

18 July 2024



THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA WITH
JESS GILLAM

“SYDNEY”
“SYMPHONY”
“ORCHESTRA”

Principal Partner



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 Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, 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.

PERFORMING IN THIS CONCERT

FIRST VIOLINS

Alexandra Osborne
*Associate
Concertmaster*
Lerida Delbridge
Assistant Concertmaster
Fiona Ziegler
Assistant Concertmaster
Jennifer Booth
Sercan Danis
Claire Herrick
Georges Lentz
Emily Long
Alexander Norton
Léone Ziegler
Benjamin Tjoo°
Tamara Elias*
Natalia Harvey*
Ilya Isakovich*

SECOND VIOLINS

Kirsty Hilton
Principal
Marina Marsden
Principal
Wendy Kong
*Acting Assistant
Principal*
Alice Bartsch
Emma Hayes
Shuti Huang
Monique Irik
Nicole Masters
Marcus Michelsen°
Emily Qin°
Dominic Azzi†
Marrianne Liu*

VIOLAS

Tobias Breider
Principal
Justin Williams
Assistant Principal
Sandro Costantino
Rosemary Curtin
Stuart Johnson
Leonid Volovelsky
Stephen Wright°
Harry Swainston†
Raphael Masters*
James Wannan*

CELLOS

Catherine Hewgill
Principal
Kristy Conrau
Timothy Nankervis
Christopher Pidcock
Adrian Wallis
Eliza Sdraulig°
Joseph Kelly†
Paul Stender*

DOUBLE BASSES

Alex Henery
Principal
David Campbell
Dylan Holly
Steven Larson
Benjamin Ward
Alexandra Elvin†

FLUTES

Joshua Batty
Principal
Emma Sholl
Associate Principal
Katlijn Sargeant*
Guest Principal Piccolo

OBOES

Shefali Pryor
Acting Principal
Callum Hogan
Alexandre Oguey
Principal Cor Anglais

CLARINETS

Phil Arkinstall*
Guest Principal
Christopher Tingay
Alexander Morris
Principal Bass Clarinet

BASSOONS

Matthew Wilkie
Principal Emeritus
Hayden Burge†
Melissa Woodroffe*
*Guest Principal
Contrabassoon*

HORNS

Samuel Jacobs
Principal
Emily Newham°
*Acting Principal
3rd Horn*
Marnie Sebire
Rachel Silver
Stefan Grant†

TRUMPETS

David Elton
Principal
Anthony Heinrichs
Alexandra Bieri*

TROMBONES

Scott Kinmont
Acting Principal
Nick Byrne
Brett Page*
*Guest Principal
Bass Trombone*

TUBA

Steve Rossé
Principal

TIMPANI

Antoine Siguré
Principal

PERCUSSION

Rebecca Lagos
Principal
Joshua Hill°
*Acting Associate
Principal Timpani/
Section Percussion*
Timothy Constable
Jack Peggie†
Blake Roden*

HARP

Natalie Wong°
Acting Principal Harp
Julie Kim*

KEYBOARDS / EXTRAS

Kate Golla*
Guest Principal Piano
Christina Leonard*
*Guest Principal
Saxophone*

Bold Principal
* Guest Musician
° Contract Musician
† Sydney Symphony Fellow

2024 CONCERT SEASON

Symphony Hour
Thursday 18 July, 7pm

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA WITH JESS GILLAM INTOXICATING RHYTHMS

UMBERTO CLERICI conductor & presenter
JESS GILLAM saxophone

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)
La valse, a choreographic poem for orchestra (1919)

MICHAEL NYMAN (born 1944)
Where the Bee Dances (1991)

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)
Symphonic Dances, Op.45 (1940)
i. Non Allegro
ii. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)
iii. Lento assai – Allegro vivace

Pre-concert talk

By Megan Steller in the
Northern Foyer at 6.15pm,
including an interview with
Jess Gillam.

Estimated durations

Ravel – 12 minutes
Nyman – 21 minutes
Rachmaninov – 35 minutes

The concert will run for
approximately 1 hour and
15 minutes, without interval

Cover image

Jess Gillam
Photo by Robin Clewley
Photography

Principal Partner



YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

La valse, a choreographic poem for orchestra (1920)

Ravel's *La valse* was a long time in gestation. He'd considered a kind of tone poem on the theme of Vienna before World War I, but only completed the work in 1920. Its hallucinogenic visions of waltz music create the sense of the ghostly presence of the now-defunct Austrian Empire.

The year 1920 saw the Treaty of Versailles come into play; Soviet Russia recognised, then invaded, Georgia; Gandhi began his program of non-violent non-cooperation in India. Contemporary music included Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending*, Milhaud's *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, and Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*.



Maurice Ravel in 1928
Source Wikimedia Commons/
Bibliothèque nationale de France

MICHAEL NYMAN (BORN 1944)

Where the Bee Dances (1991)

Nyman takes credit for inventing the term 'minimalist music', and his highly varied single-movement saxophone concerto derives much of its material from a simple four-chord progression. It also reminds us of his extensive career in film, borrowing some material from his score for Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*.

It appeared in 1991, which saw the first Gulf War, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact; the ascension of Paul Keating as Australia's Prime Minister.



Michael Nyman

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)

Symphonic Dances, Op.45 (1941)

It's been said that Rachmaninov went from being a pianist who composed to a composer who played piano. His *Symphonic Dances*, while including a piano in the orchestra, is by no means a concertante work, and despite its title the piece's three movements give a sense of a more personal statement.

It was premiered and published in 1941. Other new music included Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*; Shostakovich's 'Leningrad' Symphony; Addinsell's *Warsaw Concerto*.



Rachmaninov in his office, 1935.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

UMBERTO CLERICI conductor

After a career spanning more than 20 years as a gifted cello soloist and orchestral musician, Umberto Clerici has gained a reputation as an artist of diverse and multifaceted talents.

It was in Sydney in 2018 that Umberto made his conducting debut with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House. A host of acclaimed conducting engagements followed culminating in his recent appointment as the Chief Conductor of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. Simultaneously, Umberto continues to be in high demand with all the major symphony orchestras of Australia and New Zealand.

In addition to his first season as Chief Conductor of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Umberto's 2023 conducting engagements include returns to the podiums of the Sydney, Melbourne and West Australian Symphony Orchestras. Having conducted each of the New Zealand and Dunedin Symphony Orchestras in 2022, Umberto will debut this year conducting the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra. In addition, Umberto looks forward to his first collaboration with Opera Queensland for Verdi's *Macbeth*.

Umberto began his career as a virtuoso cellist making his solo debut at the age of 17 performing Haydn's D Major Cello Concerto in Japan. After years of performing on the stages of the world's most prestigious concert halls, Umberto took up the position as Principal Cellist of the Royal Opera House in Turin, which he held for four years. In 2014, he was then appointed as the Principal Cello of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, a position he held until 2021.

As a cellist, Umberto is beloved by Australian audiences. Umberto has performed internationally as a soloist at New York's Carnegie Hall, Vienna's Musikverein, the great Shostakovich Hall of St Petersburg, Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome, the Salzburg Festival and is one of only two Italians to have ever won a prize for cello in the prestigious International Tchaikovsky Competition.



Umberto Clerici
Photo by Jay Patel

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

JESS GILLAM saxophone

Hailing from Ulverston in Cumbria, Jess Gillam is animating the music world with her outstanding talent and infectious personality. She has been forging her own adventurous path since she shot to fame becoming the first saxophonist to reach the finals of BBC Young Musician and the youngest ever soloist to perform at the Last Night of the Proms. Passionate about inspiring and bringing joy to people through music, Jess invites audiences on journeys of musical discovery through her electrifying performances and eclectic programming.

As well as performing around the world, Jess is a presenter on TV and Radio. She became the youngest ever presenter for BBC Radio 3 with the launch of her own weekly show, *This Classical Life*. The show is in its third year now and in 2020 won the prestigious ARIA Award for Best Specialist Music Show. Jess has presented a special live edition of *This Classical Life* at the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall. She has also been a guest presenter for BBC Radio 2 and co-hosted a miniseries for BBC Radio 4's *Today* program. Keen to explore the creative output of her home county, Jess presented a series of *Cumbrian Chats* on BBC Radio Cumbria. TV presenting includes the BBC Proms and BBC Young Musician.

Jess is the first ever saxophonist to be signed exclusively to Decca Classics and both of her albums reached No.1 in the UK Classical Music Charts. Her debut album was listed in *The Times* Top 100 albums of 2019. She has been the recipient of a Classic BRIT Award, has been nominated for *The Times* Breakthrough Award and was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list 2021 for Services to Music.

A free spirit in style and character, Jess is an advocate for the power of music in society. She is passionate about inspiring and bringing joy to people through music and during lockdown, she formed her 'Virtual Scratch Orchestra', inviting musicians of any standard to come together to play music virtually with her. The orchestra played music by David Bowie and

The Beatles as well as a Christmas special of Leroy Anderson's 'Sleigh Ride'. Over 2,000 people from around 30 different countries took part across the two projects, aged 2-94, playing a huge range of instruments. Jess is a patron for Awards for Young Musicians and London Music Fund and enjoys working and performing with young musicians.

Her infectious enthusiasm and passion for classical and non-classical music lights up every stage and she has performed in prestigious concert halls and with world-class orchestras around the globe including the NDR Hannover, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Iceland Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic, Lahti Symphony Orchestra and the UK's leading orchestras. She also enjoys touring with her newly-formed Jess Gillam Ensemble bringing together a group of brilliant musicians who share her bold, uplifting and open-minded approach. Jess has performed live at the BAFTAs to millions of viewers at home.

Jess is currently Artist in Association at the Royal Albert Hall and she continues to promote her own concert series, bringing international talent to her hometown of Ulverston.

Jess is a Vandoren UK Artist and became the youngest ever endorsee for Yanagisawa saxophones aged just 13.



Photo by Robin Clewley Photography

ABOUT THE MUSIC

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

La valse, a choreographic poem for orchestra (1920)

In the space of 120 years the waltz evolved from sturdy rusticity through elegant whirling to intoxicating sumptuousness – everyone from Mozart to Richard Strauss had taken a turn on the dance floor. Then World War I crushed the society that danced in three-quarter time, and the waltz became a thing of the past. For Ravel, himself traumatised by the war, this could only have made the waltz more irresistible; the composer of the *Menuet antique* and the *Pavane pour une infante défunte* was drawn, as always, to the past and to the dance.

In 1911 Ravel completed his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* – a string of lapidary waltzes in the spirit but not the style of Schubert – and he had begun to toy with the idea of a grander work for two pianos capturing the essence of Vienna through various aspects of the waltz. But Ravel didn't write *Wien*, as it was to be called. When war broke out he headed to the front, driving lorries because he was too slight to be admitted to the fighting forces. After the armistice he completed something quite different: *La valse* – a choreographic poem for orchestra.

Where the *Valses nobles...* had been inspired by Schubert and the embryonic waltz of the early 19th century, *La Valse* is a tribute to 'An Imperial Court, around 1855', a court in which the Strausses are the kings. Ravel imagined the music as 'a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz', associated in his mind with 'the impression of a fantastic, fatal whirling'. The effect is achieved through the simplest of structures, based not so much on themes or harmony but on something very simple: the crescendo, or building of sound from soft to loud. In this respect it is not unlike his *Bolero*, but instead of one long overwhelming crescendo, *La Valse* offers two.



Maurice Ravel in October 1928.

Source Wikimedia Commons/Bibliothèque nationale de France

The music begins with a grumble – a muted double bass section divided into three separate groups that share eerie tremolos and ominous plucked notes. Ravel's scenario for this choreographic poem describes eddying clouds that part from time to time, offering fleeting glimpses of waltzing couples. Bassoons, horns and clarinets join in...Ravel's beloved harps and more trembling strings...all is low and all is muted. This is the waltz viewed from a distance, each intimate couple in its own private world.

But we cannot stay voyeurs for long – the mists gradually disperse to reveal a huge ballroom in red and gold, brilliantly lit with chandeliers, and the waltzing couples have become a whirling crowd. The music embarks on a chain of waltzes that capture the verve of Johann Strauss, the opulence of Richard, and the frenzy of the ballroom. 'I'm waltzing frantically,' wrote Ravel when working on the piece – and if we were not in a concert hall we would be too.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The themes are sophisticated and volatile by turn – one moment the crowd of dancers is all glittering elegance, the next it is caught up in the fatal whirling that Ravel imagined. The fantastic melodic invention is matched by scintillating orchestral effects such as sweeping glissandi from the harps and divisions of the strings into as many as 16 separate parts. But the potential of Ravel's huge orchestra of more than 90 players is kept in reserve – we are overwhelmed by its exquisite colours before we are overwhelmed by its power. By the time Ravel brings on his second crescendo, shorter and more turbulent, we are completely intoxicated.

Not all were intoxicated, however. Sergei Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes was offered this spectacular music for a ballet but rejected it as too symphonic and lacking in choreographic variety. In doing so he lost the friendship of the composer who had created *Daphnis et Chloé* for his company in 1912. Ironically *La valse* was one of the few Ravel ballet scores that had been conceived for dancing and for orchestra: *Ma Mère l'Oye* (Mother Goose), *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* all became ballets, but only after they had first appeared as music for piano. In the end the Royal Flemish Opera Ballet gave the danced premiere, in 1926, and it was Ida Rubinstein who subsequently put *La valse* on the map, with choreography by Bronislava Nijinska. But the music was first performed in the concert hall and it is there that its exhilarating momentum and surging climaxes continue to sweep us away. Pre-war Vienna may have waltzed itself into fatal oblivion but *La Valse* whirls on.

La valse is scored for three flutes (the third doubling piccolo), three oboes (the third doubling cor anglais), two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon; four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba; timpani and multiple percussionists, two harps and strings.

It was first performed on 12 December 1920 in Paris, with Camille Chevillard conducting the Lamoureux Orchestra of Paris.

The Sydney Symphony first performed this work in March 1939, under conductor Antal Dorati, who also conducted it in 1966. Other notable performances include those with guest conductors Walter Susskind (1952), André Cluytens (1964) Miguel Harth-Bedoya (2012) and Charles Dutoit (2017); and those led by our Chief Conductors Eugene Goossens (1950, 1952), Dean Dixon (1967), Willem van Otterloo (1975), Louis Frémaux (1982), Stuart Challender (1988, including on our USA Tour) and Gianluigi Gelmetti (2005, 2006 and 2008, including on our European tour).

Our most recent performances were with Pietari Inkinen in October 2022.

Notes by Yvonne Frindle © 2005/2018

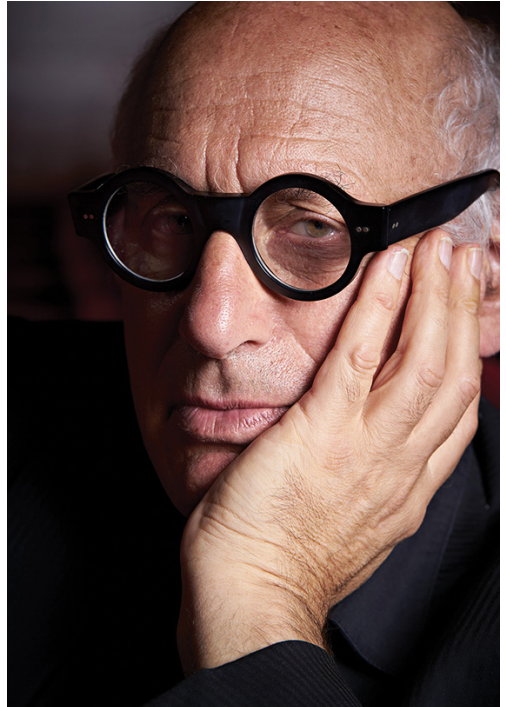
ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT MICHAEL NYMAN

Michael Nyman is undoubtedly one of the UK's most innovative and celebrated composers. His reputation is built upon a substantial body of work written for a wide variety of ensembles, not only for his own band, but also for symphony orchestra, choir and string quartet. In addition to his prolific output as a composer, Nyman is also a conductor, pianist, writer, musicologist, photographer and film-maker – his restless creativity and multi-faceted career making him one of the most dynamic and influential figures in contemporary culture.

Born in Stratford, East London on 23 March 1944, he was educated at the Sir George Monoux Grammar School, Walthamstow and studied at the Royal Academy of Music from 1961–64 with Dr Peter Fletcher, Alan Bush and Geraint Jones. Between 1964–67 Nyman was a PhD student at King's College, London under Thurston Dart, studying English Baroque music and the principles of scholarly editing, producing the first modern edition of Purcell's Catches (Stainer and Bell, 1967) and a new edition of Handel's Concerti Grossi, Op.6 (Eulenberg, 1973). He spent the academic year 1965/6 as a British Council exchange student collecting folk music in Romania.

In 1968, while working as music critic for *The Spectator* he coined the term 'minimal music' and in the following decade he both reflected and influenced a certain school of thought in contemporary music. Most of his important reviews, articles and interviews from *The Spectator*, *New Statesman*, *The Listener* and *Studio International* have since been published in *Michael Nyman: Collected Writings*, (Ashgate, 2013). In 1974, as a development of his journalistic work, Nyman published the still-classic book on new music, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Studio Vista, London).



Michael Nyman

In 1969 Nyman was commissioned to write the libretto for Sir Harrison Birtwistle's opera *Down By The Greenwood Side*. A subsequent commission from Birtwistle in 1976 to write music for Carlo Goldoni's *Il Campiello*, the opening production at the National Theatre, led to the formation of the Campiello Band (subsequently renamed the Michael Nyman Band), which for over four decades has been the laboratory for much of his inventive and experimental compositional work.

Nyman has also enjoyed a highly successful career as a film composer, a role in which, somewhat to his regret, he is best known to the general public. His reputation was established through a series of highly successful scores for films directed by Peter Greenaway, including *The Draughtsman's Contract*, *Prospero's Books*, *A Zed and Two Naughts* and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. Other scores include Neil Jordan's *The End Of The Affair*, Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland*,

ABOUT THE MUSIC

A Cock And Bull Story, and *The Trip*; Andrew Niccol's Hollywood sci-fi blockbuster *Gattaca* (1997), and his enchanting music for Jane Campion's 1993 film, *The Piano*, the soundtrack album of which has sold more than three million copies. His music was used in the BAFTA Award-winning and Oscar-nominated film *Man on Wire*, while his score for *Erasing David* (2009) was awarded Best Original Soundtrack at The London East End Film Festival.

More recently Michael has focused on composing soundtracks for silent films from the late 1920s: Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and new soundtracks for three Dziga Vertov films – *Man with a Movie Camera*, *The Eleventh Year* and *A Sixth Part of the World*.

Although the range and scope of his musical output is a clear demonstration of his versatility, Nyman's preferred musical form is opera, for which he has composed a number of influential works including *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (1986), *Facing Goya* (2000), and the critically acclaimed *Man and Boy: Dada* (2003).

His ten song cycles set texts from diverse writers including Shakespeare, Neruda, Octavio Paz, Paul Celan, Milton, and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz as well as Mexican 'folk' poets, amongst others. Additionally, Michael has composed music for a number of the world's most distinguished choreographers including Siobhan Davies, Ashley Page, Lucinda Childs, Stephen Petronio, Karine Saporta and Shobana Jeyasingh.

In addition to his composing and film-making activities, Nyman has a full international touring schedule with the Michael Nyman Band as well as a series of unique one-off performances with a variety of collaborators, including musicians from outside the western/

classical/experimental traditions such as the Orqestra Andalusi de Tetouan, Rajan and Sajan Misra, U. Shrinivas, Estrella Morente, Seijin Noborakawa, Ute Lemper, Evan Parker, Peter Brotzmann, Paolo Fresu, Mike Giles, the Flying Lizards, Dagmar Krause, Sting, Damon Albarn, David McAlmont and Alva Noto.

Michael was awarded the CBE for services to British music in 2008.

***Where the Bee Dances* (1991)**

The composer writes:

This saxophone concerto, written in one continuous movement with a wide variety of tempi, celebrates the talents of John Harle, who has been a central player in the Michael Nyman Band for over ten years. The title has a double reference: on the one hand to the circular orientation dances which a foraging bee performs to communicate the location of food source, and on the other hand to my setting of 'Where the bee sucks', composed for Peter Greenaway's film *Prospero's Books* and quoted sporadically during the concerto. However, most of the material is derived from a 4-chord sequence that John once overheard me playing and for which he expressed a particular liking.

Notes by Michael Nyman © 1991/2024

Where the Bee Dances is scored for two flutes (the second doubling piccolo), oboe, cor anglais, clarinet, bass clarinet and two bassoons; two horns, trumpet and bass trombone; piano, strings and saxophone soloist.

This is its Sydney Symphony premiere.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943) ***Symphonic Dances*, Op.45 (1940)**

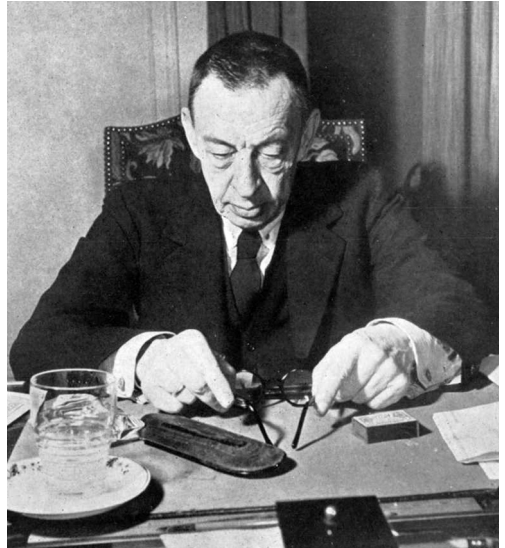
After the Rachmaninov family left Russia in 1917, the seizure of Rachmaninov's Russian income by the Soviets meant he had to earn a living. He did not want to become an orchestra's musical director so he set about establishing himself as a concert pianist.

At the age of 44 he began building up a soloist's repertoire. This left little time for composition, and he wrote no original work for nine years. Then the urge to compose began to re-assert itself. A fitful procession of 'Indian summer' pieces emerged between 1926 and 1940, many of which are now regarded as among his finest compositions.

Leaving Russia had meant exile from the culture that had nurtured his musical style; in spirit, Rachmaninov remained an exile from his homeland for the rest of his life, and to his friend Medtner's question, 'Why do you no longer compose?', there is Rachmaninov's oft-quoted reply: 'The melody has gone.' But to use this typically self-deprecating remark as a stick with which to beat the composer's later music is to ignore the vigour with which Rachmaninov sought to re-shape his compositional style in these final years.

His orchestral style was now marked by great clarity of texture, a freer and more independent approach to brass and woodwind writing, and a tendency to express ideas more concisely than in his earlier large-scale pieces. Harmonically and rhythmically his music of the 1930s bears traces of the influence of Prokofiev and Stravinsky, but very much on Rachmaninov's own terms. His melodies still move, on the whole, in stepwise fashion, in the manner of Russian Orthodox chant, and although he clothes his melodies in lighter textures, he is not ashamed to write tunes that could be called 'vintage Rachmaninov'.

At the time, the result was too 'modern' and lean-sounding for audiences who wanted him to keep re-writing the Second



Sergei Rachmaninov in his office in 1935

Piano Concerto, and too conservative for critics whose twin gods were Stravinsky and Schoenberg. But collectively, the *Symphonic Dances* represent perhaps the richest results of Rachmaninov's new approach to the orchestra. They were also his last original composition.

'I don't know how it happened. It must have been my last spark,' is how Rachmaninov described the work's origins. Yet the idea of a score for a programmatic ballet had been at the back of his mind since 1915, and when Michel Fokine successfully choreographed the *Paganini Rhapsody* in 1939 the opportunity presented itself again. He wrote the Dances the following year, giving the three movements the titles *Midday*, *Twilight* and *Midnight* respectively. At this point the work was called *Fantastic Dances* and Rachmaninov played it, in short score, to Fokine, who was enthusiastic about the music but non-committal about its balletic possibilities. Fokine's death a short time later cooled Rachmaninov's interest in the ballet idea. He deleted his descriptive titles, substituted the word 'Symphonic' for 'Fantastic', and dedicated the triptych to his favourite orchestra, the Philadelphia, and its chief conductor Eugene Ormandy.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

It is a work full of enigmas which the ever-secretive Rachmaninov does nothing to clarify. In the first movement, there is a transformation from minor to major of a prominent theme from his first symphony. The premiere of that work in 1897 had been such a fiasco that Rachmaninov could not compose at all for another three years. The reference in this new piece had a meaning that was entirely private.

There is also the curious paradox that the word ‘dance’, with its suggestion of life-enhancing, joyous activity, is here put at the service of a work that is essentially concerned – for all its vigour and sinew – with endings, with a chromaticism that darkens every musical step.

The first movement, with its unusual tempo marking (what could *Non Allegro* mean?) begins hesitantly, before a bold, staccato statement of a theme that sounds very much like the plainchant for the dead, *Dies Irae*, in disguise. This leads us to the main part of the movement. From this point on, most of the major musical ideas are introduced by the woodwinds. The major lyrical theme is then given to the alto saxophone, making its solo appearance with delicately scored accompaniment for winds only. Rachmaninov also employs orchestral piano, and when the lyrical theme is given its second statement by the strings, in an impassioned unison, the piano traces a filigree accompaniment, creating an overall effect of shining brightness. In the coda, harp and piano together create a glistening, shimmering counterpoint to the plush, chorale-like statement of the motif plucked from the first symphony.

The waltz movement begins with muted trumpet fanfares that have a sinister fairy-tale quality to them. Woodwind arabesques swirl around them, until a solo violin passage gives way to the main waltz theme, introduced by the oboe and cor anglais before being taken up by the strings. The ghostly woodwind arabesques continue to decorate this theme until the winds themselves announce the livelier second melody. Although the atmosphere becomes

warmer and more passionate at times, it does not lighten, and sometimes becomes quite macabre. It is as if we are experiencing a memory of a ballroom rather than a ball itself.

The finale is the work’s most complex movement. The extensive use of the *Dies irae* (a regular source for Rachmaninov) and the curious inscription ‘Alliluya’, written in the score above the last motif in the work to be derived from Orthodox chant, suggest the most final of endings mingled with a sense of thanksgiving. The tolling of the midnight bell that prefaces the movement’s vigorous main section reinforces the view that the work might, after all, be a parable on the three ages of man.

Much of the main *Allegro vivace* material here is derived from chant, as is the motif that eventually drives the *Dies irae* away and dominates the work’s forthright conclusion. But this is also the movement in which Rachmaninov takes time out from the dance, in an extensive central section in which morbidity, regret, passion and tears commingle in a complex and beautifully scored musical design.

Notes by Phillip Sametz © 1999

Rachmaninov’s *Symphonic Dances* is scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon; four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba; timpani and multiple percussion; harp, piano, alto saxophone and strings.

It was given its world premiere on 3 January 1941 by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, to whom it is dedicated.

The earliest known performance by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra was in March 1977, conducted by Denis Vaughan. Other notable performances include those led by Eduardo Mata (1990), David Stanhope (1999, subsequently released on CD), Mark Elder (2000, and on tour in Kuala Lumpur), Charles Dutoit (2006), Vladimir Ashkenazy (2007, as part of his Rachmaninov Festival, and subsequently released on CD), Jakub Hrusa (2012), Kristjan Jarvi (2013) and James Gaffigan (2017).

Our most recent performance was in September 2022, under our former Chief Conductor Edo de Waart, in his last-ever performances in Sydney. He had conducted the work once before, in 1995.

All scoring and history by Hugh Robertson

SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

ARTISTIC LEADERSHIP



Simone Young AM
Chief Conductor



Donald Runnicles
Principal Guest Conductor



Vladimir Ashkenazy
Conductor Laureate



Andrew Haveron
Concertmaster
Vicki Olsson Chair

FIRST VIOLINS



Harry Bennetts
Associate
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