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FRIDAY 15 OCTOBER 2021, 7.30pm

THE HELIX

COLERIDGE-TAYLOR	Ballade, Op. 33
GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ	Concerto for String Orchestra
RACHMANINOV	Symphony No. 2

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Conductor **Ruth Reinhardt**

Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm



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PROGRAMME NOTES

Ballade in A minor, Op. 33

Born in London to a father from Sierra Leone and an English mother, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was much admired at home by his more illustrious composer-peers. Notable among them were Edward Elgar and his violin teacher at London's Royal College of Music, Irishman Charles Villers Stanford, who encouraged him towards composition.

He was equally lauded in the United States where he was hailed, rather patronisingly, as the 'African Mahler', his setting of American Henry Wordsworth Longfellow's epic, myth-making poem *Song of Hiawatha* is still an essential component of the New World's orchestral life and provided him with his signature work.

Coleridge-Taylor's mixed-race heritage and the absence of his father – unmarried and unaware of the pregnancy, he had returned alone to Africa before his son's birth – made his achievements in an era dominated by the class hierarchies of steadfast Caucasian privilege all the more remarkable.

His A minor Ballade for orchestra owes its existence to Elgar, who, in refusing a commission in 1896 from the Three Choirs Festival (still thriving in its Hereford base close to England's border with Wales), recommended instead the younger composer – 'far and away the cleverest fellow going amongst the young men'.

First heard there in 1898, the Ballade was an immediate success. Subtly incorporating musical elements from his father's African heritage, it is a high-spirited work lit up by warm, unabashed romanticism. In that respect, perhaps American critics might have more appositely dubbed Coleridge-Taylor the 'African Dvořák'.

Arguably, the Ballade's intermingling passages of stirring if straight-backed nobility and swooning, twilight harmonies betrays its Edwardian roots. Less contestably, it marries both with an unerringly balanced sense of romance and drama that is recognisably Coleridge-Taylor's own.

Straying towards fantasy in places where it conjures Mendelssohn at his most ecstatic, if with a noticeably heavier hand and darker hues, it also courts comparisons with Brahms at his most lilting. It's that underpinning of European antecedents, coupled with the threads of Afro-American folk idioms, that lends the Ballade its passion and engaging impact. So, too, the masterful organisation of individual orchestral voices and sections that suggest Coleridge-Taylor's early death at the age of 37 robbed music of the splendours of what might have followed.

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GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ 1909–1969

Concerto for String Orchestra

- i. Allegro*
- ii. Andante*
- iii. Vivo*

If the Łódź-born Grażyna Bacewicz's claim to pioneer status as a female composer of note in her native Poland was eclipsed by her earlier 19th-century predecessor, Maria Szymanowska, her claim to pre-eminence in the modern era is surely unmatched, achieving international recognition that eluded many of her compatriot peers, male and female.

Although she began her musical life as a violinist, having studied the instrument along with piano and composition, in Warsaw and Paris, it was the latter discipline she felt increasingly drawn towards. Poignantly, after sustained efforts to establish herself as a composer (including contributing to clandestine concerts during the Second World War in Nazi-occupied Warsaw), she was able to dedicate herself to writing in 1954, the same year she suffered serious injuries in a car crash. One wonders whether that event shortened the 15 years she still had to live.

Composed in 1948, her Concerto for String Orchestra was one of 14 concertos she wrote (seven of them for violin). Prize-winning at home, attention-grabbing abroad and considered her most accomplished work, it glances back to the Baroque and Classical eras, is symphonic in scope, engagingly melodic and written with winning gusto and energy.

Marrying compositional inventiveness with the virtuosity Bacewicz aspired to as a violinist – she served as leader of the Polish National Orchestra in the late 1930s and toured as a soloist after the war – the Concerto is cast in three varied movements that embraces and osmotically shifts between the forms of the Baroque *concerto grosso* and the early Classical sonata. Add in finely-wrought slivers of tart textures and rounded, crepuscular tonalities that belong unabashedly to the 20th century, and the result is highly individual. A hybrid it may be, but one that is altogether coherent, the whole seamlessly blended together with thrilling aplomb.

The opening *Allegro* quickly introduces three themes: the insistent, moderately fast, Baroque-like first never overstating its ‘*pesante*’ (‘heavy’) marking; the second a lyrical interlude in which solo violin and cello are heard against a wash of dark-hued violas played *sul ponticello* (‘on the bow’); the extended third pitting low strings against pizzicato (plucked) violin chords.

A sublime *Andante* follows, its theme a disguised mirror image of the opening movement’s introduction – a signature trope for Bacewicz that has caused some to liken her compositional style to that of Bach’s. If the comparison is less obvious (indeed, less apt) here, that’s not to detract from the music’s lightly worn intricacy of design. Nor the vivid immediacy of its execution.

The exuberant *Vivo* finale revels in another characteristic Bacewicz trait, driven forward as it is by a propulsive energy carrying everything it encounters in its strong, free-flowing path along with an irresistible momentum. Somehow, time is found for reflection, however briefly, in two short episodes: the first marked by a Janáček-like wistfulness; the second spotlighting a beatifically singing solo violin rising ever higher noticeably sweeter. And then massed voices whip themselves up into a mounting frenzy, a tsunami of sound that pushes relentlessly forward until it breaks on the shore of silence.

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

- i. *Largo - Allegro moderato*
- ii. *Allegro molto*
- iii. *Adagio*
- iv. *Allegro vivace*

Seldom has the public persona of a composer seemed so at odds with the music he wrote. Listening with an innocent ear to the sweeping, lushly orchestrated melodies and rich, succulent harmonies of Rachmaninov's Second Symphony, you would be hard-pressed to connect the unbridled passion on display to Stravinsky's (in-)famous description of the composer as 'a six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl'. The scowling demeanour was acquired in childhood, and reinforced in early adulthood.

By the time he was nine, Rachmaninov's profligate father had squandered the family wealth, forcing a move from the idyllic surroundings of a country estate into a claustrophobic St Petersburg apartment. At twenty-one, his First Symphony was shot down in flames after a disastrous premiere not helped by the conductor, Glazunov, insisting on too little rehearsal time and too much vodka. The savagery of the critical response threw Rachmaninov into a debilitating period of self-doubt that lasted for several years and kept him away from music until hypnosis restored his confidence and renewed his appetite to compose.

Work on a second symphony wasn't to begin until 1906, twelve years after the fiasco of the first. Having fled Russia the previous year to escape the abortive revolution, Rachmaninov found himself in Dresden. The peace and calm of the German city aided his return to composing and besides the Second Symphony, Rachmaninov was also to write his Opus 23 Piano Sonata and the tone poem *The Isle of the Dead* while in contented exile there.

Symphony No. 2, when it was finally heard, in Moscow on 8 February 1908, with Rachmaninov himself conducting, was a triumph. While owing an

obvious debt to Tchaikovsky in the unabashed fervour of its heart-on-sleeve romanticism, it also seemed to anticipate, in its lighter moments, the comparatively uncomplicated vitality of Prokofiev.

Its long, slow, sombre introduction emerges out of silence, pregnant with the thematic material that colours and shapes what is to follow. Muscular chords cut through the gloom to allow sighing violins to take up the principal melody, quickly accompanied by *tremolando* lower strings and edgy, uneasy woodwinds. Almost unnoticed, as if by musical sleight of hand, Rachmaninov conjures up passages of richly-executed orchestral writing that elegantly hint (first on cor anglais then horn) at direction, detail and the symphony's climactic denouement, the emotional temperature rising all the while.

A sudden, stock-taking pause (a favourite Tchaikovsky device that can also be found in the first movement of the Third Piano Concerto and in the Cello Sonata) injects a moment of drama before sweet-voiced strings intervene to move proceedings elegantly along to the tumult of a shattering climax.

The accelerated scherzo draws its energy from two economically described themes – heard first in horns, then in yearning, keening violins – before a rabble-rousing middle section and the all too brief reiteration of the swooning melody is dissipated – via a fleeting brass chorale – in an excited scurry into rumbling silence. (The chorale takes its burnished mordancy from the tenor of the Dies Irae, the notion of the 'Day of Wrath' haunting much of Rachmaninov's music, with references to it also to be heard in the First Symphony, *The Isle of the Dead* and *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*).

The long-limbed *Adagio* boasts one of the finest of all symphonic melodies. Solo horn, violin and clarinet passages follow, taking up the swelling heart-filling tune to echo and mirror the opening movement. (And a melody that translates easily and effectively into other genres, with Eric Carmen extensively quoting it in his chart-topping 1976 ballad 'Never Gonna Fall in Love Again').

The sweeping final movement announces itself in brazenly bright fashion with an energetic triplet theme that gives way to a more tightly managed interlude before soaring strings thrust the orchestra into cascading declarations of lightness and joy. Here the separate thematic threads of the Symphony are woven into a gloriously bustling conclusion topped by brass triumphantly ascending over ecstatic strings and crashing percussion to blaze in a climax of unequalled ebullience.

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