ALEXANDER GAVRYLYUK PERFORMS RACHMANINOV

13–16 MAY 2026

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Emirates
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 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.

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.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS CONCERT

Expect to enjoy yourself! Maybe your heart will beat a little faster. Maybe your hair will stand on end. It's hard to predict or describe how the vast sound of a symphony orchestra will affect each of us. Just bring an open mind and engage with the music – close your eyes, watch the conductor and the musicians, or just sit back and let the music take you away.

When do I clap?

Good question. Most pieces of music are broken up into different movements – usually, people only clap at the end of a piece, so there will be silent pauses between movements. On the next page you will see how many movements the pieces in this concert have, and the duration of each piece. But the simplest thing is to wait until the conductor turns around – or when everyone else starts applauding.

The conductor may leave the stage and come back on a few times, and acknowledge the different sections of the orchestra. You can keep clapping as long as you want to – and feel free to cheer and stomp your feet if you really enjoyed the concert!

Can I take photos or videos?

You can take photos and videos on your phone during the applause at the end of a piece of music. **Please switch your phone to silent, make sure the flash is off and dim the brightness of your screen so you don't distract other audience members**. And if you share it to your socials, tag us in your posts! We love seeing what people have captured.

Please leave professional and semi-professional camera gear at home and limit yourself to a phone camera inside the venue.

What happens at interval?

The interval will begin when the conductor leaves the stage and the lights go to their full brightness. You can choose to stay in your seat and wait, go to the bathroom, walk around or purchase food or drink from one of the foyer bars.

An announcement will play through the speaker system 10 minutes, 5 minutes and 1 minute before the concert resumes.

2026 CONCERT SEASON

ALEXANDER GAVRYLYUK PERFORMS RACHMANINOV

AN OCEAN OF SOUND

Nicholas Carter conductor

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)
***Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes,* Op.33a** (1945)
I. *Dawn*
II. *Sunday Morning*
III. *Moonlight*
IV. *Storm*

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)
***Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini,* Op.43** (1934)
Alexander Gavrylyuk piano

INTERVAL

JEANNE DEMESSIEUX (1921–1968)
***Poème,* Op.9** (1949)
AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE
David Drury organ

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)
La Mer (1903—1905)
I. *From dawn to noon on the sea*
II. *Play of waves*
III. *Dialogue of the wind and the sea*

Wednesday 13 May, 8pm
Friday 15 May, 8pm
Saturday 16 May, 8pm
Emirates Masters Series

Thursday 14 May, 1.30pm
Emirates Thursday Afternoons

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

Pre-concert talk

By Vanessa Hughes in the Northern Foyer at 7.15pm (12.45pm on Thursday)

Estimated durations

Britten – 18 minutes
Rachmaninov – 25 minutes
Interval – 20 minutes
Demessieux – 15 minutes
Debussy – 25 minutes

The concert will run for approx. 1 hour and 45 minutes

Cover image

Alexander Gavrylyuk.
Photo by Marco Borggreve.

ABC Classic

Friday's performance will be broadcast live on ABC Classic, and streaming online.

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land and water on which we work and perform. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

WELCOME

Welcome to **Alexander Gavrylyuk performs Rachmaninov**, the fourth concert in the Emirates Masters Series for 2026.

As the Presenter of this Masters Series, our Principal Partner Emirates proudly champions exceptional local and international talent, with a special focus on the Sydney Symphony's celebrated Chief Conductor, Simone Young AM. Tonight's concert features two of Australia's finest musicians, both well known to the Sydney Symphony: conductor Nicholas Carter and pianist Alexander Gavrylyuk.

In 2009 Carter was chosen by Vladimir Ashkenazy as his assistant conductor in Sydney, a post he held for three seasons. He served as principal conductor of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (2015-19) and has since built longstanding relationships with New York's Met Opera, Glyndebourne, Vienna Staatsoper, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Hamburg Staatsoper and more. He was recently appointed as Music Director of the Staatsoper and Staatsorchester Stuttgart from the 2026/27 season.

Ukrainian-born pianist Alexander Gavrylyuk moved to Australia at 13 and has become a favourite of Sydney audiences. Vladimir Ashkenazy called him an "extraordinary talent", and regularly invited him to perform some of the most demanding repertoire. It is always a pleasure to hear him perform, and Rachmaninov's intricate, deceptively difficult *Paganini Variations* are an ideal vehicle for his considerable talents.

Just as these two musicians have long relationships with the Sydney Symphony, so too has Emirates. Ours is one of the most significant and enduring relationships in Australia's performing arts, one we all continue to be immensely proud of. We've recently renewed our longstanding partnership, one that reflects our shared belief in the power of connection: bringing world-class artistry to the global stage and enabling music to transcend borders, cultures and audiences.

Our partnership has been underpinned by a shared vision: to create unforgettable journeys and remarkable experiences, and this concert perfectly illustrates our mutual commitment to excellence at the very highest level.

We trust you will enjoy this marvellous concert.

Craig Whitehead
Chief Executive Officer
Sydney Symphony Orchestra

YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)
Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes, Op.33a (1945)

Britten's first opera is set in a coastal fishing village, with the North Sea in all its moods a constant presence. In the sixteen minutes of the *Four Sea Interludes* we hear depictions of the calm majesty of dawn over the ocean; the glitter of waves as church-bells ring and birds wheel in the sky; a gentle, dark-hued evocation of moonlight on the sea's surface, and finally a violent storm.

The opera appeared in 1945, the year that saw the end of World War II, the signing of the United Nations Charter and the election of Ben Chifley as Australian Prime Minister.

Britten in 1948

SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)
***Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini,* Op.43** (1934)

In this 22-minute work Rachmaninov satisfies the demands of virtuosity and formal coherence. Its theme and 24 strongly contrasting variations, based on Paganini's 24th Caprice, are played continuously but grouped into four sections, echoing symphonic form; they nevertheless offer the soloist the opportunity to display the widest variety of sounds and technical display.

Rachmaninov played the premiere performance in 1934, the year that saw Hitler become Führer of Germany and Charles Kingsford-Smith's flight from Brisbane to San Francisco.

Rachmaninov c.1933. Source: Bain News Service, publisher, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

JEANNE DEMESSIEUX (1921–1968)
Poème, Op.9 (1949)

Poème is a thirteen-minute single movement work in several linked but contrasting sections. It begins in lucid calm, gradually ratchetting up the speed and metre until the organ has a solo cadenza, after which the original material is revisited and varied. Both the organ registration and orchestral writing shows Demessieux's exquisite ear for sound.

It was published in 1952, the year that saw the accession of Queen Elizabeth II to the British throne, the death of Eva Perón and Joan Sutherland's debut at Covent Garden.

Contemporary music included Erich Wolfgang Korngold's Symphony, John Cage's *4'33"* and Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Kreuzspiel*.

Demessieux in 1958

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)
La Mer (1903—1905)

Like Britten's Interludes, Debussy's 'three symphonic sketches' invite us to imagine the sea in various moods and from various angles, though we shouldn't take the descriptive titles too literally, nor ignore the fact that the 23-minute work has a tightly argued musical structure beneath its colourful and enigmatic surface.

It was first performed in 1905, the year that saw revolutionary activity in Tsarist Russia, the foundation of Sinn Féin in Ireland and non-Indigenous women given the vote in Queensland. Contemporary music included Jean Sibelius's Violin Concerto and Richard Strauss's *Salome*.

Photo of Debussy by Atelier Nadar.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

NICHOLAS CARTER conductor

Nicholas Carter, the newly appointed Music Director of the Staatsoper and Staatsorchester Stuttgart from the 2026/27 season, has emerged as one of the most riveting opera conductors, acclaimed for his arresting presence in the pit. His distinguished artistic versatility has earned him a reputation as a perceptive interpreter of opera, ranging from Mozart, Verdi, Wagner and Strauss to Russian and French repertoire, encompassing as far as music dramas of Britten and contemporary composers such as Brett Dean. Equally sought-after in the concert hall, Carter conducts wide breadth of symphonic repertoire and maintains regular collaborations with leading international orchestras.

He opens the 2025/2026 season with his return to The Metropolitan Opera to conduct Richard Strauss' *Arabella,* followed by debuts with Semperoper Dresden in two titles, Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Verdi's *La Traviata,* as well as with Bayerische Staatsoper for Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. Carter concludes the season with his return to the Glyndebourne Festival for *Billy Budd* by Benjamin Britten. In previous seasons, he has worked with the Wiener Staatsoper, Oper Zürich, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Hamburgische Staatsoper, Oper Köln, Deutsche Oper am Rhein and Santa Fe Opera.

Alongside regular collaborations with Australia's leading symphony orchestras, Carter's recent and forthcoming symphonic highlights include debuts with the Oslo Philharmonic, Orchestre national du Capitole de Toulouse, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, Münchner Rundfunkorchester, MDR Sinfonieorchester Leipzig, Brucknerorchester Linz, BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Dallas Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Orchestre Métropolitain, Seoul Philharmonic and Hong Kong Philharmonic, to name just a few.

Carter previously held positions as Kapellmeister at both the Staatsoper Hamburg and Deutsche Oper Berlin and served as the Principal Conductor at the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra from 2016 to 2019, the Chief Conductor at the Stadttheater Klagenfurt and the Kärntner Sinfonieorchester from 2018 to 2021, and most recently Chief Conductor and Co-Operndirektor at Bühnen Bern from 2021 to 2025.

Photo by Admill Kuyler

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

ALEXANDER GAVRYLYUK piano

A stunningly virtuosic pianist, Alexander is internationally recognised for his electrifying and poetic performances. His performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No.3 at the BBC Proms was described as "revelatory" by The Times and "electrifying" by Limelight. Alexander was Artist-in-Residence at Wigmore Hall for the 23/24 season.

Highlights of the 2025-26 season include debuts with Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Tonkünstler Orchestra, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Opera North orchestra and i Solisti di Pavia. Alexander will also return to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Auckland Philharmonia. Recent highlights also include Hamburger Symphoniker, Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liege, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Estonian National Symphony, Phil Zuid, Enescu Philharmonic and Taiwan National Symphony. This season also sees returns to Baerum Kulturhaus and the Piano Masters Series in Stoke-on-Trent as a recital artist along with his recital debut at Theater Heerlen.

Alexander collaborates regularly with conductors including Rafael Payare, Alexandre Bloch, Thomas Søndergård, Donald Runnicles, Juraj Valcuha, Kirill Karabits, Edward Gardner & Gustavo Gimeno.

Born in Ukraine in 1984 and holding Australian citizenship, Alexander began his piano studies at the age of seven and gave his first concerto performance when he was nine years old. At the age of 13, Alexander moved to Sydney where he lived until 2006. He won First Prize and Gold Medal at the Horowitz International Piano Competition (1999), First Prize at the Hamamatsu International Piano Competition (2000), and Gold Medal at the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Masters Competition (2005).

As a recitalist Alexander has performed at the Musikverein in Vienna, Tonhalle Zurich, Victoria Hall Geneva, Southbank Centre's International Piano Series, Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw Master Pianists Series, Suntory Hall, Tokyo Opera City Hall, Great Hall of Moscow Conservatory, Cologne Philharmonie, Tokyo City Concert Hall, San Francisco, Sydney Recital Hall and Melbourne Recital Centre.

Photo by Marco Borggreve

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Months before he died in 1976, Benjamin Britten was created Baron Britten of Aldeburgh in the County of Suffolk. He was the first British composer to be made a life peer, a distinction which says much about his place, and the place of music, in British music and society at the time.

Born on the East Anglian coast in 1913, Britten's first compositions date from 1922, and two years later first heard music by Frank Bridge, which 'knocked him sideways'. Before long, and while still a schoolboy, he was Bridge's student. On leaving school he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music but it was Bridge – something of an outsider – who would remain his mentor and strongest influence.

The early 1930s saw several masterpieces such as the Sinfonietta Op.1 and the choral tour-de-force *A Boy was Born*. By the mid-1930s he was writing film music for the GPO Film Music, through which he met poet WH Auden who was for a time a powerful influence on Britten artistically and personally.

As World War II approached Britten undertook a concert tour of North America with tenor Peter Pears. The pair stayed in the United States after the start of the war, but after two years Britten was dreadfully homesick, and in 1942 he and Pears, now his life-partner, returned to the UK, where he threw himself into the composition of the opera that would make his name: *Peter Grimes*.

He and Pears settled in Aldeburgh, Suffolk, and Britten would go on to revitalise opera in English with a string of works including *The Turn of the Screw, Albert Herring* and *Billy Budd*.

Britten in 1948

He co-founded the Aldeburgh Festival which rapidly became an important part of British musical life, and saw the premieres of a number of major works such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and much of his vocal and chamber music. The massive *War Requiem*, completed in 1962 for the dedication of the newly-rebuilt Coventry Cathedral, brought about a change in Britten's work. From then on he concentrated largely on smaller scale works such as *Curlew River*, based on a Japanese Noh play. His health deteriorated in later life forcing a withdrawal from performing as conductor or pianist, but he continued working, his last opera being *Death In Venice*.

On Britten's death the late Queen Elizabeth sent Peter Pears a message of condolence.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT THE *FOUR SEA INTERLUDES*

From California in 1941, Britten wrote to a friend that he had just 're-discovered the poetry of George Crabbe (all about Suffolk!) & are very excited – maybe an opera one day.'

Britten had re-discovered Crabbe thanks to an article by novelist EM Forster, who described the East Anglian coast with its 'melancholy' scenery, 'expanses of mud… marsh birds crying'. Crabbe had been born in Aldeburgh in the mid-18th century, and his long poem *The Borough*, about the landscapes and villages that Britten knew so well contains the story of 'a savage fisherman who murdered his apprentices and was haunted by their ghosts'. Britten had found a perfect mixture of things close to his heart: the destruction of innocence, the isolation of the 'different' individual, and the sea itself. Britten's Grimes is misunderstood rather than savage and the deaths of his apprentices seem to be misadventure rather than murder. But he is hounded – eventually to death – by the pharisaic conformist community of The Borough.

The North Sea is an active presence in the opera, largely as a result of these four interludes that depict it in various moods. After a courtroom scene in which Grimes is acquitted of responsibility for an apprentice's death, the sun rises over the sea in *Dawn* as the villagers emerge and sing of the day's duties. Flute and violins trace a long line above the horizon as clarinets and harp create wave-shapes and the horns suggest reddening clouds in the distance. *Sunday morning* has all the bustle and energy of the village called to church by the bell-sounds of paired horn, preparing a scene where the good-hearted schoolmistress, Ellen Orford, prepares to sit by the shore with Grimes' new apprentice and make him feel welcome. *Moonlight* has some of the qualities of a Whistler *Nocturne*: rich, dark cello lines sing a gently surging, Elgarian melody punctuated by splashes of bright colour from tuned percussion and woodwinds. *The Storm* gives the set of interludes a symphonic ending, but in the opera occurs in Act I where the villagers are taking refuge from the tempest in the local pub.

These *Interludes* are scored for 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, D trumpet, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

They were first performed at the Cheltenham Festival in June 1945, with Britten conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra gave the first recorded performance by an Australian orchestra less than a year later, on 29 August 1946, conducted by John Farnsworth Hall.

Other notable performances include those conducted by Walter Susskind (1954), Nicolai Malko (1957), Charles Mackerras (1963 Regional Tour), Louis Frémaux (1979), Guido Ajmone-Marsan (1983), Vernon Handley (1986), Andrew Litton (1990), Osmo Vänskä (1998), Simone Young (2005) and Jessica Cottis (2013).

It was also a regular feature of our Schools concerts for many years, with performances led by John Hopkins, Joseph Post, Patrick Thomas and more.

Our most recent performances were in 2022, led by Chief Conductor Simone Young.

Peter Pears as Grimes in the 1945 premiere production.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT SERGEI RACHMANINOV

Rachmaninov never cut a cheery figure – Stravinsky famously (or maybe Craftily) described his countryman as 'a six-foot three-inch scowl'. That Rachmaninov felt his exile keenly is clear, and he only took out US citizenship in the final months of his life despite having lived there from 1918. Even before his departure from Russia, however, his was a temperament given to intense, and often depressive, emotion.

The composer was born on a large estate near Novgorod, but his childhood was marred his father's alcoholism. Rachmaninov senior drank away the family fortune, and left his family when Sergey was nine years old. Sergey's mother had to sell the property and move to St Petersburg. His studies were undistinguished there, but in 1885 he moved to Moscow to attend the Conservatory where he studied composition with Tanayev and Arensky. His graduation piece, the opera *Aleko* (performed at the Bolshoi in 1893) earned high praise from Tchaikovsky, but the first of many artistic crises hit with the abject failure of his First Symphony, conducted by Glazunov, in 1897. For three years Rachmaninov was unable to compose, and underwent treatment by the hypnotist Nikolai Dahl. This was supremely successful: the next year saw the production of two masterpieces of his early maturity, the Piano Concerto no 2 (dedicated to Dahl) and the second Suite for two pianos. (Norman Lebrecht has remarked that 'in Rachmaninov, the second of everything turned out best'.)

Rachmaninoff had left Russia two months after the 1917 revolution. Effectively exiled from his homeland and what remained of his fortune after the revolution, Rachmaninov focused his energies on being a piano virtuoso. Like Grainger and pianists such as Liszt before them, Rachmaninov expanded his recital repertoire with transcriptions of popular vocal or orchestral music.

Rachmaninoff's idiom is steeped in that of Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin. But as recent scholarship has argued, there are ways in which Rachmaninoff remains fundamentally Russian: his most characteristic melodies move by step in the manner of Orthodox chant (and this piece was composed at the same time as his magnificent Vespers), and often, his piano figurations ring out like the bells of churches. Russian churches.

Rachmaninov c.1933. Source: Bain News Service, publisher, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

ABOUT THE *PAGANINI VARIATIONS*

Phillip Sametz writes:

On leaving Russia for good in 1917, Rachmaninov busied himself with acquiring a concert pianist's repertoire, so that he could earn a steady income – he gave 40 concerts in four months during his first US concert season. But he gradually reduced his concert commitments until, in 1925, he had nine months free of performances, during which he composed his first post-Russian pieces: *Three Russian Songs for Chorus and Orchestra*, which were well received, and the Piano Concerto No.4, which was greeted with widespread indifference. Rachmaninov, always sensitive about his own music, did not produce another work for four years.

When the *Variations on a theme of Corelli* for solo piano appeared in 1931, they indicated that a large-scale variation structure might serve Rachmaninov's musical needs better than the more traditional concerto structure in which success had so recently eluded him. The *Corelli Variations*, based on the baroque popular tune, *La Folia*, might be thought of

as the moodier, introspective dress rehearsal for the work that was to follow: the *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini*, based on Paganini's celebrated 24th Caprice.

In the *Rhapsody*, Rachmaninov seems to grasp the big picture and distil a sense of unity, from variation to variation, that he does not achieve in the more extended forms of the Fourth Concerto. Yet the *Rhapsody*'s theme and 24 variations actually behave like a four-movement work. Variations 1 to 11 form a quick first movement with cadenza; Variations 12 to 15 supply the equivalent of a scherzo/minuet; Variations 16 to 18, the slow movement; and the final six variations, the dashing finale.

We actually hear the first variation – a skeletal march that evokes Paganini's bony frame – before the theme itself. The ensuing variations are increasingly animated and decorative until Variation 7 gives us a first stately glimpse, on the piano, of the *Dies irae* plainchant, with the strings muttering the Paganini theme against it. This old funeral chant features prominently in Rachmaninov's output. Sometimes, as in his final work, the *Symphonic Dances*, he uses it without irony, but its appearances in the *Rhapsody* are essentially sardonic.

Variation 8 is a kind of demented can-can which rushes headlong into the even more helter-skelter Variation 9, in which the strings begin by playing with the wood of their bows. Grimly glittering arpeggios are tossed between piano and orchestra in Variation 10, in which the *Dies irae* is heard in brazen octaves on the piano, with syncopated brass commentary.

With the cadenza-like Variation 11 forming a point of transition, we move to the exquisite, gently regal minuet of Variation 12. The drive, directness and power of Variation 14 are created with much bolder writing for wind and brass than Rachmaninov employed in his earlier orchestral scores. The piano is given a very subsidiary role here, then comes instantly to the fore in the dazzling, cadenza-like Variation 15.

After a pause, Variation 16 has an intimacy and exoticism that evokes the Arabian Dance from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*, with short but telling solo phrases for oboe, horn, violin, clarinet and cor anglais. Variation 17 is more palpably mysterious, even sinister, and the only one where the theme seems to have vanished altogether. But we land on very deep shag-pile indeed with the celebrated 18th Variation, in which Rachmaninov uses his sleight of hand to turn Paganini's theme upside down and create a luxuriant, much admired (and much imitated) melody of his own. Rachmaninov is reported to have said of it: 'This one is for my agent.'

As if being woken suddenly from a dream, the orchestra calls the soloist and the audience to attention for six final variations that evoke Paganini's legendary left-hand pizzicato playing (Variation 19) and the demonic aspects of the Paganini legend, with more references to the *Dies irae* and an increasing emphasis on pianistic and orchestral virtuosity in the last two variations. Just as a final violent outburst of the *Dies irae* seems to be leading us to a furious crash-bang coda, we are left instead with a nudge and a wink, as Rachmaninov's final masterpiece for piano and orchestra bids us a sly farewell.

The *Rhapsody* is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, harp strings and piano soloist.

It was premiered on 7 November 1934, at the Lyric Opera House in Baltimore, Maryland, with the Rachmaninov as soloist with Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Leopold Stokowski.

A notable Sydney connection: the English premiere on 7 March 1935 was conducted by Nicolai Malko – the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's second Chief Conductor (1957–1961) – with Rachmaninov the soloist with The Hallé Orchestra at Manchester Free Trade Hall.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra gave the first recorded performance by an Australian orchestra in March 1940, with Eric Landerer the soloist, conducted by Georg Schnéevoigt.

Other notable performances include those with Richard Farrell conducted by Eugene Goossens (1951); Moira Lympany/Ferdinand Leitner (1966); Roger Woodward/Moshe Atzmon (1969); Jorge Bolet/Willem van Otterloo (1977); Mark Zeltser/William Steinberg (1979); Pamela Page/Louis Frémaux (1982); Đặng Thái Sặn/Hiroyuki Iwaki (1986); Dmitri Alexeev/Iwaki (1987); Howard Shelley/Nicholas Braithwaite (1989); Nelson Freire/Gilbert Varga (1994); Andrea Lam/Alan Gilbert (1999); Alexei Volodin/Calo Rizzi (2000); Olli Mustonen/Edo de Waart (2003); Simon Trpčeski/Steven Mercurio (2004); Lukáš Vondráček/Vladimir Ashkenazy (2007) and Freddy Kempf/Thomas Dausgaard (2011).

Our most recent performances were in 2018, with Stephen Hough as soloist conducted by Julian Kuerti.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT JEANNE DEMESSIEUX

Jeanne Demessieux's untimely death at the age of 47 deprived French music of a brilliant virtuoso organist and a distinctively gifted composer. In her relatively short life, however, Demessieux had amassed a distinguished number of 'firsts': she was the first woman organist to sign a recording contract, to tour the United States (which she did three times as well as making extensive concert tours of Europe), and to play the organ at Westminster Abbey. Her recordings of the organ repertoire, notably the complete organ works of César Franck, are legendary; it is regrettable that her 1967 project to record Olivier Messiaen's complete organ works to date was not to be fulfilled.

She was born at Montpellier in the south of France in 1921, and studied at the Paris Conservatoire from 1933 – in which year she also took the position of 'titular organist' at the church of Saint-Esprit, a position she held until 1962 when she became titular organist at the Madeleine until her death in 1968. At the Conservatoire she began as a pianist, quickly garnering prizes for that instruments, as well as harmony, fugue and counterpoint, and improvisation. From 1939 she was an organ student of Marcel Dupré, with whom she continued studying privately after her graduation.

Her debut at the Salle Pleyel in 1946 was a huge success. Numerous organists expressed their admiration, including Dupré himself, who described her as 'the greatest organist of all generations'. Her relationship with Dupré, however, came to a sudden and mysterious end the following year: neither party ever divulged the reason, but while Dupré never spoke to her again, Demessieux continued to promote his work.

The break had little effect on Demessieux's career, however. Her career as a concert artist bloomed, and from 1950 she was appointed to professorships at the Conservatoires of Nancy (1950-52) and then at Liège, the Belgian hometown of César Franck, from 1952 until her death.

Demessieux in 1958

And, from 1946, she flourished as a composer with a style that reflects the sensuous aesthetic of the Jeune France movement of Messiaen and André Jolivet. She composed for piano, chamber ensembles, voice, and orchestra, though a large portion of her music is still unpublished. Naturally much of her work is for organ: her first published piece, Six Études, Op.5, is a set of bravura exercises that each explore some technical aspect of performance; soon after, she composed her *Sept Méditations sur le Saint-Esprit*, Op.6, which contemplates aspects of the Holy Spirit, to whom the church at which she worked is dedicated.

Like Messiaen's, much of Demessieux's organ music refers to aspects of Catholic theology and practice, but is not for liturgical use despite its frequent use of plainchant. For her work in church Demessieux made use of others' music and her brilliance as an improviser, and fortunately there are recorded examples of some of her improvisations. Like Dupré, Demessieux had certain formal models to guide her improvisation: two that she devised are *fantasie* and *poème symphonique*.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT *POÈME*

Composed in 1949 and published in 1952, Demessieux's *Poème* is a concertante work in which the organ is often first among equals. Formally the work could be both *fantasie* and *poème symphonique*: its single movement falls into clearly defined contrasting sections, with a final, though not rigid, recapitulation. Thematically it is extremely economical, Demessieux having a fine instinct for the ways in which its two main themes are developed and combined, and her harmony, as in the solo works, is drawn from a rich palette of distinctly inflected modal and diatonic chords.

In the opening *Moderato* section, organ quavers provide a subtle pulse under long-held silky chords from muted, divided strings and clarinets, as a gleaming trumpet tune sounds above. This melody contains important elements for the piece – a falling third and a faintly 'oriental' five-note contour (three steps down, one up) which is the thematic core of the work. As horns join the harmonic background for added warmth, the texture is gradually activated by more rhythmic movement – the organ's quaver rhythm moves into the harp while the strings begin to use faster-moving figurations.

The upper strings, now unmuted, and woodwinds have whirling semiquavers, with pizzicatos ricocheting in the lower voices against insistent timpani crotchets.

In a faster section, single tutti chords are answered by a loud organ figure based on the opening trumpet melody; the music is developed with often sudden changes of key and dynamics.

In the following *Andante* in 4/4 is dominated by staccato semiquavers in the organ's right hand against a version of the trumpet tune moving slowly in the left. The strings are muted again, supporting a six-note motif for flute (two steps up, three down) which, slowed down into broad tune for oboe and strings, then dominates the section in various guises.

There is another release of energy, now an *Allegro* In 12/8 with galloping figures for organ – more conventionally virtuosic than before - and unmuted strings, with long-held pedal points form the horn. This drives towards a decisive climax ornamented by extravagant harp glissandos, which introduces a cadenza for solo organ that reviews much of the material already heard.

As the orchestra returns, the trumpet tune is played very slowly in the upper strings and winds, the six-note flute motif now in the bass. In the opening section's 6/4 time, the organ gives out the flute motif over shimmering strings with harp interpolations becoming more extended in the strings getting faster until metre changes to 2/2 and the galloping triplets are revisited. There is brief return to the material of the second section, an increasingly urgent section that overlays different metrical motifs before a brief, glowing brass chord and rapid vibrant coda.

Poème is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, harp, strings and organ.

It was premiered in 1952, with Demessieux the soloist with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, conducted by Eugène Bigot.

This is the work's Australian premiere.


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Alexander Gavrylyuk, Soloist

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ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born near Paris in 1862 to a family in modest circumstances, Debussy began learning music at the age of seven and by ten years old was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire where he spent, on and off, 12 years studying. In the 'off' periods during the early 1880s he served as in-house pianist to Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patron; for Meck and himself to play, Debussy produced a number of two-piano reductions of works by Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns and others.

Like most of the canonical French composers Debussy applied for the Prix de Rome, failed on his first attempt, was runner-up on his second but, on his third, won. 'My heart sank,' he confessed. 'I had a sudden vision of boredom and of all the worries that inevitably go together with any kind of official recognition.' Nevertheless, in January 1885 he arrived in Rome where he would be accommodated in the Villa Medici, hated it, and spent the bare two-year minimum there. But while in Rome he did meet Liszt and Verdi, and it is from this time that his brief but consequential love of Wagner's music dates.

Debussy's near contemporary, Erik Satie, took credit for persuading Debussy to write music 'without sauerkraut' – in practice that meant abandoning several features of the Austro-German tradition including what we might call 'goal-directed structures' such as symphonic forms that move away from and back to a tonal centre, and the rich upholstery of late-Romantic orchestration.

Debussy's credo would become 'there is no theory; pleasure is the law', composing works that explored moments of sensual beauty with no – apparent – urgency to develop a musical argument, but we should be wary of simply assuming that his works are illustrative. And we should certainly avoid comparisons with 'what imbeciles call Impressionism' (as Debussy put it) in painting, which after all gained notoriety while the composer was still in short pants. Like Beethoven in the *Pastoral* Symphony, Debussy's musical response to the world was one of 'feeling rather than painting'.

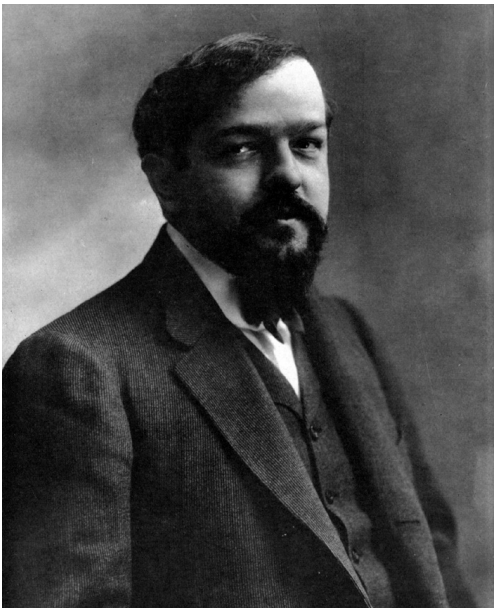

Photo of Debussy by Atelier Nadar.

He was more drawn to the literary ideas of Symbolisme, and such works like Stéphane Mallarmé's dreamy 'Afternoon of a Faun' would inspire one of Debussy's most characteristic works of erotic languor. One of Debussy's objections to Wagner was that 'symphonic development and character development can never unfold at exactly the same rate'. In *Pelléas et Mélisande,* Debussy allows the text to dictate its own speed. The vocal lines are as simple and fluid as Gregorian chant. The harmony and orchestral writing, honed in such works as the *Prélude à 'L'après-midi d'un faune'* and the *Nocturnes,* responds with infinite subtlety to the emotional fluctuation of the texts.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT *LA MER*

Debussy's music is never intended as visual imagery, or the soundtrack to some imaginary film. (This is what Debussy's colleague Satie was burlesquing when he praised *La Mer*'s first movement, 'From dawn to noon on the sea', by saying he particularly liked the bit 'around a quarter to eleven.') The composer may have invited such misinterpretations: in subtitling the work 'Three symphonic sketches' he of course evokes the media of visual art; moreover, he often used terms like 'colour' and 'shading' when discussing his music. But in 1903, when he began work on *La Mer*, Debussy wrote to a friend from the Burgundian countryside:

> You may not know that I was destined for a sailor's life, and that only chance led me in another direction...You will say that the ocean does not exactly bathe the hills of Burgundy, and my seascapes may be studio landscapes, but I have an endless store of memories, and in my mind they are worth more than reality, whose beauty often weighs heavily on the imagination.

The work, then, is about the *idea* of the sea rather than being a representation of it; significantly, much of the composition of the work took place away from the coast.

Debussy's genius for orchestration and subtle rhythmic organisation certainly make for an evocative work where it is possible to imagine the crash of waves, the call of seagulls and the protean movement of light on water. The final climactic moments of the first movement, for instance, somehow create a sense of emerging from the deep into the light.

Other masterly touches abound: the unusual timbre of cellos divided into four parts; the use of muted horns (which Debussy admitted to taking from the music of Weber) to evoke space; the soloistic use of wind instruments and harp.

But *La Mer* is as much 'symphonic' as it is 'sketch'. Its three movements are by no means simply rhapsodic, but rather show Debussy's subtle and careful approach to form. In the first movement (From dawn to noon on the sea) his careful development of short motifs is perfectly symphonic; the second movement (Play of Waves) is, among other things, a symphonic scherzo; and the third movement (Dialogue of the wind and the sea) – which has one of the rare 'big finishes' of any work by this composer – is a symphonic finale. (This movement, with its references back to the first, also shows Debussy's adherence to the notion of cyclical form which he learned from César Franck and applied in such works as his String Quartet.)

The pianist and Debussy expert Roy Howat has also shown how Debussy's structure corresponds to the ancient Greek idea of the Golden Section where a line is divided so that the ratio of the shorter portion to the longer portion forms the same ratio as the longer portion does to the whole length. (The façade of many a classical temple is built such that the ratio between its height and width corresponds to these divisions.) By applying this formula to time, a composer can plot where significant events (changes of speed, colour moods or metre) will have the greatest dramatic effect. Howat has argued persuasively that the moment in the last movement of *La Mer* where the violins play a soft, impossibly high harmonic represents the Golden Section of the piece.

By a nice paradox, Debussy's marvellous musical reflection on the constant flux of the sea is achieved by the most painstaking and careful calculation. Not for nothing did the published score carry the intricately designed woodcut *The Hollow Wave* by the Japanese artist Hokusai.

Notes by Phillip Sametz © 2000 (Rachmaninov) Gordon Kerry © 2009 (Britten), © 2026 (Demessieux), © 2005/08 (Debussy)

La Mer is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, 2 harps and strings.

It was premiered in Paris on 15 October 1905, by the Orchestre Lamoureux conducted by Camille Chevillard.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra first performed it in April 1948, conducted by Eugene Goossens.

Other notable performances include those conducted by Alceo Galliera (1951), Nicolai Malko (1957), Moshe Atzmon (1969), Willem van Otterloo (1973), Charles Mackerras (1978), Louis Frémaux (1979), Okko Kamu (1985), Stuart Challender (1989), Mark Elder (1994), David Zinman (1998), Gianluigi Gelmetti (2005), Thomas Dausgaard (2011), Vladimir Ashkenazy (2013), David Robertson (2015) and Asher Fisch (2022).

Our most recent performances were in 2025, under Benjamin Northey.

Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson

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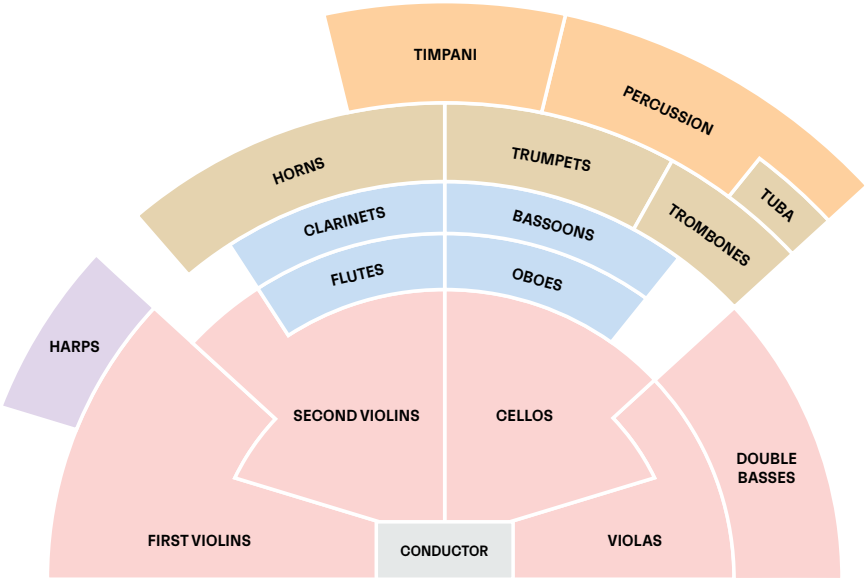

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