

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Pavel Kolesnikov & Samson Tsoy: Symphonic Dances

Wednesday 10 May 2023, 7.30pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Rachmaninov Symphonic Dances arr. for 2 pianos 35'

Interval

Prokofiev Cinderella Suite arr. Pletnev for 2 pianos 35'

Performers

Pavel Kolesnikov *piano*

Samson Tsoy *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour 45 mins
with a 20-minute interval.*

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Symphonic Dances

i *Non allegro*

ii *Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)*

iii *Lento assai – Allegro vivace – Lento assai – Allegro vivace*

When he fled Russia after the 1917 Revolution, aged 44, Rachmaninov left behind his estate, his considerable fortune and – most importantly – his whole way of life. He lived an unsettled existence between Switzerland and the United States during the 1920s, finally moving to the US permanently in 1936, where he had to rely on exhausting concert tours to support his family. He was only too aware of his predicament, and of its inevitable drain on his will to create.

Rachmaninov's passion for composing didn't disappear for long, however. In late 1940, he shocked conductor Eugene Ormandy, a friend, with a letter: 'Last week I finished a new symphonic piece, which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra. It is called *Fantastic Dances*.' Recovering from

a minor operation in a Long Island estate, Rachmaninov had completed his final composition, and the only piece that he wrote entirely in the US. He wrote the two-piano version you hear tonight first, completing it in August 1940, and finished the orchestration just in time for the work's premiere on 3 January 1941, by Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. By then, Rachmaninov had changed the work's title to *Symphonic Dances*, and dropped the individual movement headings, 'Noon', 'Twilight' and 'Midnight', that he'd originally intended.

And dance music the piece most definitely is, as its unwavering focus on rhythm makes clear throughout. Nevertheless, with its three substantial movements, the piece is also a symphony in all but name. And in it, Rachmaninov seemed to sum up his own achievements as a composer, quoting from several of his pieces in what amounts to a farewell to composition. Rachmaninov died two years after the work's premiere, and had worked on no further pieces.

Chugging martial rhythms and a descending three-note melody gradually grow into the first movement's unmistakable main theme, followed by a calmer, quieter section with the distinctive flavour of Russian folk song. Russian-sounding material returns near the end of the movement in a chant-like melody set against glittering accompaniment. This is a theme from Rachmaninov's First Symphony, and was intended to be a hidden reference – the composer was sure that the Symphony's score had been destroyed following its disastrous 1897 premiere. But when a set of parts was unearthed in Leningrad shortly after the composer's death, his secret was revealed.

The second movement is a fantastical waltz that evokes an uneasy atmosphere with its strange, dream-like harmonies. The dramatic third movement seems to describe nothing less than humankind's struggle for life and redemption, in a battle between the dour 'Dies irae' plainsong from the Latin Requiem mass, surely representing death, and a Russian Orthodox melody from Rachmaninov's own Vespers, which may represent resurrection. The movement's propulsive dance rhythms build to a triumphant climax.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) **Cinderella Suite** **(arranged for two pianos by Mikhail Pletnev)**

- i Introduction
- ii Quarrel
- iii Winter
- iv Spring
- v Cinderella's Waltz
- vi Gavotte
- vii Gallop
- viii Slow Waltz
- ix Finale

Like Rachmaninov, Sergei Prokofiev fled the turmoil of post-revolution Russia, leaving his homeland in 1918 for almost two decades, which he spent between the US and Paris. He was never entirely comfortable abroad, however, and returned to what had become the USSR for good in 1936 – to the bewilderment and consternation of many.

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. But in June 1941, as Prokofiev was partway through composing what would become *Cinderella*, Nazi troops marched into the Soviet Union, plunging the country into chaos and confusion. Prokofiev wouldn't complete *Cinderella* until 1944, and when it received its premiere in November 1945, it was at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre (though Prokofiev far preferred the production that the Kirov staged the following year).

Cinderella endured further challenges on account of Prokofiev's private life. His marriage to singer Lina Codina had almost entirely collapsed, and he was involved in a clandestine relationship with poet and writer Mira Mendelson (who would become his second wife in 1948). When Prokofiev wrote that he hoped to portray Cinderella 'not only as a fairy-tale character but also as a real person, feeling, experiencing, and moving among us,' it's debatable which of the two women in his life he might have been thinking of.

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. The composer calls for a huge orchestra, but in 2002, Russian pianist and conductor Mikhail Pletnev shrank down *Cinderella*'s lavish scoring into a nine-movement Suite arranged for two pianos, which he unveiled with fellow pianist Martha Argerich that same year.

The opening Introduction serves as the ballet's overture, raising the curtain on a somewhat eerie fairy-tale world, though we soon hear Cinderella's own more romantic theme against a rippling accompaniment. Quarrel introduces Cinderella's two stepsisters, who bicker over a shawl and eventually rip it apart in increasingly violent, dissonant music. Winter opens with mysterious music introducing the Fairy Godmother – a plaintive, folk-like melody offset by growling rumbles – before moving on to the bright, icy clarity of music for the Winter Fairy, summoned by the Fairy Godmother to aid Cinderella's magical transformation. The subsequent Spring likewise introduces the Spring Fairy, there for the same purpose, though the apparition brings far livelier, fresher music with it.

Cinderella's Waltz moves us on to our heroine's arrival at the Prince's ball, before a grand dance with an angular, wide-leaping melody. We leap back to earlier in the tale in the *Gavotte*: left alone once her stepsisters have departed for the ball, Cinderella amuses herself by dancing with a broom, wistfully imagining the happiness she might have experienced that evening.

We jump forward post-ball in the *Gallop*, whose urgent, breathless music describes the Prince's desperate search for the mysterious woman he met the night before. In the penultimate *Slow Waltz*, the Prince and Cinderella have been reunited, and whisked away to a peaceful magical garden where they can dance together privately. In the Suite's *Finale*, however, we're plunged back into Prokofiev's inexorable countdown to midnight – though we gain a final glimpse of the happy couple at the very end.

Programme notes by David Kettle

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- ▶ Pavel Kolesnikov
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