

## **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra November 7 programme complementary content**

Imagine the ultimate Romantic symphony: brooding passions, crashing storms and huge, blissful melodies that seem to unfurl without end. You're thinking of Rachmaninov's Second Symphony, the glorious climax of a concert that begins with Anna Meredith's electrifying fanfare and stars violin phenomenon Ning Feng in Barber's soaring *Violin Concerto*. In short, it's a magnificent Liverpool debut for Adam Hickox – a young British conductor who's already creating quite a stir.

### **Adam Hickox**

British conductor [Adam Hickox](#) brings to the podium an impressive and elegant fluidity of technique and mature interpretations of a wide range of repertoire which is fast building him a reputation both on the concert stage and in the opera house.

In recent seasons he has conducted the Orchestre de Paris, BBC Scottish Symphony, BBC Symphony, the Ulster Orchestra, Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León, Philharmonia Orchestra, Deutsche Symphony Orchestra Berlin, BBC Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic and Iceland Symphony Orchestra. In the opera house he has conducted *Tosca* at Opera North and a new production of *Hansel and Gretel* at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire. And in December last year, following a successful debut at Glyndebourne conducting Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*, he was appointed [principal conductor of the Glyndebourne Sinfonia](#).

Born in 1996, Hickox studied music and composition with Robin Holloway at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and conducting with Sian Edwards at the [Royal Academy of Music](#), graduating in 2019.

He was assistant conductor at the Rotterdam Philharmonic from 2019-22, and in 2021 he was invited to Tanglewood as one of the festival's two conducting fellows, later also taking part in the fellowship's corresponding residency with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig.

### **Ning Feng**

[Ning Feng](#) is recognised internationally as an artist of great lyricism, innate musicality and stunning virtuosity. He performs across the globe with major orchestras and conductors, and in recital and chamber concerts in some of the most important international series and festivals. In the 2023-24 season he was artist in residence at NCPA Beijing.

*The Washington Post* has described him as 'a wonderful player with a creamy, easy tone and an emotional honesty', and *Gramophone* magazine said of his recent Brahms Sonatas recording that his 'tone is simply ravishing, even when it soars into the stratosphere'.

Born in Chengdu, China, in 1982, [Ning Feng](#) studied at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music with Weimin Hu, the Hanns Eisler School of Music (Berlin) with Antje Weithaas, and the Royal Academy of Music with Hu Kun. He was first prize winner of both the 2005 Michael Hill International Violin Competition in New Zealand, and the 2006 International Paganini Competition.

Ning Feng lives in Berlin, where he is a violin professor at the Hanns Eisler Hochschule. He is also International Chair of Violin at the [Royal Northern College of Music](#). He plays the 1710 Stradivarius violin known as Vieuxtemps Hauser.

Watch ['an introduction'](#) to Ning Feng filmed in 2011.

## **Anna Meredith – *Nautilus***

[Anna Meredith](#) has been described as “one of the most exciting compositional catalysts of our time” and “the most confident and assured voice in British contemporary music.” Her sound is frequently described as “uncategorisable” and “genre-defying” and straddles the worlds of contemporary classical, art pop, film and TV soundtracks, electronica, and experimental rock. Meredith’s music has been performed everywhere from the Hollywood Bowl to the BBC Proms to flashmob body-percussive performances at M6 Services.

The Scottish-raised composer, producer and performer gained a first-class degree in Music at the University of York and went on to gain a master’s from the Royal Academy of Music where in 2003, aged 24, she was made the Constant and Kit Lambert junior fellow.

Her work *forms* was written for the Last Night of the Proms in 2008, and in 2010 Meredith won the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for composers. She has been composer in residence with the Scottish Symphony Orchestra and RPS/PRS composer in the house with Sinfonia ViVA. She was made an MBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours in 2019.

[Nautilus](#) was originally composed in 2011 and appeared on her debut studio album *Varmints*, released in 2016. It also features on the soundtrack to the *Netflix* series [Living With Yourself](#) starring Paul Rudd. Meredith explains: “*Nautilus* was written as a sort of call to arms (for myself!) and was one of the first tracks I wrote when I started to work in electronics alongside my acoustic or orchestral writing. The shift was my way to reclaim some of the power over my writing, making albums where I would be in complete control. It’s a lovely full circle for this piece to now be rearranged back to an orchestral form.”

The orchestral version was commissioned by the Lahti Symphony Orchestra and premiered at the Sibelius Hall in Lahti, Finland, in September 2021.

Listen to a recording of Anna Meredith’s [Nautilus](#).

## **Samuel Barber – *Violin Concerto***

Three years after writing what would prove to be his most famous and popular work, young American composer [Samuel Barber](#) was approached about a new commission – this time not for an *Adagio for Strings* but a concerto for one stringed instrument, the violin. The request came from wealthy Philadelphia laundry soap magnate and philanthropist Samuel Fels and was for the prodigal Odesa-born violinist [Isaak ‘Iso’ Briselli](#), who had been a contemporary of Barber’s at the Curtis Institute of Music in the city. Both had graduated at the same time, and by 1939 both young men were starting to forge their careers.

The new commission was duly arranged, and Barber took off to spend the summer in the mountain air of Switzerland working on the concerto to hit an agreed deadline of October 1. But global events overtook him, and with war looming in Europe, in August the 29-year-old made a speedy departure via France and the Atlantic to complete the work amid other mountains – this time in northern Pennsylvania.

When he presented the first two melodic movements to Briselli, the violinist liked them but was concerned they weren’t virtuosic enough. In response, the composer went back and wrote a showy final movement of technically challenging perpetual motion. There have been various explanations for why Briselli was unhappy with the finished work. But whatever the truth of the matter, it was leading American violinist [Albert Spalding](#) who ended up playing the piece – to critical acclaim – at its premiere in Philadelphia in early 1941, conducted by Eugene Ormandy.

Listen to the opening movement of Barber's [Violin Concerto](#).

**Did you know? Samuel Barber dubbed his work 'Concerto di Sapone' – or 'The Soap Concerto'.**

### **Rachmaninov – *Symphony No.2 in E minor***

The story of the premiere of [Sergei Rachmaninov's](#) First Symphony in 1897 is well-known – a disaster said to have been precipitated by an under-rehearsed orchestra and a conductor (Alexander Glazunov) in his cups. Critics [eviscerated the work](#) and it was never played again in Rachmaninov's lifetime. In fact, when he quit his homeland in 1917, he left the score behind.

The Russian was deeply scarred by the experience. So deeply that he fell into a depression and practically stopped all composing, reporting feeling pains in his hands and legs just thinking about it. So perhaps it's surprising that he ever returned to the symphonic form, let alone produced something as stirring and as eloquent as his [Symphony No.2 in E minor](#). It was therapy, and also that other 'Rach 2' composed in 1904, which helped finally reopen the door, with the response to the piano work encouraging him to embark on his Second Symphony.

Composed in Dresden, where Rachmaninov lived from 1906 to 1909, the symphony was premiered in St Petersburg in January 1908. And this time it was the composer himself who made sure he took the baton.

Watch an excerpt of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra performing Rachmaninov's [Second Symphony](#), with comments from Vasily Petrenko.

### **About the Music**

#### **Anna Meredith (b.1978): *Nautilus***

Composed: 2011 – arranged for orchestra by Jack Ross, 2021

First Performed (orchestral version): 16 September 2021, Lahti, Sibelius Hall, Lahti Symphony Orchestra cond. Dalia Stasevska

*Nautilus* was originally conceived for electronics, as part of Anna Meredith's hit electro-acoustic album *Varmints*. Meredith describes it as 'a sort of call to arms (for myself!)', and it has that quality right from the fanfare-like beginning. She came up with the idea for the piece while stomping along a beach in Scotland and listening to the sound of her steps – you can hear something like that in the heavy bass brass theme soon after the start – and imagining different kinds of tread moving at the same time. The nautilus of the title is an ocean mollusc, which has come to symbolise nature's power of growth and renewal, its beautiful spiral-like shell patterns reminding us of natural order amongst seeming chaos. It's a perfect image for this short but exhilarating, thunderously affirmative piece.

#### **Samuel Barber (1910-81): *Violin Concerto, Op 14***

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Presto in moto perpetuo

Composed: 1939

First Performed: 9 February 1941, Philadelphia, Academy of Music, Philadelphia Orchestra, Albert Spalding (soloist), cond. Eugene Ormandy

Samuel Barber wrote his Violin Concerto for a young violinist named Iso Briselli, but Briselli never played it. For decades afterwards the official version was that he didn't like it, but it turns out that the real villain of the piece was Briselli's teacher Albert Meiff, who complained that the violin writing was 'highly unsuitable', that the first two movements were 'rather inconsequential', that the super-athletic finale was a 'risky tiresome ending', and that the concerto as a whole 'hasn't got enough backbone'. When one considers how popular the concerto has since become with violinists and audiences, one is tempted to ask what Meiff's *real* problem with the work was.

In fact, the first two movements are a glorious display of the lyrical soul of the violin. Gorgeous, tender long melodies proliferate, radiantly in the Allegro, more darkly in the following Andante. Barber wrote these two movements in Switzerland, at a time when things were becoming increasingly worrying across the borders in Germany and Austria, and the feeling of shadows lengthening, especially towards the end of the Andante, may at least partly reflect that. But the virtuosic 'perpetual motion' finale sounds like an attempt to dance away (or at least deflect) darkness, as the famous Italian tarantella was supposed to disperse the venom of spiders. It certainly caught the mood of the times, and within a couple of years the concerto was an international hit. One hopes that Meiff was suitably shamed.

### **Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943): Symphony No 2 in E minor, Op 27**

1. Largo – Allegro moderato
2. Allegro molto
3. Adagio
4. Allegro vivace

Composed: 1906-7

First Performed: 26 January 1908, St Petersburg, Maryinsky Theatre, cond. Rachmaninov

After the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, Rachmaninov withdrew the score, and it was never heard again in his lifetime. But when he returned to symphonic form, ten years later, the completed work was published as 'Symphony No.2', even though No.1 officially didn't exist. The devastating self-doubt brought about by the First Symphony's disastrous debut obviously still lingered - even after the huge success of his Second Piano Concerto in 1904, Rachmaninov still lacked faith in his ability to tackle large scale works. And yet it was clear from the first that the new symphony would be a work on an unusually large scale. The opening theme, on cellos and basses, containing the seeds for so many of the symphony's later themes, is spacious and long-breathed – immediately one senses that something very big could grow from this. Since early youth Rachmaninov had idolised Tchaikovsky, and he often looked to the older master for inspiration and formal models. But none of Tchaikovsky's numbered symphonies are anything like as long as Rachmaninov's Second. Consciously Rachmaninov may have struggled with self-criticism, but it seems that his creative unconscious was already thinking in audaciously grand terms.

This time the new symphony was received with great applause, and the critics were warmly approving. Before beginning the symphony, Rachmaninov and his family had moved to Dresden, partly to get away from the increasingly fraught political atmosphere in Russia. Very much an 'old world' Russian, Rachmaninov had no sympathy with the revolutionary movements. If anything, though, this only heightened his sense of the immense spaciousness of his homeland, whose landscapes and moods haunt so much of this gorgeously melancholic score. Ever since Beethoven, the tendency had been to see symphonic writing in terms of the development of short, potent memorable motifs, but Rachmaninov's natural tendency was to think in terms of long lyrical paragraphs – 'big tunes' in every sense. That's very much in evidence in this ripely tuneful symphony, yet there's also a compelling sense of continuous evolution, from the brooding

introduction, through the melodic aspiration and dramatic turmoil of the Allegro moderato, onward through the brilliant, racing Allegro molto, even through the expansive, richly indulgent Adagio, right into the joyous exuberance of the finale. The Second Symphony may begin in darkness and self-doubt, but it ends in thrilling affirmation. No wonder that first audience cheered!