

11 May  
Sydney Opera House

# STEPHEN HOUGH PERFORMS RACHMANINOV 2



SYDNEY  
SYMPHONY  
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# SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

PATRON **Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley** AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Fremaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdenek Macal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

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**SYMPHONY HOUR**  
Thursday 11 May, 7pm

Concert Hall,  
Sydney Opera House

# STEPHEN HOUGH PERFORMS RACHMANINOV 2

GLORIOUSLY EXPANSIVE

**JOHN WILSON** conductor  
**STEPHEN HOUGH** piano

**SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)**

Piano Concerto No.2

- i. Moderato
- ii. Adagio sostenuto
- iii. Allegro scherzando

**OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879–1936)**

*Pines of Rome*

- i. *The Pines of the Villa Borghese*
- ii. *Pines Near a Catacomb*
- ii. *The Pines of the Janiculum*
- iv. *The Pines of the Appian Way*

Pre-concert talk by Phillip Sametz in the Northern Foyer at 6.15pm.

**ESTIMATED DURATIONS**

33 minutes, 23 minutes

The concert will conclude at approximately 8pm

**COVER IMAGE**

Sir Stephen Hough  
Photo by Sim Canetty-Clarke

*Stephen Hough's performances with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra are generously supported by Tony & Carol Berg*

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PRINCIPAL PARTNER



# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **JOHN WILSON** conductor

John Wilson is in demand at the highest level across the globe, regularly guest conducting the world's finest orchestras: in recent seasons these have included the London Symphony, London Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Budapest Festival, Oslo Philharmonic, Bavarian Radio Symphony, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic and Sydney Symphony orchestras, and productions at English National Opera and Glyndebourne Summer Festival.

For many years Wilson appeared widely across the UK and abroad with the John Wilson Orchestra. In 2018 he relaunched the Sinfonia of London. Their much anticipated BBC Proms debut in 2021 was described by *The Guardian* as "truly outstanding" and they are now much in demand across the UK, returning to the BBC Proms, Birmingham Symphony Hall and London's Barbican Centre among other venues this season.

Wilson has a large and varied discography and his recordings with the Sinfonia of London have received exceptional acclaim and several awards including, for three successive years, the BBC Music Magazine Award in the Orchestral category for the Korngold Symphony in F sharp (2020), Respighi *Roman Trilogy* (2021) and Dutilleux *Le Loup* (2022) recordings. *The Observer* described the Respighi recording as "massive, audacious and vividly played" and *The Times* declared it one of the three "truly outstanding accounts of this trilogy" of all time, after those by Toscanini (1949) and Muti (1984).

Born in Gateshead, Wilson studied composition and conducting at the Royal College of Music where, in 2011, he was made a Fellow. In March 2019, John Wilson was awarded the prestigious ISM Distinguished Musician Award for his services to music and in 2021 was appointed Henry Wood Chair of Conducting at the Royal Academy of Music.



John Wilson  
Photo by Camilla Greenwell

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **SIR STEPHEN HOUGH** piano

Named by *The Economist* as one of Twenty 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 Commander of the Order of the British Empire (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 Concertgebouworkest, 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 in Australia with the Sydney and Adelaide symphony orchestras. He is also Artist in Association with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, with whom he tours 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 extensive 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. Recent releases for Hyperion include Beethoven's complete piano concertos (Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra/Hannu Lintu), 'The Final Piano Pieces' of Brahms, Chopin's Nocturnes, a Schumann recital, Schubert Piano Sonatas, and Elgar's Violin Sonata with Renaud Capuçon for Warner Classics. His recording of Mompou's *Música callada* is released in 2023 (Hyperion). His award-winning iPad app *The Liszt Sonata* was released by Touch Press in 2013.

Hough is an Honorary Bencher of the Middle Temple, an Honorary Member of the Royal Philharmonic Society, a Visiting Fellow at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University, a Visiting Professor at the Royal Academy of Music, the International Chair of Piano Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music (of which he was made a Companion in 2019), and is on the faculty of The Juilliard School in New York.

*Stephen Hough's performances with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra are generously supported by Tony & Carol Berg.*



Stephen Hough  
Photo by Sim Canetty-Clarke

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## **SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)** **Piano Concerto No.2**

The story of the creation of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto is often told: the young composer, a star student of the Moscow Conservatory and a favourite of Tchaikovsky, had achieved considerable success getting his earliest works published, but in 1897 his ambitious First Symphony was disastrously premiered in St Petersburg, resulting in vicious press attacks, notoriously from César Cui who compared it to a program symphony based on the Seven Plagues of Egypt. 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



Sergei Rachmaninov in 1900

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

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 the Second Piano Concerto 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. The opening phrase of the second subject is recalled by the French horn, and, rather than providing a complete restatement, Rachmaninov shares fragments of the melody gently between the soloist and the orchestra. The reverie is soon broken, however, and a build up of momentum brings the movement to a fiery close.

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 (material composed some years earlier for a six-hand piano Romance), 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 — perhaps recalling the analogous section in Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto — 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

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

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, the rhythmic material being related to the motif. A dramatic keyboard cadenza also emphasises the motif before introducing 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 by the oboe and violas. This is perhaps one of Rachmaninov's most famous melodies, which the literature suggests may have been 'borrowed' from a friend. However, if there is any truth to this story it is more likely that the reference is only to the opening notes, its expansive treatment bearing too many of the composer's inimitable hallmarks. 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.

### **OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879–1936)**

#### ***Pines of Rome***

Ottorino Respighi left his native Bologna in early 1913 to take up the position of professor of composition at the Santa Cecilia Conservatorium in Rome. The sheerscale of the Eternal City overwhelmed him and, although he had plenty of friends and activities to keep him occupied, Respighi struggled to settle in, enduring severe bouts of melancholy for several years.

According to Elsa Olivieri Sangiacomo, a student of Respighi's at the Conservatorium who became his wife and biographer, the symphonic poem *Fountains of Rome* (1916) proved cathartic. The success of that work put Respighi's career on the map in Italy and abroad. But it also marked a new chapter in the composer's life and a newfound happiness in his adopted hometown where he would live and work until his death.



Ottorino Respighi



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

*Fountains* also served as the template for *Pines of Rome* (1924) and *Roman Festivals* (1928), the subsequent instalments in the so-called Roman trilogy that reflect, in Elsa's words, 'how Respighi saw and felt the varied spirit of Rome'.

Claudio Guastalla, librettist of a number of Respighi's operas, wrote the 'captions' which appear at the front of the score of *Pines of Rome* — but only after the work was completed:

## *I. The pines of the Villa Borghese*

Children are at play in the pine groves of Villa Borghese [the traditional children's song *Madama Doré*]; they dance round in circles, they play at soldiers, marching and fighting, they are wrought up by their own cries like swallows at evening, they come and go in swarms. Suddenly the scene changes, and

## *II. Pines near a catacomb*

we see the shade of the pine trees fringing the entrance to a catacomb. From the depth there rises the sound of mournful psalm-singing, floating through the air like a solemn hymn [the Advent plainchant *Veni, veni, Emmanuel*], and gradually and mysteriously dispersing.

## *III. The pines of the Janiculum*

A quiver runs through the air: the pine trees of the Janiculum stand distinctly outlined in the clear light of a full moon. A nightingale is singing [this is the first instance of a pre-recorded sound forming part of a musical score].

## *IV. The pines of the Appian Way*

Misty dawn on the Appian Way: solitary pine trees guarding the magic landscape; the muffled, ceaseless rhythm of unending footsteps. The poet had a fantastic vision of bygone glories: trumpets sound and, in the brilliance of the newly-risen sun, a consular army bursts forth towards the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph to the Capitol.

Notes by Scott Davie ©2007 and Vincent Ciccarello © 2012

# CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF RACHMANINOV

*Ahead of a two-week Rachmaninov festival in May, British pianist Sir Stephen Hough and conductor John Wilson discuss the First and Second Piano Concertos by this legendary pianist-composer.*

*By Hugh Robertson*

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When thinking of the great pianist-composers, there are no shortage of examples: Liszt, Chopin, Clara Schumann, Satie. But perhaps none are as synonymous with their instrument as Sergei Rachmaninov.

Rachmaninov was of course a great composer of piano pieces – his five works for piano and orchestra, the four Piano Concertos and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, are staples of any orchestra's season, and his solo piano works are numerous and brilliant. But between 1918 and his death in 1943 he made his living chiefly as a concert pianist and had very little time for composing.

Uniquely for Rachmaninov among those other composers, we have photos, videos and recordings of him performing his own works. We can hear how he thinks his own music should sound, notwithstanding the limitations of the recording technology of the day. And above all else we can hear his extraordinary playing: the clarity of his textures, the power of his rhythms, and the precision of his famously large hands.

All of those qualities will be on display in Sydney in May, when one of the world's most acclaimed pianists, Sir Stephen Hough, performs Rachmaninov's First and Second Piano Concertos under conductor John Wilson.

Hough has a long and close association with Rachmaninov's concertos, which he describes as "the most important corpus of concertante works for a single instrument in the 20th century". Hough's recordings of these on the Hyperion label in 2004 were as widely-praised as a recording can be, with *BBC Music Magazine* writing that they "stand out in a field jam-packed with first-rate Rachmaninov concerto cycles," and American magazine *Fanfare* declaring "these rank among the most illuminating—and most compelling—performances in the catalogue."

# CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF RACHMANINOV

2023 is a big Rachmaninov year, celebrating the 150th anniversary of his birth in 1873, and Hough is particularly looking forward to performing the First Piano Concerto, a work he feels is fundamentally misunderstood. Officially Rachmaninov's Opus 1 and first published in 1891 it is often overlooked as an immature work, but as Hough points out the composer revised the work thoroughly in 1917, and it is anything but juvenilia.

"The First Concerto was written *after* the Third," says Hough. "Although it's called No.1, he kept the tunes of a juvenile piece and rewrote it completely. There aren't many bars that are the same.

"[When he revised it] he was a mature man. He knew about the orchestra, he had travelled the world playing. He took this youthful piece and realised that there was something in there. It is completely and utterly refurbished.

"And when the theme comes in for the first time, all the harmonies are so clearly 40 years later — they couldn't have been written at the time of the original version. So that's what makes this really fascinating. It's the Second that's the less mature piece and the First that's the absolutely mature piece. And that's something to bear in mind for the audience: don't think you're hearing No.1, Op.1 — you're hearing Op.34 or something like that, if we went in the real chronology of Rachmaninov's works."



Sir Stephen Hough. Photo by Sim Canetty-Clarke

# CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF RACHMANINOV

Twenty years on from his celebrated recordings, and after countless performances, Hough has lost none of his excitement and enthusiasm for these masterpieces.

“The Second is *the* great 19th century Russian piano concerto, even though it was written just in the 20th century,” says Hough. “It’s got this incredible lyrical soul. It’s heartwarming. And it is an absolute joy to play. It’s like saying, ‘If you like chocolate, boy, we’re going to give you the best chocolate cake you’ve ever had in your life.’”

“Whereas the First, in this revised version, it’s more lean. It’s more like a soufflé than the heavy chocolate cake. The orchestration is much more transparent.”

It is illuminating that in separate interviews both Hough and John Wilson mention dessert when discussing the Second Piano Concerto. For Wilson as conductor, the piece is too often treated as confection rather than a serious piece — a tendency amplified over the years due to associations with Hollywood films and by pop songs ‘borrowing’ its themes for schmaltzy ballads.

“For some listeners it comes with already built-in set of romantic entanglements,” says Wilson. “But Rachmaninov himself said to the conductor Eugene Ormandy, ‘Don’t add sugar, Gene, I made it sweet enough.’”

“My approach as far as Rachmaninov is concerned is to avoid chocolate sauce like the plague. These pieces need ironclad discipline. That’s an intensely romantic work, the Second Piano Concerto, but it needs muscularity and ardour in the playing.

“If you do have that sort of rather lean, muscular approach, you can get the true emotion through without grafting anything on the top that isn’t there. Don’t forget that Rachmaninov is technically challenging. If it isn’t then you’re not doing it right.”

Wilson has recently recorded Symphonies 2 and 3 with his Sinfonia of London, and after putting the symphonies “under the microscope” during the recording process, Wilson feels as though he better understands Rachmaninov’s language and idiosyncrasies.

# CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF RACHMANINOV

“I don't do anything that Rachmaninov doesn't write on the page,” he is quick to say. “But I do have definite feelings about what I think the composer means. You get under a composer's skin, and you get to know the details of a composer's style. And you also get to know how a composer works technically.”

“I would definitely tackle the piano concertos from a slightly different angle compared to how I would have done them when I first started.

“I first conducted an orchestra 34 years ago,” he concludes, “But I feel as if I'm only at the starting gate in terms of what it takes to breathe life into the music, get it from the page, through the orchestra, to the audience.”

These concerts will also mark a reunion between Hough and Wilson, who have only performed once together before — coincidentally that was for Rachmaninov's other great work for piano and orchestra, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* — and Hough couldn't be more thrilled.

“I'm a big, big fan of John Wilson,” he says with a broad smile.

“What I find amazing about John is that he's genuinely creative without any sense of self-consciousness. He's not speaking down to people. He will play film scores with the same care that he plays Stravinsky and the great 20th century masterpieces.”

“I think John has found this incredible path through all the nonsense on both sides — the people on one side who think that classical music is only for the very serious and, on the other side, people who are desperate to water it down so much that it ceases to be what it is. I think John's just ridden above both of those viewpoints and found this amazing path.”

“And he's really come into his own. Everything he records is seems to be the best recording of that piece, he's on such a roll.”

“I'm sounding like his manager!”, says Hough with a laugh. “I'm so thrilled to have this opportunity to have these two weeks with him.”

*John Wilson conducts Sir Stephen Hough and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto (11 & 13 May) and First Piano Concerto (17-20 May).*



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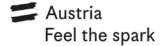
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