary performance, and went on to play at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall.

In the summer of 2023, he made his BBC Proms debut, playing Rachmaninov’s *Piano Concerto No.2* with the Sinfonia of London conducted by John Wilson, after being drafted in at just 36 hours’ notice when [a fellow performer fell ill](#).

As a recitalist, he has also made notable debuts at the Chopin Institute in Warsaw, Oxford Piano Festival, Wigmore Hall, Foundation Louis Vuitton (Paris) and Cliborn Concerts in addition to

touring Europe in association with the Steinway Prizewinner Concerts Network and Korea with the World Culture Network.

Watch Alim Beisembayev perform [*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*](#) with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra at the finals of the Leeds International Piano Competition.

Albert Roussel

Born in 1869 in Tourcoing on the French/Belgian border, [Albert Roussel](#) lost both parents as a child. Taught by a parish organist from the age of 11, when he was 15 he was encouraged to go to Paris to immerse himself in a more musical environment.

Roussel's early career wasn't spent in music, but instead in the French Navy. He enrolled in 1887, serving seven years before he returned to dry land and started playing the organ and studying composition in earnest. From 1902 he also taught composition – his students included Satie and Edgard Varèse.

Roussel went on to become one of the most important French composers of the interwar period. In 1930, he composed music for the ballet *Bacchus and Ariadne*, which was premiered by the Paris Opera the following year with choreography by Serge Lifar. Later he created two orchestral suites from the score, the second [reflecting the second act](#) of the ballet.

Watch a performance of Roussel's [*Bacchus and Ariadne Suite No 2*](#).

Eleanor Alberga

When Alim Beisembayev swept all before him in the Leeds International Piano Competition three years ago, part of his extensive first prize was the chance to play at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall. The 23-year-old Kazakh virtuoso duly appeared alongside the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra the following week.

But what his Liverpool audience may not have realised was that not only did [Beisembayev](#) triumph in the final of the prestigious competition, but he also took home the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society Prize for contemporary performance for Ligeti's [*Études for Piano*](#) in his semi-final recital. The reward? A newly commissioned piece to be performed with the Orchestra in a future Liverpool season.

“He apparently mentioned that he wanted to ask me to write something,” says composer [Eleanor Alberga](#). “And I really wanted to write a piano concerto.”

The result is a return to Hope Street for the in-demand Beisembayev this month, to perform the world premiere of what – perhaps surprisingly – turns out to be the first piano concerto among the Jamaican-born British composer and pianist's extensive catalogue of works.

“I've chosen deliberately to stay away from writing very much for the piano until recently,” Alberga explains. “Precisely because I started out as a pianist myself, and I didn't want to just fall into writing things that felt nice for me to play, and not really use my mind in a slightly different way, which is what I do with other instruments. I wrote quite a few very tonal and a lot of Afro-Caribbean piano pieces years ago, combinations of two pianos or piano duets. And one or two solo piano pieces, but not many. It's only in the last 10 years that I've decided it's time to start. So, it seemed to come together beautifully.”

The piano featured in Alberga's life from an early age. She was five when, intrigued by the classical music on the radio – and keyboard lessons she heard going on at the high school her

mother founded in the Jamaican capital Kingston – she announced to her parents that she would like to learn to play. Indeed, not just learn, but also to be a classical pianist.

But composing went hand in hand with playing for her almost from the start, with early works including *Andy* written when she was ten and inspired by her pet dog.

Alberga, an only child, was taken to classical music concerts by her parents which further fired her ambitions.

“Apparently my father used to play the clarinet – this is before I came along,” she says. “And my mother used to play the piano and the violin, and also sang in choirs. So there was already a love of classical music, and we were very lucky we used to get some wonderful artists coming to Jamaica. I think my mother really wanted me to go to university and become a proper person, you know, like a doctor or a lawyer!” she adds, smiling. “She had been to university herself and was quite a scholar. But she loved the arts so she incorporated that as much as she could in her school.”

Instead, in 1968 a teenage Alberga won the Royal School of Music scholarship for the West Indies, and two years later she found herself at the Royal Academy of Music studying piano and singing. She was one of three finalists in the Dudley International Piano Concerto Competition in 1974.

But in the event, her childhood dream of becoming a concert pianist was impeded by circumstances beyond her control.

She recalls: “I left the Academy and at the same time there was a political situation in Jamaica which meant that suddenly, the government stopped money going out of the country completely, so I just had to find work. I started working accompanying dance classes while still doing a few concerts.”

Alberga joined the [London Contemporary Dance Theatre](#) in 1978, later becoming its musical director. And it was there, after initially being asked to improvise music for dance exercises, that she began to compose more extensively.

“I feel that I’m now doing what I was meant to do,” she says of her compositional career. “And in some way, my only regret is that I haven’t discovered that earlier.”

Although she has never had any formal training, Alberga reveals at the Royal Academy she did “sneak having a few composition lessons” with her keyboard harmony teacher, the late Richard Stoker, who encouraged her to write.

Later, in 2001, she was awarded a NESTA Fellowship for composition, which enabled her to have two years of consultations with various teachers and fellow composers. One was Sir Harrison Birtwistle. “He didn’t really teach me!” she laughs. “But I had a lovely day with him. I went to his home, and he showed me his studio and just said: ‘well it looks as though you know what you’re doing’.”

Her catalogue is broad – from opera (one being *Letters of a Love Betrayed*, premiered at the Royal Opera House in 2009) to chamber music, orchestral pieces including violin and trumpet concertos and a symphony, and vocal and choral works. [Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs](#) was commissioned by the Roald Dahl Foundation in 1994, while her choral work [Arise, Athena!](#) opened the Last Night of the Proms in 2015. In 2021 she was made an OBE for services to music

Liverpool audiences have been introduced to some of Alberga’s other pieces in concerts during the past 12 months – *Tower*, written in memory of David Angel (a friend and violinist in the

London Mozart Players and Maggini Quartet), opened the A Child of Our Time concert last June, while Isata Kanneh-Mason performed Albergá's 2007 *Piano Quintet* with members of the Orchestra at St George's Hall Concert Room last May. And now the *Piano Concerto* receives its world premiere at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall this month.

One of the earliest things Albergá did after receiving the commission was attend several of Beisembayev's concerts to hear him play, and – in her words – “get a feel for how he expresses himself through music”.

“Obviously, I have to write what I want to write, and to express what I want to express,” she says. “But I like to think that there is a certain amount of collaboration with the artist as well, and their mode of expression.”

There were also discussions with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra about instrumentation being used in the wider concert programme.

“I get the ideas in my head,” she explains of her creative process. “For the piano concerto, it took me a little while to decide how many movements. I eventually decided how many I wanted, and then I decided what sort of atmosphere each movement was to create, whether fast or slow, or that sort of thing. Then usually at that stage I start working on the structure in my mind, and how it's going to unfold. And then the very last thing is the pitches and how those work, and with that comes the timbre of which instruments are playing what. Sometimes I might jot something down if I get a rough idea of a line or a rhythm or something. But not much goes down until I make those decisions.”

Sometimes it also takes a walk in the countryside around the North Herefordshire home Albergá shares with her husband, the violinist [Thomas Bowes](#). The couple decamped to the country from London two decades ago, finding peace in a rural idyll where a stream runs melodically, and soothingly, past their sitting room window and where they founded the [Arcadia Music Festival](#), which ran for 12 years.

“If you hit a wall, it's good to just go outside and breathe and look around,” she smiles.

Was there a lot of walking involved in this?

“No actually. Well, maybe there was in one movement,” she admits, “and I won't say which it is, that took a bit longer to find itself.”

Structurally, the concerto is comprised of four movements – the first, in its composer's words, being “big and fast, with contrasts, so bits of slow material as well.” It is followed by a scherzo second movement, a slow third, “and then another fast movement at the end with a recurring theme, so you could call it a rondo if you like.”

Albergá adds: “Quite often I have an extra musical idea, some form of narrative or story idea, but there's nothing like that in this. It's completely abstract. I just work with certain pitches and lines; I haven't deliberately interjected any particular cultural influence into it. I daresay people will hear things, they always like to. But it has no particular slant.”

She is, she says, interested in audience reaction – “I'm always trying to communicate to people with what I'm writing. And if people are completely non-plussed and it just goes by, then I think I've failed really. I don't know if it still applies, but there certainly used to be composers who seemed not to care. They just thought, this is my process, I'm going to write like this, and I don't care if the audience gets it or not. And I just think – well, whether you like it or not, people are going to react to what they hear, and they are going to have some response to it. It's language to

me, which means it's a form of communication, so I'd like to feel that I've communicated something."

Between commissions – including, she hopes, the chance to write more symphonies – Alberga communicates with the next generation through composition tutorials at her old alma mater, the Royal Academy.

And, in a satisfying completion of the circle, she is also a member of the jury for the [2024 Leeds International Piano Competition](#).

Dmitri Shostakovich

In 1937, [Dmitri Shostakovich](#) was in Stalin's bad books and living in fear of arrest. The Soviet leader had attended a performance of the composer's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* the [previous January](#), and days afterwards, Shostakovich had been condemned in the press, *Pravda* declaring it 'muddle instead of music' and, the worst damnation for an artist in the 1930s Soviet Union, 'formalist'.

Spooked by this attack of a piece that had previously been well received, as well as by his brother-in-law being interned, sister exiled, and friend murdered by the state, Shostakovich abandoned plans to premiere his Fourth Symphony and started work on a new piece. What became his [Symphony No.5 in D minor](#) was composed over the course of three months – it reportedly took him just three days to compose the symphony's slow movement.

Having carefully subtitled the work *A Soviet Artist's Answer to Just Criticism*, he premiered it in Leningrad in November 1937 where it was acclaimed by its audience and, more importantly, by the authorities. The work's Moscow premiere two months later was equally successful. In fact, the piece became so popular it was allegedly played 100 times in the Soviet capital in 1938 alone.

Meanwhile the symphony's first Liverpool performance came at Hope Street on October 19 1954, with Efrem Kurtz conducting, in a concert which also saw the great Myra Hess perform Mozart's *Piano Concerto No.9 in E-flat* and Haydn's *Symphony No 88*.

Did you know? In May 1937, at the height of the 'Great Purge' and while he was composing his new symphony, Shostakovich was called for interrogation. But ironically, the man due to carry out the interrogation was arrested before the day.

Listen to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra playing the [Allegro non troppo](#) from Shostakovich's *Symphony No.5 in D minor*.

About the Music

Albert Roussel (1869-1937): *Bacchus and Ariadne*, Op 43: Suite No 2

Composed: 1930

First Performed: 22 May 1931, Paris Opera, cond. Philippe Gaubert (complete ballet), February 1934, cond. Pierre Monteux (Suite No 2)

Albert Roussel's ballet *Bacchus and Ariadne* appeared in 1930, the year in which he also completed his best-known work, the Third Symphony, but the two scores are quite different. Where the symphony is muscular, driven, edgy, single-minded, *Bacchus and Ariadne* – suitably for a piece featuring the Ancient Greek god of wine, sensuality and the night – is luscious, deliciously sweet-and-sour in flavour, and elementally exciting, with touches of sharply mischievous humour.

The Second Suite is essentially the whole second act of the ballet, but with a few judicious cuts. We saw how the Minoan Princess Ariadne, having helped the hero Theseus defeat the Minotaur, ends up being dumped spectacularly – somewhat unheroically Theseus steals away, leaving Ariadne on the island of Naxos. In despair she throws herself off a cliff, but the god Bacchus sees her and with split-second timing catches her before she hits the rocks. He turns out to be a much better proposition, and as they kiss, the island becomes an enchanted garden. As the dancing grows increasingly wild, Ariadne is carried to Mount Olympus, where she is welcomed as a goddess.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75): Symphony No.5 in D minor, Op 47

1. Moderato
2. Allegretto
3. Largo
4. Allegro non troppo

Composed: 1937

First Performed: 21 November 1937, Leningrad (Now St Petersburg), Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra cond. Yevgeny Mravinsky

It's quite possible that writing the Fifth Symphony saved Dmitri Shostakovich's life. It certainly saved his career. Until the previous year, things had been going very well for him indeed: his opera *A Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934) had run for nearly two years in Russia and had been a huge international success. Then, one day in 1936, Shostakovich opened his copy of the state newspaper *Pravda* and was stunned to read a horrible denunciation of both the opera and himself. The article was unsigned, but it clearly represented the views of the Soviet Union's great 'Leader and Teacher', Stalin himself. It ended, chillingly, 'Things could end very badly.' Many eminent artistic figures had been arrested during those dark times, most never to return. Shostakovich knew well enough that he might be next.

On the face of it, Shostakovich had an impossible balancing act to pull off. The Soviet authorities were looking for some kind of gesture of repentance, a sign he'd turned his back on the 'anti-people' 'modernist distortions' of *Lady Macbeth*. He now needed to produce something positive, to affirm the brave new realities of Stalin's Communist Paradise, and in an accessible musical language, but without simply selling his soul. Was there some way he could speak the truth to those with ears to hear, while managing to force enough of a smile to convince the Soviet powers that he had learned his lesson? Somehow, he succeeded: the Soviet authorities gave the Fifth Symphony an unequivocal thumbs-up, and the audience at the Leningrad premiere roared their approval for half an hour. Overall, the Fifth Symphony charts a fairly clear darkness-to-light progress, from dark reflection and violence (first movement), through barbed satire (Allegretto) and profound sadness (Largo) to a rousing ending with triumphal fanfares and pounding emphatic drumbeats. But how triumphant is that ending? Does it in fact – in Shakespeare's phrase – 'protest too much'? In the end, that's for the listener to decide – but whatever you do conclude, it's a thrilling musical journey.