

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, Payare & Ólafsson

Friday 28 October 2022, 7.30pm  
Royal Festival Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form.

We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

### Repertoire

Samy Moussa (b. 1984)

Elysium 12'

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Piano Concerto in G 20'

### Interval

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Symphony No.10 in E minor 57'

### Performers

Orchestre symphonique de Montréal

Rafael Payare *conductor*

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*

The Orchestre symphonique de Montréal is presented by Hydro-Québec. They thank Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, Canada Council for the Arts, the Gouvernement du Québec, Conseil des arts de Montréal as well as OSM Foundation for their precious contribution.

### Samy Moussa Elysium

Composer and conductor Samy Moussa is currently Artist in Residence at the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. He was born in Montréal, Canada, and is now based in Germany.

His vision of Elysium, a Hellenic concept referenced in Homer's *Odyssey*, is influenced by the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, who helped to transform the notion of everlasting paradise into an ideal available to all.

'The pre-Hellenic Elysian Fields,' Moussa writes, 'feature many of the tropes we have grown to associate with a paradisiacal afterlife including the absence of time, an endlessly bountiful and peaceful land in which to reside, and the presence of divine beings... While Homer's Elysium is restricted to heroes and demigods, by the fifth century BCE and the time of

Empedocles the entry requirements had relaxed somewhat to include the virtuous. ... Rather than remaining the sole preserve of the elite, immortal Elysium becomes the ultimate ethical aspiration for the common man in conjunction with a new quality of earthly life.'

Moussa responds in an orchestral texture rich with Brucknerian undertones and slowly shifting glissando chords, building an aural world that contrasts sustained, shining textures with flashes of energetic activity and glistening astral embellishments.

*Elysium* was premiered in September 2021 by its dedicatee, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Christian Thielemann in the Basílica de la Sagrada Família, Barcelona.

### Maurice Ravel Piano Concerto in G

Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major displays its perfectionist composer responding with tremendous verve to the spirit of the jazz age.

Ravel had studied with Fauré, rubbed musical shoulders with Debussy and explored the folk-influenced and bitonal styles of Stravinsky, Bartók and Kodály. Then in 1927–28 he toured the US, seemingly astonished by his own success. Greeted by a standing ovation in Carnegie Hall, he commented to a companion, 'You know, this doesn't happen to me in Paris.' He also enjoyed visiting the jazz clubs of Harlem, in the company of George Gershwin.

Much stimulated, he wrote his two piano concertos side by side in 1930–31, intending to play the G major himself on a world tour. 'The music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be light-hearted and brilliant,' he wrote. 'I had intended to entitle this concerto *Divertissement*. Then it occurred to me that there was no need to do so, because the very title *Concerto* should be sufficiently clear.'

They proved to be among his last works, sadly. He was too unwell to play the G major's solo part and eventually conducted its premiere with the pianist Marguerite Long in January 1932.

To begin, a whip-crack spurs the piano into filigree busyness and the flute into the folksong idiom of Ravel's native Basque region. The soloist offers frissons resembling a Spanish guitar, peppered with 'blue' notes; later a new, syncopated theme brings a tender contrast. There are cadenzas respectively for the harp and the woodwind before the piano's own cadenza transforms the tender theme into shimmering trills.

The second movement is a slow-motion waltz in which the orchestra weaves a delicate web of colour around the soloist; during the central section, intertwining lines mingle different keys, to magical effect. Insouciant ideas whirl by in the high-speed finale, the pianist engaging in brilliant virtuoso effects, notably a tireless 'perpetuum mobile'. A final drum stroke closes the concerto as brusquely as it began.

### **Dmitri Shostakovich** Symphony No.10

Born in St Petersburg, Shostakovich spent most of his life navigating a challenging path through the darkest days of the Soviet Union. His prolific output charts the journey not only of a creative soul in conflict with proscriptive and deadly authorities, but also that of his land, times and society.

Whether Shostakovich intended to paint a sonic portrait of Joseph Stalin in his Symphony No.10 is up for debate. He declined to explain the work's 'meaning', saying 'Let them work it out for themselves.' What's certain is that for him, Stalin's death was an artistic liberation. Stalin died on 5 March 1953; Shostakovich resumed writing symphonic music shortly afterwards, for the first time since 1945; and his Symphony No.10 was premiered by the Leningrad Philharmonic under Evgeny Mravinsky on 17 December 1953.

Solomon Volkov's *Testimony*, supposedly relaying Shostakovich's memoirs, stated that this symphony was 'about Stalin and the Stalin years', and the second movement 'about Stalin, roughly speaking' – but the book's reliability has been the subject of intense debate. Yet the work's impact is intense: it seems to evoke an almighty struggle between the individual and the monstrous machine of a world shaped by Stalin's reign of terror.

Shostakovich is a character in his own wordless drama, represented by the musical cipher 'D-S-C-H' (in German,

S is E flat and H is B natural) which he used often in his later works. Ultimately, D-S-C-H triumphs, fulfilling Shostakovich's symphonic resurgence, arguably better than ever.

The first, longest and bleakest movement begins with low strings in undulating lines before a clarinet enters with a lonely solo. The music builds towards an outburst of anguish. Its ongoing narrative ranges through a sinister passage on deep woodwind to peaks of tension in which the strings shudder in the face of blazing brass and percussion. Ultimately the music subsides towards the return of the opening material; two piccolos sound plaintively over a low drone, before one of them vanishes.

Brutal blows launch the violent second movement, which is soon powered by the galloping rhythm that Shostakovich seems to have borrowed from Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, another idea he used frequently. If the aggression at high volume is ferocious, it becomes still more terrifying when the dynamics are briefly suppressed towards the end.

The third movement begins with a theme whose distinctive, regular rhythm acquires a peculiarly sinister magnetism. Later, a horn call seems to pivot the music towards new ideas. Nevertheless, it can seem a shock when a grotesque triple-time march abruptly brings D-S-C-H blaring in on bright-toned strings. The movement ends softly, D-S-C-H ticking overhead on the piccolo.

A soul-searching introduction starts the finale, but eventually jaunty violins sweep introversion aside. Through attempts at cheerfulness, however, the sense of conflict remains, interjections of the second movement's gallop clashing with the rhythms of dance and march. Matters become increasingly frenetic until the D-S-C-H motif flattens it all with a surge of tam-tam. A calmer atmosphere emerges; and a final charge of D-S-C-H propels the symphony to a triumphant conclusion.

**Programme note © Jessica Duchon**

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## **You might also like...**

### **Emerson String Quartet: Shostakovich Cycle – Parts 4 & 5**

Tuesday 8 & Wednesday 9 November 2022, 7.30pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

The Emerson Quartet continues its journey through the string quartets of Dmitry Shostakovich, works that reveal the composer's innermost secrets. The performance of Part 5 signals a last farewell to London as the legendary quartet completes its landmark Southbank Centre Shostakovich cycle before retirement.

### **Matthias Goerne & Vikingur Ólafsson**

Friday 9 December 2022, 7pm | Royal Festival Hall

Baritone Matthias Goerne meets pianist Vikingur Ólafsson for a programme of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms.