

RLPO Programme Notes Online
Paul Lewis performs Mozart
Sunday 21 April 2013 2.30pm

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1847)
orchestrated by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)
Grande Valse Brillante, Op.18
Nocturne in A flat, Op.32 No.2

Considering that it is one of the most popular of all ballets, *Les Sylphides* has an extraordinarily complicated history. It originated in a set of orchestrations of Chopin piano pieces made by Alexander Glazunov in 1892, which he arranged into a concert suite under the title *Chopiniana*. In 1907 the great choreographer Michel Fokine got Glazunov to orchestrate an additional movement, a Waltz, and made this expanded suite the basis of a ballet (called first *Moonlight Vision*, then *Danse sur la musique de Chopin*) staged at St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre. Fokine then, retaining only the waltz, reworked his choreography to an entirely different set of Chopin piano pieces, which were orchestrated for him by Maurice Keller, one of the Mariinsky's répétiteurs. That second ballet, at first confusingly also called *Chopiniana*, became *Les Sylphides* when Fokine re-fashioned it yet again as part of Serge Diaghilev's 'Saison Russe' in Paris – the first appearance of what would become the world-renowned Ballets Russes – which premiered at the Théâtre du Châtelet on 2 June 1909 starring Tamara Karsavina, Vaslav Nijinsky and Anna Pavlova.

Instead of the Keller orchestration, Diaghilev reverted in one movement back to Glazunov's original scoring, and commissioned new orchestrations of the other movements from the established composers Liadov, Taneyev and Nikolai Tcherepnin – and from one of Rimsky-Korsakov's most gifted students, the 26-year-old Igor Stravinsky. To Stravinsky, indeed, Diaghilev entrusted the opening and closing movements, the *Nocturne in A flat* and the *Grande Valse Brillante*, which suggests he had considerable confidence in him.

The first 'plotless ballet', *Les Sylphides* remained a standard item of the Ballets Russes repertoire throughout the history of the company, and it was undoubtedly this version which made the ballet so famous. But the special orchestrations Diaghilev had commissioned remained unpublished when the company was wound up after Diaghilev's death in 1929, and when rival companies started to essay alternative productions of the ballet they had to acquire other orchestrations – Alexander Gretchaninov, Benjamin Britten, Roy Douglas and Leroy Anderson all did versions, for example.

Stravinsky's two arrangements were only published several years after his death. Compared to the orchestral works he had already written, such as *Scherzo fantastique* and *Fireworks*, his approach to realising these Chopin movements is good-mannered and safely conventional, but there is no denying the professionalism and the attractiveness of the orchestration. And they had an enormously important consequence. A few months later, Diaghilev was in despair about his cherished ballet project *The Firebird*, scheduled for his next Paris season, as his first, second, and third choices for composer had all cried off for one reason or another. Time was short, and then Diaghilev remembered Stravinsky's promptness in supplying the Chopin orchestrations. The rest is history: in fact the rest is a good deal of the history of 20th-century music!

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791) Piano Concerto No.25 in C major, K503

Allegro maestoso
Andante
Allegretto

It is remarkable that when the great Artur Schnabel performed this work with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1934, it was noted as its first performance in the Austrian capital since Mozart gave its premiere there, some 147 years before. While this claim is probably untrue, the work certainly faded into relative obscurity for many years. That the piece did not enter the repertory until after the Second World War was not helped by Eric Blom, who in his influential *Master Musicians* study of Mozart (1937) judged the work “frigid and unoriginal”. Remarkable indeed, for the work is now rightly regarded as one of Mozart’s greatest achievements in the form, and understood as a major influence on the music of a certain Ludwig van Beethoven.

The C major concerto K503 was the last of no fewer than twelve piano concertos Mozart composed during an astonishingly creative period of just two years from 1784 to 1786. The exact date of its first performance is unknown, but it is thought to have been played at one of four subscription performances Mozart held during Advent of 1787. It remained for some two decades or so one of Mozart’s most frequently performed concertos, played by the composer himself, his son Franz Xaver, his pupil Johann Nepomuk Hummel and possibly by the young Beethoven (all of which surely challenges that 1934 claim regarding the lack of post-1787 Viennese performances). Though the home key of the work is the traditionally bright, optimistic and public one of C major, and though the orchestra is augmented by the conventionally martial timpani and trumpets, Mozart was just too original a musical thinker to in any way let these factors restrict him harmonically, thematically and expressively. Far from being “frigid and unoriginal”, this is some of the most complex and inventive music that even Mozart ever wrote.

First movement

Take the beginning of its orchestral introduction. Though the opening is orthodox enough in its straightforward grandeur, within a few bars the dynamic recedes to *piano* (soft) and there are quiet murmurings in bassoons and oboes. The full orchestra immediately reaffirms itself but the woodwind call now leads the music into a darker, minor key and a passage of elaborate thematic invention ensues. The piano enters, not with a traditional restatement of the orchestral material, but with its own delicate patterns lovingly woven around gentle violin trills. Thereafter the relationship between soloist and orchestra is in a state of glorious flux: at times the piano leads; at other times it seems content to accompany or follow the orchestra’s example. (Another significant feature is a recurring short-short-short-long rhythmic pattern that surely inspired Beethoven during the composition of his Fifth Symphony when it famously reappears in a faster, more muscular guise). With its frequent changes from (brighter) major to (darker) minor keys and its remarkable melodic and textual variety the movement has perhaps the widest expressive palette of any in all Mozart’s concertos.

Second movement

The slow movement is a wonderful reminder that the date of the concerto’s composition, 1786, was also the year of Mozart’s great opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. After the scene-setting orchestral introduction – with its prominent, *Figaro*-like woodwind solos – it is not difficult to imagine a rather dejected-sounding diva pouring her heart out in an effort to gain our sympathy. That said, while this is a magnificent, unbroken outpouring of lyricism, the highly decorative and virtuosic piano writing is often beyond the agility and register of any human voice.

Third movement

All vestiges of melancholy, at least for a time, are swept away by the onset of the effervescent finale, the main recurring theme of which Mozart borrowed from his own opera *Idomeneo* (K367). This graceful gavotte is interspersed with contrasting episodes, the most substantial of which throws into relief the overall exuberance of the movement with its excursions into darker regions. The ending, however, is one of unalloyed joy.

ANATOLY LIADOV (1855-1914)

The Enchanted Lake, Op.62

Baba Yaga, Op.56

The Russian composer Anatoly Liadov occupies an unusual place in musical history in that he is probably most famous for a piece of music he never wrote. After Sergei Diaghilev approached him to write a score for the ballet *The Firebird*, the indolent Liadov declined the offer, thus leaving the opportunity to a certain Igor Stravinsky who then instantly established his name with his luminous *Firebird* music. Stravinsky was always going to blaze a trail, but if Liadov had taken up Diaghilev's proposition, the beginning of the younger composer's career may not have been so mercurial and we may have been deprived of his two other early Diaghilev ballet scores, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*. Incidentally, Stravinsky was an admirer of Liadov, describing him as "the most progressive musician of his generation."

Liadov was born in 1855 into a musical (and somewhat bohemian) family. He began musical studies with his father – a conductor at St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre – before joining Rimsky-Korsakov's classes at the St Petersburg Conservatory. Absenteeism and lack of application led to initial failure, but he eventually became a professor of harmony and composition at the institution (where he taught, among others, Prokofiev) and a colleague of Rachmaninov and Scriabin. One of Liadov's most significant contributions to Russian music was research he undertook into regional folk songs, the result of a commission from the Imperial Geographical Society. He was thus engaged in similar nationalistic work to that of Vaughan Williams in England and Bartók and Kodály in Hungary. In addition he is known for three beautifully orchestrated tone poems, two of which we hear tonight.

The Enchanted Lake

"How purely picturesque it is – with bountiful stars over the mysteries in the depths! But most importantly it is uninhabited, without entreaties and complaints; only nature – cold, malevolent, but fantastic as a fairy tale."

So wrote Liadov in 1908 of Lake Ilmen, a stretch of water in the Novgorod region south of St Petersburg. The huge impression the lake made on Liadov found musical form in this the greatest of his tone poems. Heavy brass falls silent for the work, while harp and celeste add to the sense of enchantment. Throughout there is a wonderful sense of magical stasis created largely through slow harmonic changes (orchestral colourations being more important to Liadov here than melodies as such). Furthermore, short repeated figures and measured trills create a gentle shimmering effect suggestive of those "bountiful stars over the mysterious depths."

Baba Yaga

Baba Yaga is an outlandish figure in Slavic folklore, a hideous witch who flies around the forest in a pestle and mortar and lives in a hut supported by chicken's legs. Mussorgsky also musically portrayed this strange character in his *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Liadov's breathless scherzo, composed between 1899 and 1904, conveys a vivid sense of the witch's rapid movement through the air. Throughout this short work the uncanny atmosphere is superbly captured by Liadov's deft orchestral writing – the influence of his great teacher Rimsky-Korsakov is very much in evidence – until, as the sound fades away into nothing, Baba Yaga disappears into the depths of the forest.

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FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Symphony No.4 in A major Op.90 'Italian'

Allegro vivace

Andante con moto

Con moto moderato

Saltarello: presto

Like many young men from cultivated and wealthy backgrounds, Mendelssohn was encouraged to undertake the European 'Grand Tour' – a sort of cultural rite of passage – and Italy, as the centre of Roman civilisation, was a

compulsory leg of such journeys. In fact, no less a figure than the great German poet Goethe entreated Mendelssohn to visit the “warm south” and the composer’s sojourn in Rome between November 1830 and April 1831 formed the finale of his highly inspirational tour.

Mendelssohn adored Italy and joyfully immersed himself in all aspects of its culture – from “the awe-inspiring Coliseum”, as he described it, to popular Neapolitan songs and dances. After completing his Piano Concerto No.1 he began work on his equally sunny ‘Italian’ Symphony, soon afterwards telling his sister that it would be “the happiest piece I have yet composed”. Although Mendelssohn later experienced difficulties in completing the work, it remains a superb musical counterpart to the numerous drawings and letters he produced at the time in which he lovingly recorded scenes of Italian life. It was first performed in London in May 1833, under the directorship of Mendelssohn himself, to great acclaim.

First movement

The symphony’s first movement (*Allegro vivace*) radiates the warm glow of Mediterranean sunshine, its first subject possessing an indomitable, even heroic spirit. With its relentless, dance-like momentum, Mendelssohn’s model was surely Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony (that ‘apotheosis of the dance’ written in the same key of A major). A more earnest second subject to some extent tempers the sense of carnival yet the overall effect of the exposition remains one of ardour and exuberance.

The sky becomes cloudier in the development section, which includes an intricate fugato section, reminding us that Mendelssohn was a Bach disciple through and through. The development culminates in an austere rendition of the second subject, but thereafter the brilliance of the opening returns with renewed vigour as it sweeps us along to the movement’s brilliant close.

Second movement

The inspiration for the *andante con moto* is believed to have been a religious procession that Mendelssohn witnessed in the streets of Naples. In the traditionally pious key of D minor the oboes, bassoons and violas, followed by the violins, introduce a solemn, chorale-like theme over a ‘walking’ figure of staccato quavers in the cellos and basses. A warmer, less restrained middle section provides a secular interlude but the measured ritualism resumes. As the staccato quavers gradually fade away the pilgrims recede into the distance and, with three soft pizzicato notes, are gone.

Third movement

The dreamy third movement, *Con moto moderato*, recalls Schubert in its unaffected simplicity, its graceful melodic line and its gently lilting arpeggio accompaniment. The contrasting trio section features a colourful horn fanfare reminiscent both of Weber and Mendelssohn’s own *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. After the opening section’s reprieve the fanfare reappears as its own distant echo before the gentlest of downward arpeggios in the violins seems to magic away the whole enchanted scene.

Fourth movement

With the *saltarello* – a breathtaking southern Italian rustic dance – the specifically Italian conception of the symphony bursts back into life. The vigorous *ostinato* rhythm, which underpins virtually the entire movement, reflects the peculiar steps of the *saltarello* or ‘little hop’ in which the performers leap as they dance (each group of fast triplet quavers misses a note, as it were, as the dancers leave the ground). Particularly energetic is the flute writing and some frenzied triplet passages in the strings from another south Italian dance, the *tarantella* (the dancing of which was believed to cure the effects of a tarantula bite). Just as the momentum appears at last to be ebbing, one final burst of manic energy brings the *saltarello* to a suitably bounding conclusion.

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