

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Budapest Festival Orchestra & Igor Levit: Prokofiev

Tuesday 11 March 2025, 7.30pm

Royal Festival Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Prokofiev Overture on Hebrew Themes arr. for orchestra, Op.34a 9'

Prokofiev Piano Concerto No.2 in G minor, Op.16 33'

Interval

Prokofiev Selection from Cinderella Suites 40'

Performers

Budapest Festival Orchestra

Iván Fischer *conductor*

Igor Levit *piano*

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Overture on Hebrew Themes arr. for orchestra, Op.34a

Born in Imperial Russia in 1891, Sergei Prokofiev left his homeland in 1918 following the previous year's Bolshevik Revolution – first for New York, then Paris – only to return to the Soviet Union at the height of Stalinism in 1936. The three pieces in tonight's programme come from different stops along the course of his circular, world-encompassing journey of almost two decades.

We begin in New York in 1919, where Prokofiev met the fellow Russian musicians of the Zimro Ensemble, founded to champion music by Jewish composers, who had arrived in the US as part of a tour sponsored by the Russian Zionist Organisation. Reports differ as to whether it was Zimro's leader, Moscow-born clarinettist Simeon Bellison, who requested a new piece from Prokofiev, or whether it was Prokofiev who suggested he might write something for them. In any case, Prokofiev selected two tunes from a notebook of traditional Jewish melodies that Bellison offered him – a klezmer dance tune and a more sentimental Yiddish wedding song – for what would become the *Overture on Hebrew Themes*.

Prokofiev's original version was for the Zimro line-up of clarinet, string quartet and piano, and he joined the ensemble's musicians as guest pianist for the piece's premiere in New York's Bohemian Club in February 1920. It went down well: there were repeated calls for Prokofiev to create an orchestral version, which he initially resisted before relenting in 1934.

It's essentially a very simple piece, based around the two distinctive tunes – the jumpy klezmer-style melody on clarinet and other woodwind, and the more nostalgic wedding theme in the strings. But Prokofiev's skill lies in the multitude of personalities and settings he devises for this pair of melodies, and his distinctive blending of authentically klezmer-sounding melancholy joy with his own, more acidic musical language.

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

Piano Concerto No.2 in G minor, Op.16

- 1 *Andantino*
- 2 *Scherzo: Vivace*
- 3 *Intermezzo: Allegro moderato*
- 4 *Finale: Allegro tempestuoso*

If the US origins of our opening piece are relatively clear, those of tonight's second piece are a bit more complicated. Prokofiev first wrote his Second Piano Concerto in 1913, while he was a rebellious, swaggeringly self-confident student at the Moscow Conservatoire in pre-Revolution Russia, premiering it himself as a 22-year-old in September that year. After his departure for the US, however, he learned that the concerto's only score had been destroyed in a post-Revolution fire. In Paris in 1923, therefore, two years after he had written his Piano Concerto No.3, Prokofiev set about composing No.2 all over again, though he admitted it was 'so completely rewritten that it might almost be considered No.4'.

Listeners at the piece's Russian premiere had been divided. The composer later remembered: 'Following the violent concluding chord there was silence in the hall for a few moments. Then boos and catcalls were answered with loud applause, thumping of sticks and calls for "encore".' The piece didn't go down terribly well at the Paris premiere of its revised version, on 8 May 1924, which again featured Prokofiev as soloist. He even drily noticed that he'd so appalled his Parisian neighbours when practising the piece at home that they took to noisily building bookshelves to counter the din.

Indeed, it's not hyperbole to say that Prokofiev's incendiary Second is one of the grandest piano concertos ever written, pitting a fearsomely taxing solo part against a large orchestra in four substantial movements of some of the most intense music Prokofiev wrote, and effectively casting its soloist as an elite keyboard athlete. It begins simply enough, with rhapsodic piano melody set against a gently undulating left hand. But the music quickly generates enormous heft and power, and almost half of the movement is dedicated to a huge, multi-layered solo cadenza for the pianist, before a tumultuous orchestral return.

The quicksilver second-movement 'Scherzo' might sound more like a piece of intricate, whirring machinery than a conventional piece of music, and the pianist plays an incessant succession of running notes, covering almost 1,500 of them in barely a couple of minutes. There's no true slow movement in the concerto: Prokofiev's third is a dark and menacing 'Intermezzo' with an impacable tread of inexorable determination. His 'Finale' contrasts breathless, dashing rhythms with moments of near stasis – where the pianist plays just a few chiming harmonies – before another grand solo cadenza, and a roaring build-up to its noisy conclusion.

Selection from Cinderella Suites

- 1 *Pavane*
- 2 *Pas de châte*
- 3 *Quarrel*
- 4 *The Fairy Godmother and Fairy Winter*
- 5 *Mazurka*
- 6 *Orientalia*
- 7 *Cinderella goes to the ball*
- 8 *Cinderella's Waltz*
- 9 *Midnight*
- 10 *Amoroso*

Prokofiev's return to what by then had become the Soviet Union in 1936 deeply worried many of his friends and associates. They were right to be concerned: while he was initially welcomed home with prestigious commissions, he would later encounter state censure, plus related financial and health difficulties.

One of Prokofiev's biggest successes in the years immediately after his return was the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, whose Soviet premiere took place in 1940 at Leningrad's Kirov Theatre. The Kirov management were keen to repeat the success, and immediately commissioned a follow-up. Prokofiev's work on what would become *Cinderella* was stalled by the Nazi invasion in June 1941. He didn't complete the score until 1944, and when it received its premiere in November 1945, it was at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre.

The storyline that Nikolai Volkov produced for Prokofiev's score sticks closely to Charles Perrault's much-loved tale: girl sweeps floor; girl gets a magical trip to the Prince's ball, and loses a slipper in her rush to leave; Prince seeks girl; and girl and Prince eventually live happily ever after. From it, Prokofiev fashioned one of his most colourful and magical scores, a work whose opulence and optimism belie the difficult circumstances of its creation.

Prokofiev arranged three suites of music from *Cinderella* shortly after the ballet's premiere, stressing that he had reworked the music from its stage-focused original to make it more appropriate for the concert hall. Tonight's selection brings together movements from Suites No.1 and No.3 in an order that reflects musical variety rather than following the ballet's storyline.

In the elegant opening 'Pavane', ball guests await the arrival of the Prince, while the 'Pas de châte' takes us back to the Ugly Sisters, who are embroidering a shawl for the grand occasion – only to bicker furiously in the subsequent 'Quarrel' as to which of them should wear it. 'The Fairy Godmother and Fairy Winter' both transform Cinderella into the beautiful figure fit for the ball, and the energetic 'Mazurka' returns us to the ball itself, where the Prince is about to make his entrance to joyful fanfares.

In 'Orientalia', we jump ahead to the Prince's travels: searching far and wide for the mysterious owner of the glass slipper, he visits the Middle East, but with no success. Cinderella is excitedly preparing to head off to the Palace in 'Cinderella goes to the ball', and 'Cinderella's Waltz' sees her whirling with the Prince, before the nightmarish tick-tocking of 'Midnight' marks her moment of re-transformation.

Finally, 'Amoroso' is the ballet's very final number, a tender moment that takes us intimately into the love between Cinderella and the Prince after their final slow waltz, in an atmosphere of almost unspeakable intensity, and some final magical glitter from the celeste.

Budapest Festival Orchestra

Violin I

Daniel Bard
Violetta Eckhardt
Balázs Bujtor
Csaba Czenke
Mária Gál-Tamási
Emese Gulyás
Erika Illési
István Kádár
Péter Kostyál
Tímea Iván
Eszter Lesták Bedő
Gyöngyvér Oláh
János Pils
Alexei Stichkin
Rosa Hartley
Bence Asztalos

Violin II

Ágnes Biró
Antónia Bodó
Györgyi Czírók
Pál Jász
Krisztina Haják
Zsófia Lezsák
Noémi Molnár
Anikó Mózes
Levente Szabó
Zsolt Szeffcsik
Zsuzsanna Szlávik
Éva Kóbor
Lucrezia Costanzo
Birgit Katriin Born

Viola

Csaba Gálfi
László Bolyki
Zoltán Fekete
Barna Juhász
Nikoletta Reinhardt
Nao Yamamoto
Gábor Sipos
Harriet Joy Quick
Barbora Butvidaite
György Fazekas
Zita Zárbók
István Polónyi

Cello

Péter Szabó
Lajos Dvorák
Éva Eckhardt
György Kertész
Gabriella Liptai
Kousay Mahdi
Orsolya Mód
Rita Sovány
Tonka Javorovic
Alejandro Viana Herreros

Double Bass

Zsolt Fejérvári
Attila Martos
Károly Kaszás
László Lévai
Csaba Sipos
Jenő Puporka
Vilmos Mohácsi
David Tinoco

Flute

Anett Jóföldi
Bernadett Nagy
Izabella Nagy

Oboe

João Miguel Silva
Beáta Bereczkyné Berta
Marie-Noelle Perreau

Clarinet

Ákos Ács
Rudolf Szitka
Roland Csalló

Bassoon

Bence Bogányi
Dániel Tallián
Ziv Wainer Bobrowitz

Horn

Zoltán Szőke
András Szabó
Máté Harangozó
Zsombor Nagy

Trumpet

Gergely Csikota
Tamás Póti
Zsolt Czeglédi

Trombone

Balázs Szakszon
Attila Sztán
Gergely Janák

Tuba

József Bazsinka
Bálint Keresztesi

Timpani

Roland Dénes

Harp

Ágnes Polónyi

Percussion

László Herboly
István Kurcsák
Boris Boudinok
Kornél Hencz
Gábor Pusztai

Piano/Celeste

László Adrián Nagy

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