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FRIDAY 28 JANUARY 2022, 7.30pm

NATIONAL CONCERT HALL

RACHMANINOV *Cinq Études-Tableaux* (orch. Respighi)

NIELSEN Flute Concerto

SIBELIUS Symphony No. 5

National Symphony Orchestra

Elena Schwarz conductor

Adam Walker flute

Presented by Paul Herriott, RTÉ lyric fm



RTÉ lyric fm

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Welcome

from the National Concert Hall

Welcome to this milestone performance by the National Symphony Orchestra. This week has been a joyous one in which we all took our first steps forward with the NSO, the National Symphony Chorus, Cór Linn and Cór na nÓg as part of the National Concert Hall. This will allow us to strengthen our artistic offering to the Irish public, and enhance our position as the national venue for the performance, appreciation and enjoyment of music in Ireland.

It is our vision, and a key part of the strategic ambition of the National Concert Hall, to ensure the orchestra is sustained, strengthened and developed to a world-class standard, with state-of-the-art facilities which will be delivered as part of our overall redevelopment programme.

Our ambition is to invest in the orchestra, to realise our joint artistic potential, enhancing diversity and accessibility, ensuring orchestral music is a sustainable and integral part of our output. As custodian of Ireland's musical heritage, the National Concert Hall, the National Symphony Orchestra, and the combined choral groups look forward to creating a legacy of music performance, participation and education that is uplifting for all, forging strong creative links between past, present and future.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the National Symphony Orchestra and we very much hope you enjoy this evening's concert.

Maura McGrath, Chairperson, National Concert Hall

Robert Read, CEO, National Concert Hall

Welcome

from the National Symphony Orchestra

Welcome! This concert is an auspicious one in a momentous week for the National Symphony Orchestra: the first under the remit of the National Concert Hall and, as we embrace living with fewer restrictions owing to Covid-19, the first in which we, finally, can truly look forward to a full return to live performances with capacity audiences.

Thank you for being with us. We hope you will return and find much to give you pleasure in the weeks and months to come. February concerts are now on sale. March, April and May will soon follow suit. Making and sharing music with you, our audience, is what we are all about. We look forward to the future, to new beginnings and to realising a shared vision for Ireland's National Symphony Orchestra. We hope you enjoy the evening.

Anthony Long, General Manager
National Symphony Orchestra and National Symphony Chorus

SERGEI RACHMANINOV 1873-1943

Cinq Études-Tableaux orchestrated by Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936)

- i. *La Mer et les Mouettes* (The Sea and the Seagulls)
- ii. *La Foire* (The Fair)
- iii. *Marche Funèbre* (Funeral March)
- iv. *Le Chaperon Rouge et le Loup* (Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf)
- v. *Marche* (March)

Rachmaninov published two sets of “Études-Tableaux” for solo piano, op. 33 in 1911 and op. 39 in 1917. He attached no descriptive titles, although the pieces are obviously programmatic, saying: “I don’t believe in the artist who discloses too much of his images. Let them paint for themselves what they most suggest”. But the pieces did lend themselves to descriptive titles, since the composer himself called them “picture pieces, musical evocations of external visual stimuli”.

The “études-tableaux”, as written for piano, show remarkable similarities with the piano preludes, op. 32, which he wrote at the same time. They explore climates of feeling within the textures and sonorities available on the piano.

In 1929, Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, asked Rachmaninov’s permission for an arrangement of some of the pieces, and the composer himself selected five from the total of seventeen (one from op. 33 and four from op. 39). It’s possible that these arrangements for orchestra of a work for solo piano were inspired by the fact that seven years earlier Koussevitzky had very successfully commissioned an orchestral version of Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition” from Ravel.

Respighi’s reputation as a composer-arranger rests on a slim volume of highly successful works, of which his Roman trilogy – *The Fountains of Rome*, *The Pines of Rome* and *Roman Festivals* – is the most popular. As an orchestrator, he had, ten years earlier, arranged Rossini’s *La Boutique Fantasque* (The Fantastic Toyshop) at the request of Serge Diaghilev for the *Ballets russes*.

It appears that Respighi visited Rachmaninov, who chose the five pieces. He is said to have told Respighi that the projected orchestration “great joy, for I am sure that in your masterly hands they will be made to sound marvellous”.

He then wrote to Respighi, confiding in him the inspirations (what he called “the secret explanations”) for the music.

It’s believed that Rachmaninov’s wife suggested the title for “La Mer et les Mouettes” (“The Sea and the Seagulls”), which Respighi cleverly evokes in the sound of the waves. It’s melancholy, tragic and poetic, and features the “Dies Irae” theme which was Rachmaninov’s trademark signature, appearing as the dominant motif in his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, for example, as well as many other works.

La Foire (The Fair) is playful but very brief. Ironically, the “Dies Irae” theme does not appear in the central movement, *Marche Funèbre* (Funeral March), where one might expect it. Rachmaninov wrote in detail of the Funeral March: “The initial theme is a march. The other theme represents the singing of a choir.” Later, “A fine rain is suggested, incessant and hopeless... culminating in the chimes of a church.”

A “chaperon rouge” is simply a “red hood”, but the piece has traditionally been understood to portray “Little Red Riding Hood” and the story of her visit to her grandmother, who turns out to be a wolf.

The final movement, simply entitled “March”, is oriental in style.

The work was first performed by Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony in 1931.

Richard Pine © RTÉ

CARL NIELSEN 1865-1931

Flute Concerto

- i. *Allegro moderato*
- ii. *Allegretto un poco – Adagio ma non troppo – Allegretto – Poco adagio – tempo di marcia*

The Danish composer Carl Nielsen was born on the island of Fuen, in a village near the town of Odensee. His father was a house-painter and played the violin and cornet in the village band, in which young Nielsen also played the violin, before moving on to the town orchestra in Odensee.

Financial conditions obliged Nielsen to work as a violinist (second section) in the Royal Theatre Orchestra in Copenhagen, and he pursued his career as a composer in the spare time allowed by his profession, before eventually becoming director of the Copenhagen Conservatory.

Nevertheless, Nielsen has become Denmark's most prominent composer and, alongside Sibelius, one of Scandinavia's outstanding symphonists; but this didn't happen in his lifetime, however: he had to wait until the 1950s before his work came to be championed internationally – not least by the RTÉ NSO, recording all six symphonies under Adrian Leaper on the Naxos label in 1995.

Nielsen enjoyed a good working relationship with the Wind Quintet of the Royal Orchestra in Copenhagen, having heard them playing a work by Mozart, and wrote a Wind Quintet for them in 1922. He then decided to honour each member with an individual concerto, not unlike Ireland's A.J. Potter, who wrote concertos and concertinos for several members of the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and the (then) RTÉ Symphony, including Benny McNeill (trumpet), Seán Cahill (trombone), and Helmut Seeber (cor anglais).

But Nielsen was in some doubt as to his own capacity for concerto-writing. It was this rapport with members of the Quintet that prompted him, so late in life, to undertake the unfulfilled project of the five concertos, interrupted

by the composer's death. The first of the five was the Flute Concerto, written in 1926 for Holger Gilbert-Jespersen. He went on to write a clarinet concerto in 1928, which has joined the flute concerto as one of the favourites in the international repertoire, but his death in 1931 prevented him from completing the three other projected works.

As with the clarinet concerto, Nielsen had the dedicatee's personality in mind: Jespersen was clearly a quirky individual (at least as far as his musical temperament was concerned) and although much of the concerto's two movements is, in Nielsen's words, "pastoral and sweet", he also demonstrates frenetic and staccato interludes to punctuate the lyrical line of the flute's melodies.

This is particularly evident in the cadenzas, which aren't the conventional solo displays but incorporate dialogues with other instruments such as the trombone, the clarinet and even the timpani.

Despite the extended tempo markings of the second movement, it is considerably shorter than the first. Nielsen described it as having "a little nastiness" at the opening which is calmed by the "childish innocence" of the flute.

The premiere took place in Paris in October 1926 (where it was acclaimed by both Ravel and Honegger) and was followed by the first Danish performance in Copenhagen in January 1927.

Richard Pine © RTÉ

Symphony No. 5 in E flat, Op. 82

- i. *Tempo molto moderato – allegro moderato – presto*
- ii. *Andante mosso, quasi allegretto*
- iii. *Allegro molto – un pochettino largamente*

This work was written in 1915, to celebrate the composer's own fiftieth birthday, which was declared a national holiday. He was a national hero in his own right, awarded a state pension, since his music had done more than any other artist to foster a sense of nationalism. But Finland was still two years away from independence and civil war, and Europe was in the clutches of the First World War.

And Sibelius had his own problems: health scares in 1909 resulted in a seven-year ban on alcohol and cigars, which exacerbated his ever-present self-doubt. Although the fifth symphony has been greeted as a work of light and hope, the evidence of Sibelius' own revising of the work and his medical condition, taken together with the political situation, also point towards a work of darkness and despair. It is certainly a work of inspiration for the Finns, but the second symphony (of 1902) is more specifically Finnish in theme and character.

The work was inspired by the composer seeing sixteen swans: 'God, what beauty! They circled over me for a long time, disappeared into the solar haze like a silver ribbon. One of the greatest experiences'. Swans were a powerful image in his mind, most explicitly appearing in the tone poem *The Swan of Tuonela*. He heard the swans as well as saw them: 'their call is a woodwind type, a gentle refrain that sounds like the crying of a small child'. This became the final theme of the symphony.

As with so many other works, he had been contemplating for some years a new approach to symphonic writing. But in the end, the work is unashamedly Romantic, which caused him problems since his contemporaries, Stravinsky and Schoenberg, were creating a new musical

language for the twentieth century. The challenge to change his musical style was too great for Sibelius, and without a doubt contributed to his silence as a composer after 1932, for the last twenty-five years of his life.

For Sibelius, the same themes which can be heard in so many of his other works based on Finnish mythology are at the forefront of the music. As he was writing it he told his friend the novelist Axel Carpelan 'The autumn sun is shining. Nature in its farewell colours. My heart is singing sadly – the shadows grow longer.' This was written a year before he finished the symphony, and we can see the tensions between Sibelius' glorification of nature and his sense of his own autumnal waning powers.

The opening, like that of the second symphony, is a moody evocation of a misty morning with birdsong, interrupted by the sound of a deluge – perhaps a waterfall. This alternation of soft and loud, peaceful and frenetic, continues throughout the work, until after a series of climaxes the 'swan' theme appears to close the work.

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