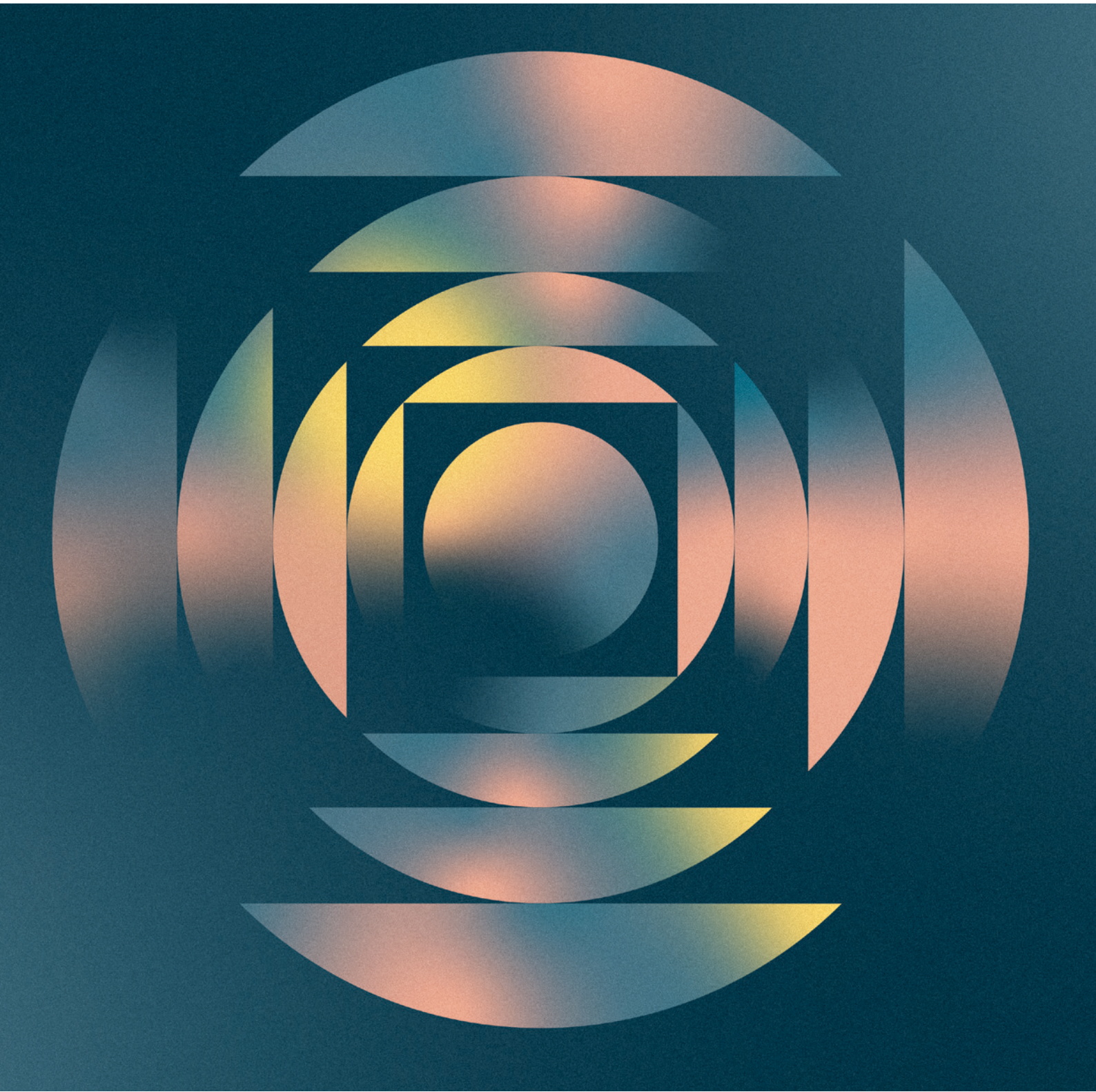
Rachmaninov:
The Piano Concertos

24 May–3 June
Adelaide Town Hall

Adelaide
Symphony
Orchestra

Season
2023



Rachmaninov: *The Piano Concertos*

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Welcome

Colin Cornish AM
Chief Executive Officer

It's hard to think of a composer more beloved by audiences than Rachmaninov. The 150th anniversary of his birth this year gives us a rare opportunity to present his complete works for piano and orchestra with two of the great musicians of our time. It's a pleasure to welcome back an old friend of the ASO, Sir Stephen Hough – a passionate advocate for Rachmaninov's music – and to welcome conductor Andrew Litton here for his debut appearances with the Orchestra.

My thanks to the major supporters of this project, Normus Homes, Diana McLaurin and Joan Lyons, for allowing us to follow our epic Beethoven Symphony cycle of 2022 with another immersive project, one which has already proved to be a huge success before it has even begun. All four of these concerts sold out some time ago, and all of us here at the ASO are grateful for such incredible support from South Australia's music lovers. Following the first two *Symphony Series* concerts of the year – both of which played to capacity houses – this represents a wonderful start to the concert year.

Speaking of that, in a few weeks' time we welcome back another dear ASO friend – cellist Li-Wei Qin – for the next *Symphony Series* concert, *Skyward*; he'll be the soloist in Haydn's joyous Cello Concerto in C.

In the meantime, I hope you find *Rachmaninov: The Piano Concertos* a thrilling and inspiring experience.

The ASO acknowledges that the land we make music on is the traditional country of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with the land. We acknowledge that this is of continuing importance to the Kaurna people living today. We extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are with us for this performance today.

Andrew Litton
Conductor

Andrew Litton is Music Director of the New York City Ballet. He is also Conductor Laureate of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and was previously Music Director Laureate of Norway's Bergen Philharmonic. In addition to conducting over 30 ballets with NYCB, Andrew also returns regularly to the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (where he is a former Principal Guest Conductor), guest conducts leading orchestras around the globe and adds to his discography of over 130 recordings which have garnered America's Grammy Award, France's Diapason d'Or and other honours.

Andrew has also led major opera companies throughout the world, including the Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera Covent Garden, Australian Opera and Deutsche Oper Berlin. In Norway, he was key to founding the Bergen National Opera, where he led numerous critically acclaimed performances. Recent and forthcoming engagements include the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, South Netherlands Philharmonic, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, Orquesta Sinfonica de Galicia, Orchestra della Toscana, and the Seattle, Phoenix, and Colorado Symphonies.

Born in New York City, Andrew earned both Bachelor's and Master's degrees from The Juilliard School. His many honours include Norway's Order of Merit, Yale's Sanford Medal, the Elgar Society Medal, and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Bournemouth.

With this series of concerts, Andrew Litton makes his Adelaide Symphony Orchestra debut.

Sir Stephen Hough
Piano

Named by *The Economist* as one of 20 Living Polymaths, Sir Stephen Hough combines a distinguished career as a pianist with those of composer and writer. He was the first classical performer to be awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, was made a CBE in the New Year Honours 2014 and was awarded a Knighthood for Services to Music in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2022.

In the 2022/23 season Hough performs over 90 concerts across five continents. Concerto highlights include returns to the Concertgebouw Orchestra, Detroit, Cincinnati and Washington's National symphony orchestras, BBC Symphony and Philharmonia orchestras, and the National Symphony Orchestra, Taiwan. 2023 Artist in Residence with Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo, Hough performs the complete Rachmaninov concertos in Brazil as well as here in Adelaide. He is also Artist in Association with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, with whom he toured the UK in Spring 2023. Recent highlights include the New York Philharmonic, Dallas and Atlanta Symphony orchestras, Singapore and Finnish Radio symphony orchestras, Wiener Symphoniker, Orchestre National de France, London Philharmonic and City of Birmingham Symphony orchestras.

Hough's discography of around 70 CDs has garnered international awards including the *Diapason d'Or de l'Année*, several Grammy nominations, and eight Gramophone Awards including *Record of the Year* and the *Gold Disc*.

4 Rachmaninov at his Steinway piano in the 1920s.

Rachmaninov: The Piano Concertos

Concert 1

Wed 24 May
Adelaide Town Hall

Andrew Litton
Conductor

Sir Stephen Hough
Piano

Duration
2 hrs (incl. interval)

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) [27′]
Piano Concerto No.1 in F sharp minor, Op.1 (1919 version)

Vivace
Andante
Allegro vivace

Sir Stephen Hough Piano

Interval

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) [50′]
Symphony No.5 in E minor, Op.64

Andante – Allegro con anima
Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza
Valse (Allegro moderato)
Finale (Andante maestoso – allegro vivace – moderato assai e molto maestoso)

Listen Later ABC Classic is recording this concert for later broadcast at 1pm on Friday 16 June.

Classical Conversation Join us in the stalls of the Adelaide Town Hall one hour before the concert for our free pre-concert talk to hear pianist Sir Stephen Hough in conversation with ABC Classic's Russell Torrance.

Vivace
Andante
Allegro vivace

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Concerto No.1 in F sharp minor, Op.1 (1919 version)

'It's incredible how many stupid things I did at the age of 19. All composers do it.' That was Rachmaninov's view, in 1931, of the piano concerto – his first – that he had written 40 years earlier.

The concerto was a graduation piece, and Rachmaninov played the first movement with some success as part of a student's concert at the Moscow Conservatory. The work was published immediately – and therein lay the seed of Rachmaninov's growing concern. Had it remained in manuscript it would probably not have haunted him so, but its status as his first opus number began to irritate him more and more, so that in 1908 he would write: 'There are so many requests for this concerto, and it's so terrible in its present form, that I should like to work at it and, if possible, get it into decent shape.' His embarrassment lay in what he saw as its structural weaknesses, its technical clumsiness and the formal problems that compromised the presentation of his melodic ideas, particularly in the finale.

The moment Rachmaninov chose to undertake his long-awaited revision of the concerto was, to say the least, historically charged. In the Russian summer of 1917 he experienced some unpleasant encounters with Bolshevist agitators at his country estate, Ivanovka. (After the revolution the house would be virtually destroyed.) His sorrow at the political turmoil in his homeland was a major pre-occupation, and he found it impossible to concentrate on new composition. Returning to Moscow, he shut himself up in his flat and decided that this was the moment to put the first concerto's demons to rest. In so doing he kept himself oblivious to the shouting and sounds of gunfire in the surrounding streets. By the time he completed his revision in November, Russia's revolutionary government was in place. Only a few weeks later Rachmaninov and his family would leave Russia for the last time.

Rachmaninov's re-examination of his teenage concerto did not result in an overhaul of the work's musical language. Those passages that do suggest the mature Rachmaninov – and this is principally in sections of the finale – do not alter the status of the work as a young composer's achievement. He altered many aspects of the piece, making thematic presentation, orchestration and the solo part more subtle and sophisticated (yet still very demanding and virtuosic – tailor-made for a pianist of Rachmaninov's fearsomely complete technique and romantic disposition). But some things he left alone; the concerto has a freshness and impulsiveness Rachmaninov was not to capture again.

He was always a rhapsodic composer but, in its outer movements, this concerto is distinguished by a high level of contrast in tempo between its major musical statements. After the grim call to action which opens the work, each theme is given its own very distinct setting. The cadenza, a brilliant, lengthy showpiece, takes up around a quarter of the first movement.

The *Andante* emerged largely intact from Rachmaninov's revisions. It's an oasis of lyrical simplicity, in which the lovely theme is presented by the soloist without accompaniment, before the orchestra takes it up, now accompanied with decorative figurations from the piano. This movement is the closest Rachmaninov came to inhabiting the world of a Chopin nocturne.

Like the first movement, the finale opens with an orchestral call to arms, and the results are dashing, the piano leaping in almost immediately with a playful response that turns out to be the movement's major theme. This idea develops by way of incisive dialogue between piano and orchestra, much of it the result of Rachmaninov's revisions. In fact this movement received the greatest overhaul in the 1917 version. The languorous central episode for the strings, with filigree commentary from the piano at the end of each phrase, was originally transformed into a grandiose final statement. Now the closing section is a highly accented Russian dance of great rhythmic exhilaration.

In refining the concerto's structure and technique, Rachmaninov hoped the piece would enter the repertoire as assuredly as his second and third concertos had. But it was not to be. 'I have re-written my first Concerto; it is really good now,' he told a friend during his years in the United States. 'All the youthful freshness is there and yet it plays itself so much more easily. And nobody pays any attention. When I tell them in America that I will play the First Concerto, they do not protest, but I can see by their faces they would prefer the Second or Third...'

Phillip Sametz ©2003

Performance History

The ASO's first performance of this work took place in October 1983 at the Adelaide Festival Centre: the pianist was Stephen McIntyre and the conductor Zdenek Macal. The Orchestra most recently performed it during a Great Classics concert in June 2016, also in the Festival Centre, with conductor Alexander Bloch and soloist Alexander Gavrylyuk.

Andante – Allegro con anima
Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza
Valse (Allegro moderato)
Finale (Andante maestoso – allegro vivace – moderato assai e molto maestoso)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) Symphony No.5 in E minor, Op.64

Composers get themselves into terrible trouble talking about their works, and even worse if something casually written down – say in a diary or private letter – comes to public attention. There are, for instance, numerous cases in the letters of Mozart where the composer is being economical with the truth or indulging in tactful white lies to set his father's mind at ease. Tchaikovsky, similarly, is frequently misinterpreted on the basis of written remarks, as his music seems so clearly to reflect the apparent turbulence of his emotional life.

Tchaikovsky was at the height of his creative powers in 1888, and had come to a personal and artistic rapprochement with Brahms (whom he once described as a 'giftless bastard', but who was arguably the leading symphonist of the day). Tchaikovsky's Fifth (like his Fourth) is in some respects an attempt to contribute to a genre associated with Brahms' mentor Schumann, and which Brahms himself used: the motto symphony. In short, the work is unified by a 'motto' or theme stated in the introduction to the first movement.

Tchaikovsky has been taken at his word when he protested that the symphony 'has a mountain of padding; an experienced eye can detect the thread in my seams and I can do nothing about it'. In fact the experienced eye and ear of Brahms was, as well it might have been, highly impressed by the work's cohesion. The work too displays some of Tchaikovsky's most inspired orchestration. In addition to the use of the motto theme, Tchaikovsky gives his work its special sense of coherence through the use of a web of key relations, and 'subliminal' motifs which occur from movement to movement.

The first movement's introduction sets the tone with lugubrious scoring which features the low register of the clarinet, an instrument which also heralds the faster material of the main body of the movement. The energy gradually increases, with marvellous antiphonal writing for the winds against the passionate surges of the strings and the urgent punctuation from the brass. The 'second subject' group of themes forms a sharp contrast in its more lyrical, noble mood.

The material forms the basis for dramatically contending music, but the movement ends quietly and, in a sense, inconclusively.

The slow movement is justly famous for its long-breathed horn theme, and its powerful climaxes (Tchaikovsky's directions for the second climax are 'with desire and passion'). The balletic *Valse* may have anecdotal significance, but it also provides a relaxation in the intensity of the music (despite a late reminiscence of the motto) before the *Finale*, in which the tension between tragedy and joy is decisively concluded in favour of joy.
The work does have moments of unarguably tragic tone, which, if biographical explanation is required, may relate to these specific events: the composer fell ill in 1886 and experienced poor health for the following year – to the point where he became convinced that this was his final illness. More importantly, a number of his closest friends died at this time, including Nikolai Kondratiev, whose demise provided the inspiration for the symphony. Scholar Roland John Wiley argues that the rhythm of the motto theme corresponds to a Russian Easter chant which sets the words 'Christ is risen'. As Wiley says:

If that connection was intentional, various aspects of meaning in the Fifth Symphony would be clarified. The triumphal variant of the motto in the last movement would be more than a defeat-to-victory cliché, while the clash between the motto and the worldly intonations of the inner movements would make sense.

This is not to say that the work is a 'program symphony', but that it contains a meaning more complex and important than is admitted in more common, glib accounts.

Abridged from a note by Gordon Kerry ©2005

Performance History

The ASO first performed this symphony in October 1940 with Bernard Heinze conducting, and most recently in June 2019 under Pinchas Zukerman's direction.

Rachmaninov
The Pianist

Rachmaninov actively pursued three careers in music: those of composer, pianist and conductor, although he admitted late in life that it had been his misfortune to be able to concentrate on only one of these at a time. His first years of sustained work as a conductor, for example, were those between the disastrous premiere of the First Symphony in 1897 and the composition of his Second Piano Concerto in 1900, during which time he composed very little. His life as a concert virtuoso, which began when he was 45, coincided with a period when he composed infrequently.

Although he had played piano in public since his teens, once he started composing in earnest again in 1900 his piano-playing became of secondary importance to him. He performed his own works to huge success in Russia, Europe and the USA between 1900 and 1917, but these performances were an extension of his composing – he had no other concert repertoire, and fitted these performances in between his composing and conducting work.

His circumstances changed completely with the 1917 Revolution. He and his family left Russia for good, and with it they left behind the income from Rachmaninov's estate, Ivanovka, and from his work as a performer. Somehow, he had to make a living. He was offered the Chief Conductor positions with the Boston and Cincinnati Orchestras. He turned both offers down – he did not like long-term contracts, because they reduced his artistic freedom; he had become insecure about his conducting abilities; and America was a strange country to him. He had been there only once, in 1909, when he found its ethos and his aristocratic temperament poorly matched. He wrote: 'All around one there are Americans and the "business", "business" they are always doing, clutching you from all sides and driving you on.'

But now the American offers seemed to suggest a solution to his financial concerns, and he soon moved there, acquired an agent and embarked on a new career of pianist-composer; not, as previously, composer-pianist. So he went about building up a soloist's repertoire. He did so slowly and selectively, and never had more than 12 pieces 'under his fingers' at any one time, chosen from a select group of composers – Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Beethoven, the toccatas of Ravel and Poulenc, pieces by his compatriots Medtner and Scriabin and some early Debussy works.

Wherever he performed, he found himself forced to play 'the' prelude, the one in C sharp minor he had written at the age of 19 and which had become his most popular piece, indeed one of the most popular piano pieces in the world. Late in life he told one critic that, as much as he had come to dislike 'the' prelude, he usually made it his last encore because 'when I play it then I can go home!' On those occasions when he felt he could simply not look the piece in the eye, audiences would be bitterly disappointed.

By the early 1920s, Rachmaninov was considered one of the finest pianists in the world. For those of us who did not hear Rachmaninov in the flesh, we are fortunate that he made so many records. After a short and unhappy period recording for the inventor Thomas Edison, he signed with Victor, with whom he recorded for the rest of his life, appearing on disc as soloist in all his works for piano and orchestra, in major works and encores from his recital repertoire, in partnership with Fritz Kreisler and, reluctantly but magnificently, as conductor.

Rachmaninov's hands

That Rachmaninov was a fine player of his own music was one thing. That his performances of major repertoire works were equally superb was another, and this was considered the miraculous aspect of his musicianship. Critic Neville Cardus once said that he 'was working from within *out*, not – as most pianists have to do – from without in'. In Chopin's Sonata No.2 or Schumann's *Carnaval* it could seem that Rachmaninov was re-creating the music on the spot.

Yet he was not a spontaneous player by nature. He believed in poise and finish. Every piece, he felt, had a 'point' *(tochka* in Russian), which, if missed, would destroy the piece's structure. 'This culmination,' he wrote, 'may be at the end or in the middle, it may be loud or soft: but the performer must know how to approach it with absolute calculation ... You have to peer into every corner, take every screw apart, so that you can easily put the whole together again.' He presented a very sober platform appearance and was far less free with the text than some of his more flamboyant contemporaries.

Fashions in performance styles may come and go, but the large recorded legacy Rachmaninov left behind contains some of the most incisive and thoughtful piano playing captured on disc. It seems even more astonishing that this same musician should also have written some of the century's most enduring music.

Sir Frank Dicksee's painting of the Balcony Scene from *Romeo and Juliet* (1884)

Rachmaninov: The Piano Concertos

Concert 2

Andrew Litton
Conductor

Sir Stephen Hough
Piano

Sat 27 May
Adelaide Town Hall

Duration
1 hrs 50 mins (incl. interval)

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) [33']
Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor, Op.18

Moderato
Adagio sostenuto
Allegro scherzando

Sir Stephen Hough Piano

Interval

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) [40']
Romeo and Juliet: Suite **(arr. Andrew Litton)**

Morning Dance
Montagues and Capulets
Juliet the young girl
The street awakens – tableau
Dance
Romeo and Juliet
Masks
Minuet
Romeo at Juliet's before parting
Death of Tybalt

Listen Later ABC Classic is recording this concert for later broadcast at 1pm on Saturday 17 June.

Classical Conversation Join us in the stalls of the Adelaide Town Hall one hour before the concert for our free pre-concert talk to hear conductor Andrew Litton in conversation with ABC Classic's Russell Torrance.

Moderato
Adagio sostenuto
Allegro scherzando

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor, Op.18

The story of the creation of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto is often told: the First Symphony by the young composer, a star student of the Moscow Conservatory, was disastrously premiered in St Petersburg, resulting in vicious press attacks. Supposedly, the ordeal led Rachmaninov into a three-year period of deep depression in which he was unable to write, and ended only after a course in hypnotherapy with the viola-playing Dr Nikolai Dahl. The doctor's treatment apparently persuaded the young composer that he would be able to write a new concerto, and the resulting work – dedicated to Dahl – has become one of the most famous in the piano repertory.

It's an attractive tale, yet despite Rachmaninov's obvious disappointment with the reception of his symphony, the so-called 'creative hiatus' was a relatively busy period for him. From 1898, he took up the baton professionally for the first time, conducting numerous performances for the newly established Mamontov Private Opera Company in Moscow, and directing the young Chaliapin in roles for which he would later become so famous. Such was his conducting skill that within a few years he would hold a position at the Bolshoi Theatre. The period also heralded a subtle but significant change in his outlook on composition once he started writing larger works again. From 1900, Rachmaninov favoured a more conservative style than that of his symphony, and one that, ironically, became the source of some personal consternation as he sought to evolve his creative voice in following years.

Whether due to the course in hypnotherapy – after all, it was some months before he began to write again – or simply the passage of time, there is no doubting the sense that something was unleashed within the composer in the works that followed. In the concerto and other compositions of the period (the second Two-Piano Suite and the Sonata for Piano and Cello are the closest), a new assuredness of style is evident, and there is an almost overwhelming abundance of melody. These new works were also created quickly: the second and third movements of the concerto were completed within a few months, and a performance of these took place in December 1900 in Moscow. The first complete performance of the new concerto occurred on 9 November 1901, also in Moscow, with the composer at the piano and his cousin, the noted pianist Alexander Siloti, conducting.

The famous opening notes of this work are essentially an extended cadence: slightly varied chords over bell-like bass notes gradually increase in volume, before the notes A flat, F, G – the basis of a motif that appears throughout the concerto – resolve to the home key of C minor, whereon the orchestra introduces the expansive principal subject. The second theme, in the key of the relative major, is by contrast given almost exclusively to the piano. The development section begins with material based on the motif, while a fragment of the second subject in the violins propels the movement to its climax. The recapitulation follows, with the orchestra again stating the main theme while the piano provides a martial-like accompaniment based on material extrapolated from the motif.

A short orchestral passage serves to move the second movement to the warmer key of E major where, over an arpeggiated figure in the piano, the first subject is given to the flute, then taken over by the clarinet. After a second statement of the theme by the soloist, the melody is developed as the music builds. A faster *scherzando* section leads the movement to a climax, at which point Rachmaninov provides a cadenza (lacking from its traditional place in the first movement). The violins restate the opening melodic material, before sustained piano chords accompany a passage of gradual melodic descent as the movement dies away.

The final movement begins quietly on low strings, before a dramatic keyboard cadenza introduces the principal theme. A short period of development, including a brief shift to waltz-time, leads to an abrupt key change and the announcement of the lyrical second subject – perhaps one of Rachmaninov's most famous melodies – by the oboe and violas. A trance-like section over a held bass note leads to a development section where Rachmaninov, with youthful exuberance, replaces a recapitulation of the first subject with a fugue based on its opening notes. The second subject is then heard again in the distant key of D flat major, before a short coda leads to a final restatement of the melody, this time *fortissimo* and given to the full orchestra, underpinned by massive chords on the piano. In characteristic fashion, the concerto concludes with a spirited dash to the end.

Abridged from an annotation by Scott Davie

Performance History

Pnina Salzman was soloist in the ASO's first performance of this work in July 1945. The conductor was Malcolm Sargent. Most recently, the work was conducted by Nicholas Carter in December 2017; the soloist was Alexander Gavrylyuk.

Morning Dance
Montagues and Capulets
Juliet the young girl
The street awakens – tableau
Dance
Romeo and Juliet
Masks
Minuet
Romeo at Juliet's before parting
Death of Tybalt

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)
Romeo and Juliet: Suite

(arr. Andrew Litton)

Between 1932 and 1936 Prokofiev spent increasingly long periods back in the USSR, which he had left to further his career abroad in 1918. By 1936 he and his family had settled again in Moscow. Aware that the Soviet system had created a vast new, but largely inexperienced, audience for classical music, he said in an interview with *Isvestia* in 1934 that what the USSR needed was "light serious" – or "serious light" – music; it is by no means easy to find the term which suits it. Above all, it must be tuneful, simply and comprehensively tuneful, and must not be repetitious or stamped with triviality.'

Sadly, many of his first attempts to write for the new Soviet man and woman were derided as 'simplistic' or, at the same time, 'formalist' (Soviet-speak for 'nasty and modern'). Certain works, however, achieved the ideal of 'light-serious' music. *Peter and the Wolf* and the score for Sergei Eisenstein's film of *Alexander Nevsky* ensured a precarious period of grace for the composer at the end of the 1930s and these have remained in the repertoire in- and outside of Russia ever since.

The greatest among these is *Romeo and Juliet*, yet it had a difficult and protracted birth. Leningrad's Kirov Theatre rejected the initial proposal because of the story's tragic ending but Prokofiev's friend, theatre director Sergei Radlov, suggested a happy conclusion in which the lovers avoid death. This, he argued, would make it 'a play about the struggle for the right to love by young, strong progressive people battling against feudal traditions and feudal outlooks on marriage' and thus a perfect piece of optimistic Socialist Realism.

Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre took over the commission for the work. Then the artistic director of the Bolshoi fell foul of Stalin's purges, and was arrested and shot. The ballet was quietly shelved.

The premiere of *Romeo and Juliet* was eventually given in Brno, in the then Czechoslovakia in 1938, at which time the Kirov offered to give the Russian premiere in January 1940. Choreographer Leonid Lavrovsky made some unauthorised changes to the scenario and score, and then bullied

Ford Madox Brown's painting of the Balcony Scene from *Romeo and Juliet* (1870)

Prokofiev into making further cuts and additions – the *Morning Dance*, with which this selection begins, for instance, was composed so that Lavrovsky would not fulfil his threat of simply using another, unrelated piece of Prokofiev's to set the scene. Then there were the dancers, who were, as Galina Ulanova, who danced Juliet, later observed, 'a little afraid' of the music. The composer was very accommodating, subtly changing orchestrations to be heard more clearly by the dancers on stage, for instance, and he reported to a friend that 'after 15 curtain calls' at the Leningrad premiere, some of the dancers felt the work 'might be acceptable after all'. Fortunately, the regime felt that the work was acceptable after all too, and it ushered in a period of favour and popularity for Prokofiev, producing works like the Flute (or Violin) Sonata in D and the Fifth Symphony.

The dancers' initial bafflement seems odd now. The score is notable for its clarity of orchestration – not that this precludes moments of great opulence, such as the pile-up of sonority which opens Act III and presages the tragic events about to unfold, or the multi *divisi* strings which give the young lovers a halo of rich sound. But the score offers clear contrasts between the implacable march of tragic fate in those passages built on repeated ostinato figures and the more rhapsodic soaring passages associated with love, and between the worlds of public life and private intimacy. Musicologist Stephen Walsh calls the ballet a 'brilliant fusion of post-Imperial romanticism and scuttling, unpredictable Prokofievism'.

Prokofiev's characterisation is masterful, whether he depicts the arrogance of the Capulets at their ball, the tenderness of Juliet herself or the otherworldly music which accompanies Friar Lawrence as he awaits the lovers in his cell, and his theme for each character is immediately recognisable when it appears in a new context. There are numerous set-pieces such as the *Dance*, the *Minuet* and *Masks*, which provide a sometimes bustling, sometimes menacing backdrop to the unfolding love story. The parting of the young lovers is given a full and impassioned treatment which features themes associated with each. In contrast to music of such heartbreaking intensity, this selection concludes with the uncompromisingly brutal music which accompanies Romeo's furious killing of Tybalt in revenge for the death of his friend Mercutio.

Abridged from a note by Gordon Kerry © 2005/10

Performance History

The ASO first performed a suite from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* in September 1974, under Carlo Bagnoli's direction.

Ivanovka, the country estate of Rachmaninov's relatives the Satins, where Rachmaninov created many of his compositions

20 Rachmaninov proofing the Piano Concerto No.3 at Ivanovka.

Rachmaninov: The Piano Concertos

Concert 3

Andrew Litton
Conductor

Sir Stephen Hough
Piano

Wed 31 May
Adelaide Town Hall

Duration
2 hrs (incl. interval)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) [44′]
Symphony No. 1 in G minor, Op. 13 *Winter Daydreams*

Dreams of a winter journey (Allegro tranquillo)
Land of desolation, land of mists (Adagio cantabile ma non tanto)
Scherzo (Allegro scherzando giocoso)
Andante lugubre – Allegro maestoso

Interval

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) [39′]
Piano Concerto No.3 in D minor, Op.30

Allegro ma non tanto
Intermezzo (Adagio) –
Finale (Alla breve)

Sir Stephen Hough Piano

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Dreams of a winter journey (Allegro tranquillo)

Land of desolation, land of mists (Adagio cantabile ma non tanto)

Scherzo (Allegro scherzando giocoso)

Andante lugubre – Allegro maestoso

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Symphony No. 1 in G minor, Op. 13
Winter Daydreams

Tchaikovsky's First Symphony is the product of a nervous young man in his mid-20s just appointed to a responsible teaching position in a strange city, and trying to juggle his wish to compose with his new-found professional responsibilities. It's a remarkably assured work to have been composed under such circumstances, and to many listeners unfamiliar with it, may display more of the composer's mature stylistic fingerprints than they might expect.

Tchaikovsky had just joined the staff of the Moscow Conservatoire early in 1866 when its Director, Nicholas Rubinstein, urged him to write a symphony. Tchaikovsky, who had completed his first orchestral score only two years before, began sketches immediately, and was soon working so hard on it – writing well into the night and teaching during the day – that his health began to suffer, and he made fitful progress.

By the following summer he had worked his sketches up into a full orchestral score. He chose this moment to show his former teachers Anton Rubinstein (Nicholas' brother) and Nicholas Zaremba, who were quick to find fault. Tchaikovsky's consternation at this criticism was allayed by Nicholas' continuing enthusiasm, and it was this Moscow Rubinstein who conducted the first complete performance in February 1868.

It was a big success for Tchaikovsky, and became one of the first Russian symphonies to find public favour; but the composer continued to make alterations to it. Following revisions and cuts in 1874, he revised it further in 1883. Despite these changes, Tchaikovsky told a friend: 'I have a soft spot for it, for it is a sin of my sweet youth.'

With young composers it's often fun to play 'pick the influences'. Tchaikovsky scholar John Warrack has discussed the symphony's particular debt to Mendelssohn. Following Mendelssohn's *Scottish* and *Italian* symphonies, Tchaikovsky seems to have wanted to create his own Romantic musical landscape, but one arising out of the emotions stirred in him by his own country. The idea must have lost its appeal, for the final two movements lack the sub-titles of the symphony's first half. The attempt at a lightness of texture in many key passages and the surprising independence of the woodwind writing throughout the work suggests Mendelssohn's immediate influence on the work's musical language. Yet many of the ideas in *Winter Dreams* seem to pre-figure passages you might know from Tchaikovsky's later music.

The first movement opens with a flowing woodwind melody that has the light, questioning quality and gentle interjections that suggest a Mendelssohnian response to landscape. This cannot be said of the chromatic semiquaver theme that sounds, on first hearing, like the opening theme's accompaniment, but turns out to be its partner. These 'twin' themes spend much of their time in interplay in this movement, and are offset by a true second subject that appears unexpectedly on clarinet. The passionate development of this idea, and healthy doses of bombast that follow, suggest the Tchaikovsky to come, as does a balletic passage for horns and woodwinds. The brass fanfares that dominate much of the development section pre-figure the tense opening of the Fourth Symphony. *Winter Dreams*' first movement concludes with a return to the quietly expectant mood of the opening.

The slow movement resembles one of the great ballet adagios in both atmosphere and texture. Muted *divisi* violins play the beautiful first subject, which is followed by a long, songful melody on He soon gives this expansive tune to the violas for a passionate re-statement. The horns dominate the climax, until the movement is framed by a return to the gentle beauty of the opening subject.

The *Scherzo* is perhaps the most overtly Mendelssohnian movement. At the opening, the lightness of the scoring is offset by a pervasive chromaticism. The Trio begins as a waltz in all but name, then develops considerable tension. The Scherzo's reprise is followed by an unusual passage in which the timpani taps out the rhythm of the principal tune under the strings' reminiscence of the Trio's waltz theme.

Although much of the music in this symphony sounds folk-like, the Finale begins, slowly, with the first *actual* Russian folk tune you'll hear, taken from the song *The Gardens Bloom*ed. The pace then quickens, and the mood becomes more festive. The dance-like second subject, announced by strings, bears a strong resemblance to the folk tune with which the movement opened so lugubriously. The sudden return to this darker mood in the middle of the festivities seems to cast a pall on the proceedings, until a spirit of brightness and grandeur gradually emerges. The symphony ends in a mood of brash jubilation.

Phillip Sametz © 1999

Performance History

The ASO first performed Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.1 in August 1984 under conductor Dalia Atlas, and most recently in April 2014, conducted by Arvo Volmer.

Allegro ma non tanto
Intermezzo (Adagio) –
Finale (Alla breve)

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Concerto No.3 in D minor, Op.30

Having just completed what is now regarded as one of the most famously difficult piano concertos of all time, the composer's resort to the use of a 'dummy' keyboard as he worked to master it is, perhaps, darkly ironic. But that he did, as he sailed the Atlantic to America for its premiere. His performance with the New York Symphony and Walter Damrosch on 28 November 1909 was greeted enthusiastically, as was a repeat performance at Carnegie Hall the following January with the New York Philharmonic under Gustav Mahler. However, unlike his Second Piano Concerto, which was taken up by other pianists immediately, the popularity of the Third was slow to build. Arguably, it was not until the young Vladimir Horowitz made his European recording debut with the work in 1930 that it found a wider audience.

The concerto was written on the cusp of the so-called 'modern' age, the point at which the maximalist excesses of the Romantic were undercut by a preference for sparseness, as is notable in many later 20th-century works.

As a composer, Rachmaninov was very much aware of the changing trend, his own turning-point coming directly after his massive, formally designed Second Symphony, completed in 1907. While the inflections common in many performances of the Third Concerto often emphasise its extravagances, many modernising twists are to be found, especially in the work's unique structure.

An example is the treatment of the first movement's two main themes, which return at various places in later movements. The famous opening melody – about which commentators often relate Joseph Yasser's unconvincing attempts to connect it to the composer's subconscious recollection of a liturgical chant – recurs in the second movement as an impassioned outburst in the violins, and as a jaunty clarinet waltz. In the final movement, the cellos reflect on it briefly as the music winds toward a full restatement of the second theme, which is also reincarnated (incognito) as the underlying motto of the central *scherzando* section.

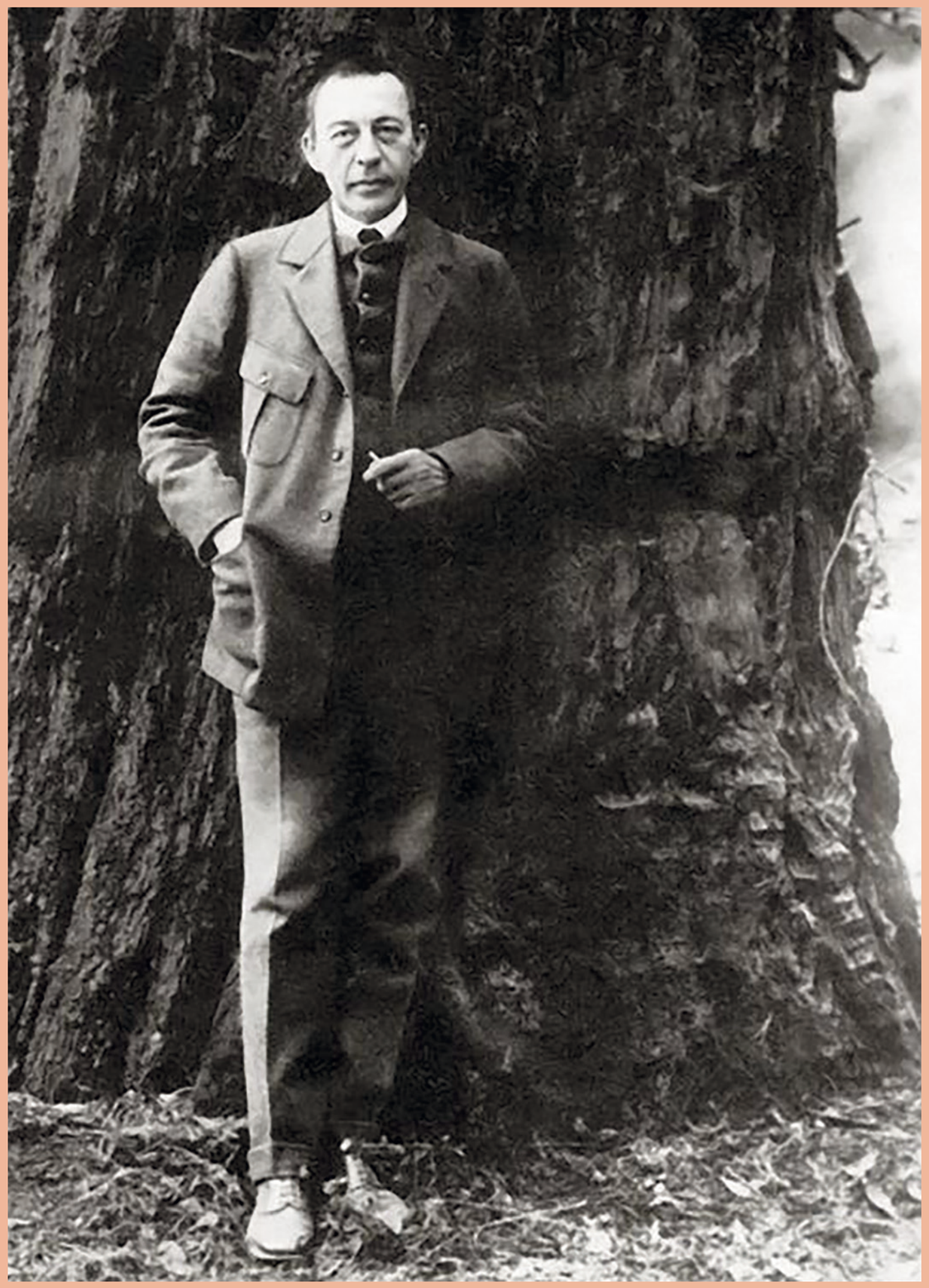
Rachmaninov wrote alternate cadenzas for the opening movement, the longer and more extreme being the original of the two. In that reading, the mighty restatement of the main theme in double-octave chords clearly marks the point of recapitulation, while in the shorter and lighter second cadenza the recapitulation is less obvious. This tendency to recast by cutting back is a harbinger of the composer's uncertainty over issues of length and scope, which becomes increasingly prevalent in his later years. This issue similarly underscores the numerous, often disfiguring, cuts that he made in both performance and recording, truncations that were assiduously followed by many subsequent interpreters. These days the concerto is typically played complete, save for a couple of the more adventurous *ossias* (or alternative passages), which include variant figurations so demanding that they are close to impossible (such as the suggestion of even faster double-octaves in the closing lines).

Rather than using a formally structured theme as the basis for the second movement, as he typically did, a short four-note motif provides the melodic impetus. The writing here is some of his most idiosyncratic, and a high level of craft can be discerned in the way each iteration differs in length, allowing successive moments of ever-greater impact to be reached. In the Finale, the outer portions of the threefold structure offer pianists some of the most physically challenging passages in the repertoire, an exceptional degree of strength being a prerequisite. The second subject – an ebullient, fast-flowing melody – offers only momentary respite.

With the release of the film *Shine* in 1996, the concerto has witnessed even higher levels of fame (or infamy, depending on one's view). While its iconic status now seems entrenched, it is perhaps worth noting that Rachmaninov's success as a pianist was built on ideals that were novel for the time, including understatement, an abhorrence of virtuosity, and faithfulness to the score. A subtle illustration of this perhaps lies in the closing moments, where the music returns – in the style of Grieg and Tchaikovsky's earlier models – to the lyrical second subject. In this instance, however, Rachmaninov does not allow for wallowing excess; rather, the concerto proceeds to its conclusion in a forthright and headlong manner.

Performance History

Irene Kohler was soloist in the ASO's first performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No.3, in March 1956; the conductor was Tibor Paul. Most recently, the Orchestra performed it in October 2021. The soloist was Konstantin Shamray, the conductor Johannes Fritzsch.



Rachmaninov. in 1919, in front of a giant Redwood tree in California.

Rachmaninov In The New World

By June 1917 Rachmaninov knew he could not stay in Russia much longer. The Czar and his government had fallen early in the year, and initially Rachmaninov had felt joy at the prospect of democratic freedom for his country. But soon after, his country estate Ivanovka was looted and vandalised, and the political atmosphere became increasingly unstable. Concentrating on composition was impossible. He wrote to his cousin Siloti, telling of his desperate need to take his family out of the country, to 'Norway, Denmark [or] Sweden. It makes no difference where! Anywhere!'

But he could pull no strings, and in his increasing despair, turned to a task he had put off for some time but that he felt would take his mind off the enveloping chaos: the revision of his Piano Concerto No.1. He became so absorbed in this work that he failed to notice the world changing around him. In late October, in the streets surrounding his Moscow flat, the latest incarnation of the provisional government was overthrown, and the Bolsheviks seized power. When, a few weeks later, Rachmaninov received an invitation to perform in Stockholm, he leaped at the chance. On December 23, 1917, he and his family left Russia for the last time.

When poet and novelist Boris Pasternak was threatened with deportation after the success of *Doctor Zhivago* in 1958, he wrote: 'Leaving the motherland will equal death for me'. For Rachmaninov departure from Russia was a desperate but seemingly inescapable measure. He was a patrician in spirit, completely antipathetic to the Communist regime, and found himself unable to work in the newly violent atmosphere of his homeland. Rachmaninov's income and possessions were now gone and he had to earn enough money to provide some security for his family. He was, in effect, a refugee. So, at the age of 45, he transformed himself from a composer-pianist to a virtuoso pianist who performed his own compositions as part of a much broader repertoire.

Just as he was trying to decide where the family would settle, he received three offers from the United States: the post of Chief Conductor with the Boston Symphony (110 concerts in 30 weeks), a two-year conductor's contract with the Cincinnati Symphony and a recital tour of 25 concerts. Although he turned down all three proposals, they cemented his idea of making the USA his home. It was far from the war and the offers he'd already received indicated that he was likely to find work there.

Rachmaninov would tour Europe frequently in his remaining years and built himself a villa on the shore of Lake Lucerne, called *Senar*. But North America became the centre of his career: all his major works written after 1917 were premiered there, he made all his recordings there and it is where he returned for good as war clouds gathered over Europe.

The outset of his career as a concert pianist coincided with the cessation of his composing activities. 'Coincided' may be too gentle a term. Travelling as frequently as he did and making his home in a new culture, it might seem as if he had acclimatised to his new life reasonably well, but in the New York house Rachmaninov bought in 1921, and at Senar, he consciously recreated the atmosphere of Ivanovka, with Russian servants in employ, Russian customs observed and Russian visitors received. When Stanislavsky and the Moscow Arts Theatre arrived in New York in 1922 Rachmaninov entertained them royally.

This separation from his cultural roots has often been given as the reason for Rachmaninov's long compositional silence: between 1917 and the premiere of the Fourth Piano Concerto in 1926 he wrote no original works at all. But there was a practical reason also; he was performing intensively (between November 1922 and March 1923, for example, he gave 71 performances in the USA, Canada and Cuba) and making records and piano rolls.

The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* aside, for decades the recorded legacy of his piano playing was considered the major achievement of his American years. His pianism may sound romantic and very "personal" to our ears, but, in an age of high-flown pianism, his contemporaries admired it for its combination of vivid imagination and searching analysis. He is often cited as one of the founders of a modern interpretative sensibility.

When he did, finally, present new works to the public – the Three Russian Songs, Fourth Piano Concerto, *Corelli* Variations, *Paganini* Rhapsody, Third Symphony and Symphonic Dances came forth in sporadic bursts from 1926 until 1940 – they were generally greeted dismissively. Critics were listening to Stravinsky and audiences wanted more of the handful of his works they already knew, particularly the tunefulness and lush textures of the Second and Third piano concertos. The *Paganini* Rhapsody was his only piece to be a "hit" in his lifetime. Only since the 1970s has a real appreciation begun of the music he created in his new world.

Rachmaninov had been a welcome guest at the household of novelist Boris Pasternak; Boris' father Leonid, an art professor, depicted the composer in this sketch.

30 Rachmaninov in 1920.

Rachmaninov: The Piano Concertos

Concert 4

Sat 3 June
Adelaide Town Hall

Andrew Litton
Conductor

Sir Stephen Hough
Piano

Duration
1 hr 50 mins (incl. interval)

Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857) [5′]
Ruslan and Ludmila: Overture

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) [24′]
Piano Concerto No.4 in G minor, Op.40 (1941 version)

Allegro vivace
Largo
Allegro vivace

Sir Stephen Hough Piano

Interval

Rachmaninov [20′]
The Isle of the Dead – Symphonic Poem, Op.29

Rachmaninov [22′]
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43

Sir Stephen Hough Piano

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Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857)
Ruslan and Ludmila: Overture

Glinka's music was, to borrow a phrase from Tchaikovsky, the 'acorn from which the oak of Russian music grew'. Born into a minor noble family, Glinka was able to cultivate his musical interests from a young age, at school in St Petersburg and conducting a 'serf orchestra' on an estate neighbouring his parents'. By 1820 he was back in St Petersburg, ostensibly working in the civil service but in fact devoting himself to composition, and attending opera. The visit of an Italian company in 1828 confirmed his love of Rossini, and he travelled to Italy two years later where he got to know Donizetti and Bellini and their works. Before returning to Russia in 1834, he spent time in Berlin, studying the principles of counterpoint. Having absorbed Italian lyricism and German rigour, Glinka returned to his homeland and set about writing music based on Russian themes.

Ruslan and Ludmila is his second completed opera, and is based on a fairy tale given literary currency by the great poet Alexander Pushkin. (Glinka and Pushkin had discussed a collaboration on the work, but the poet was fatally wounded in a duel before work began.) Ludmila is the daughter of Grand Prince Svetozar. She is betrothed to Ruslan, but abducted from her father's palace by the evil sorcerer Chernomor. After a series of fantastic adventures, during which Ruslan removes a spell that has put Ludmila into a magic sleep, all ends happily.

Like many an opera composer, Glinka left writing the overture to *Ruslan and Ludmila* until last, but drew on themes from the body of the work. The overture begins with music derived from the general rejoicing at the end of the opera, which is contrasted with a melody associated with Ruslan's love for Ludmila. Chernomor makes an appearance in Glinka's pathbreaking use of the whole-tone scale (heard in the trombones), but is banished by a return to the rejoicing mood of the opening.

Abridged from an annotation by Gordon Kerry
Symphony Australia © 2004

Performance History

Bernard Heinze conducted the ASO's first performance of this work in June 1955, as part of a Youth Concert. Most recently, the Orchestra performed the Overture under Guy Noble's direction, in a *Classics Unwrapped* program presented in June 2019.

Allegro vivace
Largo
Allegro vivace

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Concerto No.4 in G minor, Op.40 (1941 version)

This concerto was a troubled work: between the earliest sketches and its final form, its composition covered a period of 27 years. Rachmaninov's previous compositions for piano and orchestra had all been successful, and the Russian press had reported the composer at work on a new concerto as early as 1914. However, the turbulent events of 1917 drove him and his young family away from Russia. He took few things when he left, but included among his possessions were sketchbooks containing a substantial amount of material for the new work. In need of financial stability, he was fortunate to arrive in the United States at a time of immense interest in Russian culture, and his subsequent phenomenal success as a concert pianist – a career he saw as preferable to conducting – meant there was little time for composition. He also felt an intense sadness on being separated from his homeland, alluding to a lack of inspiration for writing new works when he said to his friend, Nikolai Medtner: 'How can I compose without melody?'

More settled and financially secure by the summer of 1925, however, Rachmaninov dramatically reduced his performance schedule to allow a return to composition, producing two new works the following year: the *Three Russian Song*s, for chorus and orchestra, and the Fourth Piano Concerto. Completed in Dresden, the concerto was premiered in Philadelphia in March 1927 with Leopold Stokowski conducting. Reviews of the new work, however, were unkind and Rachmaninov immediately set about making revisions: in all, 114 bars were removed, most of them from the final movement. A second version was performed in London in 1928 with Sir Henry Wood at the podium, and subsequently published. However it again failed to find success and eventually disappeared from the composer's repertoire.

Perhaps disheartened by the lack of success generated by his return to composition, he wrote only a few new (yet significant) works in the years before the final version of the fourth concerto. In 1938, following the unexpected success of his *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini*, Rachmaninov again revisited the concerto, but it was not until the summer of 1941 when holidaying in Long Island that the final version took shape. Again, the work was shortened: this time a further 78 bars were removed. The new version was performed on 17 October in Philadelphia with Eugene Ormandy conducting, and a recording was made in December, just one and a half years before the composer's death. The composition of this concerto had covered more than a third of his life.

With the soloist playing the soaring opening theme in double-octave chords, the concerto seems to set out from where the Third Piano Concerto ended. The musical mood soon changes, however, with the intensely lyrical second subject. As is typical of his large-scale works, a motif links the various movements, and in the development section this motif – a leaping minor ninth figure – is first heard. A more substantial build-up ensues, with melodic material derived from the opening theme sustaining the gradual *accelerando*. Subverting expectations, the recapitulation states the first and second themes in reverse order: the second is heard in the woodwinds over an arpeggiated piano accompaniment; and the first theme, formerly triumphal and exuberant, is treated gently and scored for high strings. The music dies to a murmur before ending abruptly.

A short piano introduction begins the second movement before the theme, marked *misterioso*, is introduced in the strings. Breaking the mood, a sudden fortissimo heralds what seems to be a new section but is, in fact, a chromatic transformation of the main theme. A sense of calm gradually returns before a more expansive melody acts as an apotheosis for the movement, a tune 'borrowed' from one of his solo piano works.

The final movement begins suddenly, with the first subject appearing almost immediately. The thematic material is presented twice before a short, whimsical leads to the second subject. Fanfare-like motifs form much of the first part of the theme, while a more extended second section shows Rachmaninov in a lyrical vein. A complete state of rest, however, is not reached until a series of descending chords leads to a quiet cadenza. The development section, substantially based on the rising minor ninth motif, continues amid hints of a recapitulation, before Rachmaninov – setting on a solution that he believed had evaded him in the earlier versions of the work – recalls material from the climax of the first movement, bringing the concerto to a thrilling close.

While his other works for piano and orchestra may have achieved a greater level of fame, the Fourth Piano Concerto heralded a notable shift in Rachmaninov's approach to piano writing and a revitalisation of his musical rhetoric.

Abridged from an annotation by Scott Davie
©2007

Performance History

This is the ASO's first performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No.4.

Arnold Böcklin's painting *The Isle of the Dead*. Böcklin created several different versions of the picture; this one, from 1883, now hangs in the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

Rachmaninov
The Isle of the Dead – Symphonic Poem, Op.29

Rachmaninov's symphonic poem takes its title from a painting by Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), one of a series on the same subject. It is the only mature work Rachmaninov admitted was the result of literary or pictorial stimulus.

Rachmaninov came across the painting in 1906 while living in Dresden. Böcklin's painting depicts Charon, the ferryman of the dead in Greek mythology, rowing a wrapped corpse across the Underworld river of Styx – a lonely island landscape with mournful cypresses surrounded by high cliffs.

The mood of this picture stirred Rachmaninov's imagination greatly. He was subject to a persistent melancholia (traceable perhaps to the psychological collapse which accompanied the failure of his First Symphony), but we should not underestimate the 19th century's fascination with death and commemoration. Much of Rachmaninov's work can be thought of as an end-of-century amplification of the 19th century's typically morbid concerns.

Böcklin said that this painting was meant to achieve a dream-like quality, an effect of stillness, and Rachmaninov brilliantly achieves a similar effect at the beginning of his tone poem; the five-note motif introduced by cellos suggests a boat slowly plying through waters or waves lapping at its sides. Sustained brass tones emerge from this music. By reference to the painting one can imagine the cliffs looming over the approaching cargo. There is the occasional tragic countermelody.

Rachmaninov's symphonic poem describes a simple dynamic pattern, building a couple of times to climaxes, the last perhaps expressive of the soul's grief at parting from the world, before finally subsiding quietly into the irresistible mood of the opening. One of Rachmaninov's most typical features, the quoting of the *Dies irae* melody from the Latin Mass for the Dead, is heard in various guises throughout, never in full, but perhaps most noticeably after the main climax, where it is heard above a plodding funereal accompaniment. What is remarkable, considering that the *Dies irae* is never heard complete, is that the whole of this work is imbued with the effect of lamentation such that we could divine the subject matter even without benefit of title.

G.K. Williams Symphony Australia © 1997

Performance History

Tibor Paul conducted the ASO's first performance of *The Isle of the Dead* in June 1973, in the Adelaide Festival Theatre. The Orchestra's most recent performance took place in the same venue, under Nicholas Carter's direction, in May 2014.

Rachmaninov
Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43

On leaving Russia in 1917, Rachmaninov busied himself with his self-appointed task of acquiring a concert pianist's repertoire, so that he could earn a steady income. Once settled in the USA, he gave 40 concerts in four months during his first concert season there. But he gradually reduced his concert commitments until, in 1925, he had nine months free of performances. During this period he composed his first post-Russian pieces, *Three Russian Songs for Chorus and Orchestra*, which were well received, and the Piano Concerto No.4, which was greeted with widespread indifference. Hurt by this rejection, he did not produce another work for four years.

When his *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* for solo piano appeared in 1931, they not only signalled a more astringent approach to harmonic language and musical texture but indicated that a large-scale variation structure might serve Rachmaninov's musical needs better than the more traditional concerto structure in which success had so recently eluded him.

So the *Corelli Variations* might be thought of as the moodier, introspective dress rehearsal for the work that was to follow, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. The Corelli 'theme' Rachmaninov chose was actually the popular Baroque tune *La Folia*, which forms the basis of a movement in Corelli's violin sonata Op.5 No.12. It was to another celebrated work for violin that Rachmaninov turned for the *Rhapsody*: the 24th Caprice of Paganini that had already been mined with distinguished results by Schumann, Liszt and Brahms, not to mention Paganini himself. How confident Rachmaninov must have felt about himself – a man so often pessimistic about his musical achievements – to be exploring the theme yet further, in a big work for piano and orchestra.

The *Rhapsody* attained an instant popularity that has never waned. Rachmaninov finally had a new 'concerto' to play, and was asked to do so frequently. The work has wit, charm, shapeliness, a clear sense of colour, strong rhythmic impetus and a dashing, suitably fiendish solo part that translates Paganini's legendary virtuosity into a completely different musical context. But the word 'Rhapsody' cleverly disguises a work that often behaves like a four-movement concerto. Of the 24 variations, Variations 1 to 11 form a quick first movement with cadenza; Variations 12 to 15 supply the equivalent of a scherzo/minuet; Variations 16 to 18, the slow movement; and the final six variations, the dashing finale.

You hear the first variation – a skeletal march that evokes Paganini's bony frame – before the theme itself. The ensuing variations are increasingly animated and decorative until Variation 7 gives you a first stately glimpse, on the piano, of the *Dies irae* plainchant, with the strings muttering the Paganini theme against it.

Rachmaninov and conductor Eugene Ormandy during a rehearsal at Philadelphia's Academy of Music in 1938
Photo: Adrian Siegel Collection/ Philadelphia Orchestra Archives

This old funeral chant features prominently in Rachmaninov's output. Sometimes, as in his final work, the *Symphonic Dances*, he uses it without irony, but its appearances in the *Rhapsody* are essentially sardonic.

Variation 8 is a kind of frenzied can-can which rushes headlong into the even more helter-skelter Variation 9, in which the strings begin by playing with the wood of their bows. Grimly glittering arpeggios are tossed between piano and orchestra in Variation 10, in which the *Dies irae* is heard in brazen octaves on the piano, with syncopated brass commentary.

With the cadenza-like Variation 11 forming a point of transition, you move to the exquisite, gently regal minuet of Variation 12. The piano has quite a subsidiary role in Variation 14, then comes instantly to the fore in the dazzling, cadenza-like Variation 15.

After a pause, Variation 16 has an intimacy and exoticism that evokes the Arabian Dance from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. Variation 17 is more palpably mysterious, even sinister, and the only one where the theme seems to have vanished altogether. But you land on very deep shag pile indeed with the 18th Variation, in which Rachmaninov uses his sleight of hand to turn Paganini's theme upside down and create a luxuriant, much admired (and much imitated) melody of his own. Rachmaninov is reported to have said of it: 'This one is for my agent.'

As if being woken suddenly from a dream, the orchestra calls the soloist and the audience to attention for six final variations; these evoke Paganini's legendary left-hand pizzicato playing (Variation 19) and the demonic aspects of the Paganini legend, with more references to the *Dies irae* and an increasing emphasis on pianistic and orchestral virtuosity. Just as a final violent outburst of the *Dies irae* seems to be leading to a furious coda, you're left instead with a nudge and a wink, as Rachmaninov's final masterpiece for piano and orchestra bids you a sly farewell.

Performance History

The Adelaide Symphony Orchestra first performed the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in October 1950, with soloist Ronald Farren-Price and conductor Henry Krips, and most recently in June 2018, when Stephen Hough was the soloist, and the conductor was Arvo Volmer.

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Cameron Hill
Associate Concertmaster
—
Graeme & Susan Bethune ♪

Alison Heike
Principal 2nd Violin
—
FASO in memory of Ann Belmont OAM ♪

Lachlan Bramble
Associate Principal 2nd Violin
—
In memory of Deborah Pontifex ♪

Janet Anderson
—
In memory of Gweneth Willing ♪

Ann Axelby
—
David & Linnett Turner ♪

Minas Berberyan
—
Merry Wickes ♪

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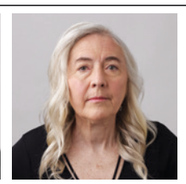

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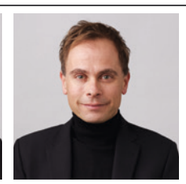

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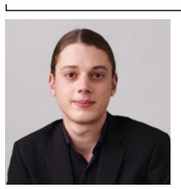
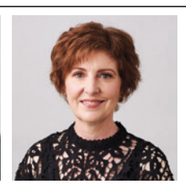
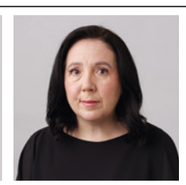


Justin Julian
Section Principal
—
In memory of Mrs JJ Holden ♪

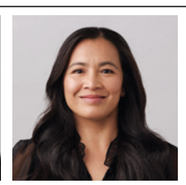


Lesley Cockram

Linda Garrett
(on trial)



Anna Hansen
—
Anonymous donor ♪



Rosi McGowran
—
Liz & Mike Bowen ♪

Michael Robertson

Michael Robertson
—
Bob & Julie Clampett in memory of their daughter Carolyn ♪

Cecily Satchell

Cellos

Simon Cobcroft
Section Principal
—
In memory of Rodney Crewther ♪

Christopher Handley
—
Bruce & Pam Debelle ♪

Sherrilyn Handley
—
Johanna & Terry McGuirk ♪

Gemma Phillips
—
Anonymous donor ♪

David Sharp
—
Dr Aileen F Connon AM ♪

Cameron Waters
—
Peter & Pamela McKee ♪

Double Basses

David Schilling
Section Principal
—
Daniel & Sue Hains ♪

Jonathon Coco
Associate Principal
—
John Sulan KC & Ali Sulan ♪

Jacky Chang
—
Dr Melanie Turner ♪

Harley Gray
—
In memory of Bob Croser ♪

Belinda Kendall-Smith
—
In memory of Dr Nandor Ballai and Dr Georgette Straznicky ♪

Lisa Gill
—
Dr Tom & Sharron Stubbs ♪

Julia Grenfell
Principal
—
In memory of Father Kevin McLennan and Barbra McLennan ♪

Flutes

Piccolo

Joshua Oates
Section Principal
—
Caryl Lambourn & Graham Norton ♪

Renae Stavely
Associate Principal
—
Roderick Shire & Judy Hargrave ♪

Peter Duggan
Principal
—
Dr JB Robinson ♪

Dean Newcomb
Section Principal
—
Ann Vanstone ♪

Darren Skelton
—
K & S Langley Fund ♪

Mitchell Berick
Principal
—
Nigel Stevenson & Glenn Ball ♪

Oboes

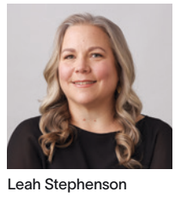
Cor Anglais

Clarinets

Bass Clarinet

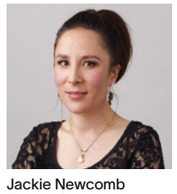
Bassoons

Mark Gaydon
Section Principal
—
Pamela Yule ♪



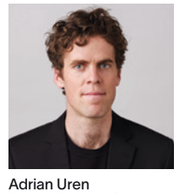
Leah Stephenson
—
Liz Ampt ♪

Contra Bassoon

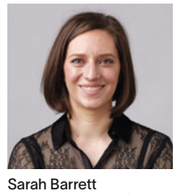


Jackie Newcomb
Principal
—
Norman Etherington AM & Peggy Brock ♪

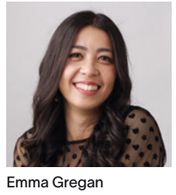
Horns



Adrian Uren
Section Principal
—
Roderick Shire & Judy Hargrave ♪



Sarah Barrett
Associate Principal
—
Margaret Lehmann ♪



Emma Gregan
—
The Richard Wagner Society of South Australia ♪

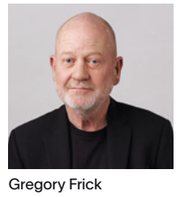
Philip Paine
Principal

Trumpets

Timothy Skelly

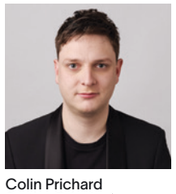
David Khafagi
Section Principal
—
Alyson Morrison & Michael Critchley ♪

Martin Phillipson
Associate Principal

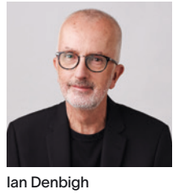


Gregory Frick

Trombones



Colin Prichard
Section Principal
—
Andrew & Barbara Fergusson ♪

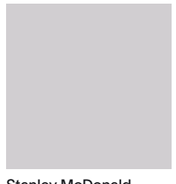


Ian Denbigh
—
Anonymous donor

Bass Trombone

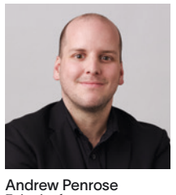
Tuba

Amanda Tillett
Principal



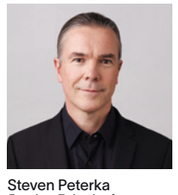
Stanley McDonald
Principal (on trial)

Timpani

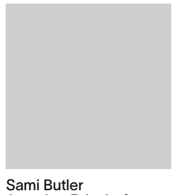


Andrew Penrose
Principal
—
Andrew & Denise Daniels ♪

Percussion



Steven Peterka
Section Principal
—
FASO in memory of Bev McMahon ♪



Sami Butler
Associate Principal Percussion/Timpani

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Vacant Positions

We also thank the following donors for their support of temporarily vacant chairs:

- In memory of Bob Croser, Principal 1st Violin
- Dr Tom & Sharron Stubbs, Associate Principal Viola
- John Turnidge AO & Patricia Rayner, Associate Principal Cello

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- Robert Kenrick
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- Diana McLaurin
- Robert Pontifex AM in memory of Deborah
- Andrew & Gayle Robertson

Miriam Hyde Circle

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- Joan Lyons – *Patron of Sir Stephen Hough*
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- Sally Gordon – *2023 Artist in Association Supporter*

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- John Sulan KC & Ali Sulan
- John & Suzanne Tilley
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- Merry Wickes
- Dr Richard Willing OAM
- Anonymous (3)

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- Rob M Guyatt
- In memory of Geoffrey Hackett-Jones
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- Helen Walker
- G C & R Weir
- Barbara Wing
- Hon David Wotton AM & Jill Wotton
- Dawn Yeatman
- Anonymous (13)

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The ASO gratefully acknowledges recent bequests to the orchestra

- In memory of Jill Barrington
- In memory of Barbara Carter
- In memory of Bob Maynard
- In memory of Dr Ian Hodgson and Elaine Hodgson
- In memory of Janet Ann Rover
- Anonymous (4)

Donation by the ASO Players Association in memory of Ladislav Jasek, former ASO Concertmaster

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Correct as at 9 May 2023

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Arts South Australia

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