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**FRIDAY 22 OCTOBER 2021, 7.30pm**

**THE HELIX**

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**VERDI** *La forza del destino* Overture

**RACHMANINOV** Piano Concerto No. 1

**DVOŘÁK** Symphony No. 9 'From the New World'

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**RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra**

Conductor **Michele Mariotti**

**Vadym Kholodenko** piano

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

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**RTÉ lyric fm**

**PROGRAMME NOTES**

## GIUSEPPE VERDI 1813-1901

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### Overture to *La forza del destino*

The lithe, muscular Overture to *La forza del destino* ('The Force of Destiny') was composed for its 1869 revival in Milan. Compact, concise and compelling in its bravura use of the orchestra, it quotes a number of important themes, including the luckless heroine Leonora's 'Fate' motif, her Act II prayer-duet with Guardiano in the monastery to which she has fled for sanctuary and her suitor Alvaro's Act IV aria. Drenched in atmosphere, it brilliantly evokes the high drama that is to unfold and shows Verdi as an orchestrator of enormous technical, coloristic and imaginative accomplishment.

Michael Quinn © RTÉ

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## SERGEI RACHMANINOV 1873-1943

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### Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1 (1890-91, rv. 1917)

- i. *Vivace - Moderato - Vivace*
- ii. *Andante*
- iii. *Allegro Vivace*

Rachmaninov's life started happily enough in the countryside some 120 miles south of Saint Petersburg. His father inherited four estates and a considerable fortune and his mother was a General's daughter. His grandfather had been a student of Irish composer John Field, though he only played as an amateur. He encouraged the young Sergei and they often played duets together. However, Sergei's father squandered the family fortune and at the age of seven they moved to a small apartment in Saint Petersburg. Fortunately his musical talent earned him a scholarship and he was able to continue his studies. His father left home and his

mother had to bring up the family. The boy became careless about his studies and was nearly dismissed from school for failing most grades, except music.

In 1885 he was sent to Moscow where he became a star pupil at the Conservatory and, for his piano finals in 1891, he played the opening movement of his first piano concerto, which he started when still only 17. Vasily Safanov, the Director of the Conservatory, was the conductor and Rachmaninov caused some disturbance through his constant correction of the Director's view of the score – fortunately he was a patient and understanding man. The first public performance took place at a student concert on 17 March 1892. He wrote the last two movements, apparently in under three days, the following summer. Twenty-six years later he revised the work, particularly the finale, just before he left Russia and ahead of the 1917 Revolution, and it is this more polished version that is heard today. The full score was first performed on 28 January 1919 in New York.

For his composition finals in 1892, Rachmaninov had to set the text of Pushkin's poem *Aleko* as a one-act opera libretto, later staged by the Bolshoi Theatre. Tchaikovsky, one of the examiners and a great supporter of the budding composer, placed an extra three 'plus' marks on his examination sheet. The nineteen-year-old was awarded the Great Gold Medal of the Conservatory, only the third person to be granted the honour at that time.

The first movement is a remarkable creation for any student to have achieved and is a musical bridge from Tchaikovsky, whose mantle the young composer was taking over. It opens with a short brass fanfare and a descending octave sequence for the piano, typical of the composer's mature style. The violins launch the first main theme, a yearning Russian melody soon taken up by the soloist. The tempo changes to *Scherzando* and a lively sequence leads to the sparkling second main theme. A development of these themes begins in the orchestra, based initially on the piano's opening octaves. The fanfare also makes a return, bringing back the soloist who elaborates on elements of the second theme. The

solo horn recalls the opening of the first theme and the piano turns its attention to it in a wide-ranging elaboration. The pace slackens and the piano decorates the theme extensively at a more leisurely pace. Rachmaninov now builds to his first main climax, followed by the return of the *Scherzando* and a fresh view of the second theme. This leads to the piano's main cadenza, a technically most demanding exercise, recalling the main themes and the fanfare. A brief coda brings this remarkably mature movement to its close.

The slow movement is in D major and the horn launches a most attractive, yearning melody, soon taken up in a decorated style by the soloist. Again, shades of the Rachmaninov of the later concerto slow movements are clearly evident, with the melancholy, wistful mood of the music. It is a relatively short movement, less than half the length of the first, and Rachmaninov creates an extended fantasy involving variants of the melody, rather than adopting any formal construction.

The finale bursts in with another fanfare and a sparkling run by the soloist. The erratic phrasing is again quite advanced for a student composer. The opening theme flies along, giving the soloist plenty of chances for virtuoso displays. The central section is heralded by the movement's opening fanfare. It is marked *andante ma non troppo* and brings in a slow, sad melody on the strings over which the soloist rhapsodises extensively. The mood switches to the lively opening pace again, bringing back the first theme. This leads to a really splendid coda with everyone, particularly the pianist, presenting fireworks in an uninhibited, brilliant conclusion.

Ian Fox © RTÉ

## **Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, ‘From the New World’**

*i. Adagio – Allegro molto*

*ii. Largo*

*iii. Molto vivace*

*iv. Allegro con fuoco*

‘Next to Brahms, he is the most God-gifted composer of the present day’, the great German conductor Hans von Bülow declared of the thirty-six-year-old Dvořák in 1877. In our own age, he continues to be revered, alongside Janáček and Smetana, as one of the three great Czech composers. Of the trio, Bohemia-born Dvořák was undoubtedly the one who most successfully incorporated the idioms of his native folk tradition within the development of the European symphony and, in doing so, indelibly stamped his own musical identity on that of his native homeland.

His acute appreciation of the music of the Czech language remained a potent part of Dvořák’s life during the three years he spent in the United States from 1892 as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. There, his fascination and feeling for indigenous music found a wellspring of inspiration in the rich abundance of Native American tunes, Negro spirituals and plantation songs he encountered. ‘These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are all American,’ he observed, tellingly adding, ‘In them, I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.’ Dvořák began composing within weeks of reaching America. By May 1893 his Symphony No. 9 was complete. Inspired by the music he was hearing around him, he gave it the subtitle ‘From the New World’. But while the symphony is influenced by American folk music, it refuses to directly quote from it and can be heard just as much as a homesick and heartfelt paean to his own homeland thousands of miles distant.

Interestingly enough, when the symphony received its Irish premiere, in Dublin in 1901, the then prevalent belief that its sweeping melodies and evocative lyricism were based on plantation melodies prompted the organisers of the annual Feis Ceoil to launch a competition for the composition of a symphony based on traditional songs and folk melodies that would be as authentically ‘Irish’ as Dvořák’s ‘American’ symphony was assumed to be. The inaugural competition was won by Michele Esposito, and the second, in 1904, by Hamilton Harty’s appropriately titled *An Irish Symphony*. (A fascinating discussion by Jan Smaczny on the similarities and contrasts of national musical traditions in Ireland and the Czech territories can be found in *Music in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, published by Four Courts Press as part of the *Irish Musical Studies* series). The symphony begins in twilit self-absorption, the guarded, somewhat weary feeling underlined by the employment of strict sonata form throughout the first movement. A forlorn, lamenting phrase in lower strings is briefly picked up by flutes and oboes before thumping percussion and strident winds refuse the complaint. The main theme glints through clotted orchestral textures to provoke an early climax out of whose shadow a brace of string supported horns emerge to breathe in new air as the second, lighter-grained theme, with its glancing similarity to ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’, takes shape in flutes and violins. From out of the molasses-dark opening of the second movement, a cor anglais begins to lift the symphony’s elegiac signature theme to tug and transport head and heart homewards – wherever home might be. A faster, more agitated section breaks the mood with a new melody and effervescent tune before the haunting theme returns as soft overlapping chords bring momentary balm in introspective quiet. A deceptively authentic-sounding exchange between flute, oboe and clarinet ignites the scherzo to send it cresting along on the contrasting surge of two differently keyed trios before concluding in a pointed exclamation mark from the orchestra.

The finale is a luxuriant celebration of all that Dvořák has discovered in the New World, and all that he had left behind in Bohemia; setting

off with a dashing syncopated flourish that ushers in a cascade of memorable moments, not least the decidedly bright, buoyant and Irish sounding faux plantation reel, and a dextrous weaving together of motifs from the preceding movements with new themes that comfort and reassure just as they excite and invigorate.

*Michael Quinn © RTÉ*