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NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF
UKRAINE
UK Tour 2023



Strauss Don Juan (17')
Bruch Violin Concerto no. 1 (24')
interval
Sibelius Finlandia (8')
Lyatoshynsky Symphony No. 2 (30')

Conductor: Volodymyr Sirenko
Soloist: Aleksey Semenenko, violin

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USHER HALL | SUNDAY 29 OCTOBER | 7.30pm



Richard Strauss (1864-1949) Don Juan, *Tone Poem* (1888)

Richard Strauss placed the following three extracts from the unfinished play by the Austrian poet and playwright Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1848) at the head of his orchestral score. The words quoted are all spoken by Don Juan and, rather than describe any dramatic action, they focus on Don Juan's hedonistic philosophy of life, trying to explain his state of mind that led to his libertine excesses. The first two quotes come from the earlier part of the play and capture Don Juan in the full throes of his excesses. In the third quotation, Don Juan has exhausted his life of sensual pleasures and he has run out of energy; he is left feeling cold and empty, as he faces his inevitable death:

1.

*Fain would I run the magic circle, immeasurably wide,
of beautiful women's manifold charms,
in full tempest of enjoyment,
to die of a kiss at the mouth of the last one.
O my friend, would that I could fly through every place
where beauty blossoms, fall on my knees before each one.
Yes! Were it but for a moment, conquer....*

2.

*I shun satiety and the exhaustion of pleasure;
I keep myself fresh in the service of beauty;
and in offending the individual
I rave for my devotion to her kind.
The breath of a woman that is
as the odour of spring today,
may perhaps tomorrow oppress me
like the air of a dungeon.
When in my changes, I travel with my love
in the wide circle of beautiful women,
my love is a different thing for each one;
I build no temple out of ruins.
Indeed, passion is always and only the new passion;
it cannot be carried from this one to that;
it must die here and spring anew there;
and, when it knows itself,
then it knows nothing of repentance.
As each beauty stands alone in the world,
so stands the love which it prefers.
Forth and away, then, to triumphs ever new,
so long as youth's fiery pulses race!*

3.

*It was a beautiful storm that urged me on;
it has spent its rage, and silence now remains.
A trance is upon every wish, every hope.
Perhaps a thunderbolt from the heights
which I contemned, struck fatally at my power of love,
and suddenly my world became a desert and darkened.
And perhaps not; the fuel is all consumed
and the heart is cold and dark.*

(English translations of Lenau's text, as quoted in footnotes from Volume One of Norman Del Mar's *Richard Strauss, a critical commentary on his life and works*, Barrie and Rockliff, 1962)

'I would ask those of you who are married to play as if you were engaged and then all will be well.'

This was Richard Strauss's later advice to an orchestra whilst rehearsing his tone poem, *Don Juan*. With this work he burst onto the musical scene in Germany and was recognised as the new hope for German music. His parents had been perhaps understandably concerned about his numerous amorous relationships during the mid-1880s. In early 1888 Strauss had been to Bologna where he saw Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and, as can be heard in every bar of *Don Juan*, he clearly fell under its intoxicatingly sensual spell. Prior to *Don Juan* (premiered in 1889) Strauss had produced his 'symphonic fantasy' *Aus Italien* in 1886 and had then composed *Macbeth* over the next two years. With *Macbeth* he turned to the description 'tone poem', which he continued to use for his following compositions which either told a story or painted a musical picture. The legend of the Spanish libertine *Don Juan* had fascinated dramatists since the middle of the seventeenth century, as witnessed by stage versions by Molière, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and the epic nineteenth century poem by Lord Byron. However, Strauss turned to an unfinished play by the Austrian poet and playwright Nikolaus Lenau to inspire his own tone poem.

The very start is notoriously challenging for the orchestra and one conductor allegedly dealt with this by striding to the podium and, whilst the audience continued to applaud, he signalled for the orchestra to launch into the music just

as he mounted the podium. Hopefully, the orchestra had reached a unison by the time the applause had died down. Strauss did not leave any clear storyline for his tone poem, but the opening is undoubtedly a portrayal of *Don Juan* in the heights (or depths!) of his excess. The 'love' (or perhaps that should be 'lust') music foreshadows the opening of *Der Rosenkavalier*, composed nearly a quarter of a century later. Some of the more tender woodwind music, including melting solos for oboe, remind us that the twenty-year-old Strauss composed a Suite for thirteen wind instruments: he was a natural orchestrator from an early age.

Who can fail to be stirred by the sight and sound of the four horns triumphantly blasting out Don Juan's characteristic motif, *molto espressivo e marcato*? Strauss was unerring in scoring and pacing the climactic moments in the score. Whilst the denouement is perhaps shockingly brief and bleak, it undoubtedly reflects Lenau's words: *And suddenly my world became a desert and darkened. And perhaps not; the fuel is all consumed and the heart is cold and dark.*

Timothy Dowling, July 2023

Max Bruch (1838-1920) Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Opus 26 (1866, revised 1867) [c.25 minutes]

1. *Vorspiel (Allegro moderato)* –
2. *Adagio* –
3. *Finale (Allegro energico)*

For five years this work topped Classic FM's *Hall of Fame* and it remains Bruch's most popular work, indeed the only work by which he is widely known, other than his shorter *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra (1881). Despite its appearance of having been composed in the white-heat of inspiration, Bruch's Concerto had a difficult gestation and he revised it thoroughly after its first performance in 1866 with advice from the greatest violinist of the nineteenth century, Josef Joachim. After some six re-writes (according to Bruch himself), the version we know today was premiered in early 1868.

Like Mendelssohn's Concerto the soloist opens Bruch's Concerto, but this first movement is unusually titled 'Vorspiel' (*Prelude*) and it has a sense of constant anticipation, as if it is an introduction rather than the Concerto's main centre of gravity. Thus Bruch's structure does not follow the classic example of Beethoven's Violin Concerto, as Brahms was to do just a decade later. After the rather restless opening theme we are transported to a radiant episode in the relative major key (B flat). An orchestral *tutti* passage then leads to a mini-cadenza section and the soloist exchanges questions and answers (or perhaps more questions) with the woodwind. This leads directly to the central Adagio movement of the Concerto in a warm E flat major, surely the slowly beating heart of this work. The Adagio is based on three inspired themes that combine together very effectively at its climax before drawing to a peaceful close.

However, not a full close, because the *Finale* clearly needs to follow directly, as its 'opening' in E flat major carries on the tonality of the *Adagio* before moving back to the Concerto's home key of G, with a lively Hungarian dance-type tune in the major key. This alternates with a glorious second theme which could have Elgar's *nobilmente* inscribed as its marking in the score. But there is no Elgarian lingering here and Bruch rushes headlong towards an exultant ending.

There have been advocates for his later concertos, but in truth Bruch never recaptured the spontaneous rapture of this romantic warhorse. Sadly, he sold the rights for the work cheaply early on and its unending popularity (together with his failure to live up to the inspiration of the G minor Concerto) was a source of bitter regret in the later years of his long life. Like his close contemporary Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), Bruch remained oblivious to the developments in music across Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century and he died virtually in poverty and oblivion in 1920.

Bruch's G minor Concerto owes much to Mendelssohn's E minor Concerto, just as Grieg's A minor Piano Concerto is similarly indebted to Schumann's in the same key. The Concertos by Bruch and Grieg are often paired together with their respective role models. Perhaps the original models do strike deeper chords, but there is no denying the sheer romantic attraction of the two works inspired by the timeless masterpieces of Mendelssohn and Schumann.

Timothy Dowling, July 2017

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) Finlandia, Opus 26 (composed in 1899, revised in 1900) [c. 9 minutes]

Sibelius was closely involved with Finland's struggle towards independence, providing stirring music to accompany various pageants that celebrated Finnish history and national identity. The first substantial contribution was his incidental music for a series of historical tableaux for the Karelian homeland in 1893. The Russian Czarist authorities became increasingly concerned by the political situation in the Duchy of Finland and the authoritarian response was increased censorship.

Sibelius was asked to compose music for what were termed 'Press Celebrations', part of a mass movement to counter the censure of free speech in Finland. Sibelius provided a Prelude and music for six tableaux, each portraying either historical or mythical events connected with Finland. Sibelius was able to recycle some of the earlier tableaux for his *Historical Scenes*, Opus 25.

The first tableau introduces the mythical figure of Väinämöinen, who was later to feature in his 1906 symphonic poem *Pohjola's Daughter*; the next five tableaux mark significant episodes in Finnish history, culminating in *Finland Awakes*, its defiantly provocative title proclaiming the fierce determination of the Finnish people.

The 1899 programme note informed the audience: "From amongst the host of spirit goddesses that populate the pages of history, one rises up to tell the story of Alexander II," referring to the Russian Czar Alexander II who had granted Finland the status of an autonomous Duchy in 1809. Important literary and artistic figures (including Elias Lönnrot, who compiled the *Kalevala* from oral tradition) then appeared across the scenario, concluding with the appearance of a steam locomotive.

Sibelius made some minor revisions to this final tableau to allow *Finlandia* to be published as a separate tone poem, the major changes being in the final pages, possibly to remove any suggestion of a steam train as the tone poem achieves its triumphant ending.

Sibelius's unique sound-world is evident from the very start with its imposing brass chorale.

The central section, introduced by woodwind over tremolo strings, immediately suggested a call for word-setting, just like Elgar's contemporaneous *Pomp and Circumstance* No. 1 (1901) led to *Land of Hope and Glory*. Elgar was reluctant about this jingoistic word-setting and likewise Sibelius had mixed feelings about arranging *Finlandia* for male chorus, setting words by Veiko Antero Koskenniemi in 1931, and thus creating an alternative Finnish National Anthem. However, its hymn-like quality remains irresistible and many will hear it as the Christian Hymn, Be Still, My Soul. And when one hears a Welsh male chorus sing Lewis Valentine's *Gweddi Dros Gymru* (A Prayer for Wales), one can be forgiven for thinking that this is 'the original version'. Despite (or perhaps because of) its many transformations, *Finlandia* remains one of Sibelius's most characteristic and popular works.

Timothy Dowling, August 2018

Boris Lyatoshynsky (1895-1968)

Symphony No. 2, Opus 26 (1935-36, revised 1940)

1. *Lento tenebroso e con maesta – Allegro deciso ed impetuoso*

2. *Lento e tranquillo (Alla ballata)*

3. *Andante – Allegro precipitato*

Boris Lyatoshynsky was born in Zhitomir in Ukraine and after completing his school studies he went to study Law at Kyiv University in 1913. However, it was clear that music remained his first love and his parents arranged for him to have composition classes with Reinhold Glière (1875-1956) and then enter the Music Conservatory in Kyiv. Lyatoshynsky maintained a close friendship with his former teacher until his death in 1956 at the age of 81: his teacher remained an important bedrock of support. Glière conducted the premiere of Lyatoshynsky's Symphony No. 1 in 1923, the work also serving as the student's graduation composition after completing his musical studies. The most striking influence on Lyatoshynsky that can be heard in his graduation work is that of Alexander Scriabin, the work echoing the sound-world of *The Poem of Ecstasy* and Scriabin's Third Symphony, *The Divine Poem*. The influence of earlier composers can also be heard, including Borodin and Tchaikovsky.

Lyatoshynsky then joined the staff at the Kyiv Conservatory as a teacher, being promoted to a professor's post in 1935. He also taught composition at the Moscow Conservatory. He went on to be a leading member of the new generation of twentieth century Ukrainian composers, and he was awarded several accolades, including the honorary title of People's Artist of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and two Stalin Prizes.

However, he struggled to get some of his compositions heard, including Symphony No. 2, which he initially composed in 1935-36, but he was advised against performing it at the time following a critical review. There are parallels here with his younger contemporary, Dmitri Shostakovich, who was working on his own Fourth Symphony at the same time. Both composers had to wait until the early 1960s to hear their respective symphonies performed in the USSR for the first time. Shostakovich had withdrawn his work after the infamous Pravda headline review of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1936, 'Chaos instead of music.' Lyatoshynsky returned to his Symphony No. 2 in 1940, revising it in the hope of hearing it performed, but again it faced the criticism that it did not comply with the doctrine of 'Socialist Realism'.

This doctrine was first proclaimed by Maxim Gorky at the Soviet Writers Congress of 1934, although it was not precisely defined at that time. In practice, it meant artists

using realist styles to create highly optimistic depictions of Soviet life. In music, this meant avoiding complexity and employing melodies that ordinary people could appreciate, being closer to folk music. Pessimistic or critical elements were to be avoided, so that there would be a positive view of life in the Soviet Union.

As well as 'Socialist Realism', there was heavy criticism of music that was considered to be 'formalistic', where composers were too keen to promote music that was complex and abstract, rather than expressing positive emotions in line with Socialist Realism. Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Khachaturian were all criticized for 'formalism' at the infamous 1948 Party Congress by Andrei Zhdanov, Second Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union until his death in August 1948.

Lyatoshynsky joined the club of condemned composers, and his Second Symphony was particularly mentioned in this regard with this statement by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1948):

"The anti-national formalist trend in Ukrainian musical art was manifested primarily in the works of the composer Boris Lyatoshynsky. This is a disharmonious work, cluttered with unjustified thunderous sounds of the orchestra, which depress the listener, and in terms of melody – the symphony is poor and colourless."

Lyatoshynsky wrote to his former teacher and lifelong friend, Glière, "As a composer, I am dead, and I do not know when I will be resurrected." His Third Symphony, composed three years later in 1951 was given a day-time premiere performance at the Congress of Ukrainian Composers in Kyiv in 1951 and the composer was pleased to note that the audience gave it a standing ovation.

During the 1960s, Lyatoshynsky, a member of the Composers' Union of the USSR, was permitted to take cultural trips abroad, where he met fellow composers. He was a member of international competition juries for the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958 and 1962 and the Belgian String Quartet Competition in Liège. He was the artistic director of the Ukraine State Symphony Orchestra and worked as a music consultant on the Ukrainian State Radio Committee. He travelled to Poland on several occasions for the Warsaw Autumn festivals of contemporary music. In 1957, as a representative of the Union of Composers of the USSR, he went to Bulgaria for the centenary commemorations of the death of Mikhail Glinka in 1857.

Following his revision of his Third Symphony in 1954 he composed his symphonic poem *Grazhyna* in 1955 to mark the centenary of the death of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. During his later years, Lyatoshynsky composed two further symphonies (with more prominent use of Ukrainian folk melodies) and the Solemn Overture (1967) for orchestra. He died on 15 th April 1968 and was buried in Kyiv.

Returning to his Second Symphony, this half hour work reflects the tumultuous years of its composition, with forced collectivization and Stalin's purges having a major impact on life during the 1930s. It is not surprising that this is the darkest of his five symphonies and that it would fall foul of the Soviet authorities.

Lyatoshynsky uses his favoured structure of a substantial first movement (half the length of the complete work), which opens with a slow introduction focusing on the depths of the orchestral palette (*Lento tenebroso e con maesta*). This leads to the more rugged *Allegro deciso ed impetuoso*, and again much of the focus is on the lower orchestral instruments. Following the overall structure of sonata-form, the lower strings, accompanied by harp, offer some second subject material, providing temporarily more consoling music. However, their efforts are too often suppressed by the brutality of the brass instruments and agonizing woodwind laments. The competing musical ideas and orchestral forces are memorably brought together in the final moments of the movement, leading to a somewhat abrupt conclusion. The central *Lento e tranquillo (alla ballata)* opens with a beautiful bardic solo for cor anglais, with harp accompaniment. However, the 'tranquility' is rather precarious and short-lived, as the atmosphere is troubled by woodwind salvos, although the cor anglais does manage to return, rounding the movement off in tentative calm. The finale follows without interruption. One might wonder whether this movement was where most of the revisions occurred in 1940, as there is almost a desperate attempt at a positive conclusion. The strings, in particular, are allowed a longer, surging tune, raising the spirits as we move towards the final moments. The coda starts with a sequence for marching timpani which is uncannily reminiscent of a similar passage in Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony. Despite the positive surge, the final chords in the major key still have an air of desperation about them, closing in hope rather than in confidence. Listeners are encouraged to seek out the Third Symphony (1954), where Lyatoshynsky demonstrates that he can produce a truly triumphant conclusion. The Third Symphony is the most frequently performed of his five symphonies.

Nevertheless, the Second Symphony accurately reflects what Lyatoshynsky felt in the 1930s. Like Shostakovich in his Tenth Symphony (1953), triumphant release could only come after the death of Josef Stalin.

Timothy Dowling, July 2023

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VOLODYMYR SIRENKO

Conductor

Volodymyr Sirenko was born in 1960 in the Poltava region of Ukraine.

His conducting debut took place at the Kyiv Philharmonic Hall in 1983 with works by Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Boulez. In 1989, Sirenko graduated from the Kyiv Conservatoire where he studied conducting under Prof. Allin Vlasenko. In 1990, he was a finalist at the International Conducting Competition in Prague. A year later, he was appointed as Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Ukrainian Radio Symphony Orchestra, a position which he held until 1999. During this period, he made over 200 recordings with the orchestra, including Mozart Symphonies Nos. 38 and 41, Beethoven Symphony No. 9, Brahms A German Requiem, Dvorak Symphonies Nos. 7 and 9, R. Strauss *Macbeth*, *Janacek Taras Bulba*.

Since 1999 he has been the Artistic Director and Chief Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine. Highlights include cycles of Gustav Mahler's Complete Symphonies, Bach's four Passions and Mass in B Minor, Lyatoshynsky's Complete Symphonies, Honegger's *Jeanne d'Arcau bûcher*, Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust*, and Debussy's *Le Martyre de St. Sebastien*.

He has recorded over 50 recordings with the orchestra and the CD of Silvestrov's *Requiem for Larissa* was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2005. He has premiered many works by Ukrainian composers including Silvestrov's Symphonies Nos. 7, 8, 9, Stankovych's Symphony No. 6, oratorios *A Tale of Igor's Campaign* and *Taras Passion*.

Sirenko has toured Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, China, Korea,

Lebanon, the Netherlands, Oman, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

He has worked with many international orchestras including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Sinfonia Warsovia, NOSPR (Katowice), the Bratislava Radio Symphony, the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, Israel Sinfonietta, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic. Sirenko has appeared in numerous concert halls around the world, including Concertgebouw (Amsterdam), Berliner Philharmoniker, Brucknerhaus (Linz), Barbican Hall and Cadogan Hall (London), Theatre des Champs-Élysées and Opera Comique (Paris), Teatro La Fenice (Venice), Seoul Art Center, Palau de la Musica in Valencia and Centro Manuel de Falla in Granada, Filharmonia Narodowa (Warsaw), the Roy Thomson Hall (Toronto), the Tokyo City Opera and the Osaka Symphony Hall. He is also Professor of Opera and Symphonic Conducting at the National Music Academy of Ukraine.



ALEKSEY SEMENENKO

Violinist

...a powerful technique, rich tone and passionate approach. There was a fluidity and warmth to his playing throughout the program.

The New York Times

The refined, impassioned and commanding playing of Ukrainian violinist Aleksey Semenenko identify him as inheritor of the great Odessa violin tradition and earned him places on both the BBC New Generation Artists scheme and Young Concert Artists in New York, bringing him to the attention of audiences across Europe and the US.

He has given recitals at Snape Maltings, Wigmore Hall, the Kennedy Center and Alice Tully Hall, and performed concertos with orchestras including BBC National Orchestra of Wales, BBC Philharmonic, Deutsches Symphonie - Orchester Berlin, Seattle Symphony, Orchestra of St Luke's, National Orchestra of Belgium, Ulster Orchestra, Kyiv Symphony and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. His festival performances include invitations at the Hay, Cheltenham and Edinburgh festivals. This season, Semenenko tours with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine under the baton of Volodymyr Sirenko.

The most recent addition to Semenenko's discography is his new album 'Crossroads' on BIS, with pianist Artem Belogurov, featuring sonatas by Previn, Schemmer and Gay. The launch of the album was marked by a Wigmore Hall recital in which the duo performed a selection of American works.

Semenenko began his violin studies at the age of six with Zoya Mertsalova at the Stolyarsky School, making his solo debut with orchestra only a year later with the Odessa Philharmonic. He completed his studies with Zakhar Bron and Harald Schoneweg at Cologne's Hochschule für Musik and was a prize winner in the 2015 Queen Elizabeth Violin Competition. Alongside his performing career, Semenenko is Violin Professor at the Folkwang Universität der Künste. He is kindly supported by the Deutsche Stiftung Musikleben.



NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF UKRAINE



About the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine
Formed by the Council of Ministers of Ukraine in November of 1918, the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine is considered to be one of the finest symphony orchestras in Eastern Europe. Its first conductor was Oleksander Horilyj. Natan Rachlin was the Artistic Director of the Orchestra from 1937 until 1962. Stefan Turchak, Volodymyr Kozhuchar, Fedir Hlushchenko, Igor Blazhkov and Theodore Kuchar consequently conducted the Orchestra as its Principal Conductors. Other conductors who worked with the NSOU include Kostiantyn Simeonov, Leopold Stokowski, Igor Markevitch, Kurt Sanderling, Kiril Kondrashin, Kurt Masur, Hermann Abendroth, Willy Ferrero and others. Soloists who performed with the NSOU include Artur Schnabel, Yehudi Menuhin, Isaac Stern, David Oistrakh, Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich, Emil Gilels, Leonid Kogan, Gidon Kremer, Oleh Krysa, Monserrat Caballe, Jose Carreras, Placido Domingo, Andrea Bocelli and Juan Diego Flores. The NSOU was entrusted with the premier performances of the works of the following composers: Boris Lyatoshynsky, Valentyn Sylvestrov, Myroslav Skoryk, and Evgen Stankovych.

The Orchestra has gained international recognition over a remarkably short period of time. Since 1993, the NSOU has released more than 100 sound recordings which include both Ukrainian and international repertoires. Most of these recordings have received the highest international acclaim. In 1994, the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) rated NSOU's recording of Boris Lyatoshynsky's Symphonies No. 2 and No. 3 as "The Best Recording of the Year". The CD of Sylvestrov's *Requiem for Larissa* was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2005. The CD of Bloch and Lees' Violin Concertos was nominated for a Grammy Award four years later. The NSOU has performed in successful concert tours throughout Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, China, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, England, Hong Kong, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, Oman, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates and the United States of America. Volodymyr Sirenko is the Artistic Director & Chief Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine. Oleksandr Hornostai is Managing Director & Producer of the Orchestra.

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