HENLEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Alexander Walker *Conductor*

David Burton *Leader*



Sunday 16th March 2025 The Hexagon, Reading

www.henleysymphonyorchestra.co.uk

Registered Charity No. 271849

FANTASY OVERTURE 'ROMEO AND JULIET'
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky 1840-1893

This piece is so well known that it's hard to imagine hearing it for the first time, but let's try… It roughly follows Shakespeare's plot. The beginning is mysterious and brooding, with sombre woodwind chords representing monks chanting in rich but simple harmony - here is Friar Laurence in this tragic love story. Soon, low strings enter with a slow and threatening melody of sorts, which rises through the other string sections; gradually this grinds, accelerates, and builds to a clash.

If you didn't already know you'd have to ask why this is happening. It's all because two young people from opposing families have fallen in love, against the odds and against unwritten rules. Two young men and their gangs meet, with fighting in mind, murder waiting to happen – what could be more contemporary for us across the world today, when enmity, testosterone, and power demand revenge at any price. The music rushes and swerves, with rhythmic upsets that are in cinemascope… there is a chaos, with knives and fists flying.

Friar Laurence interjects to make peace and things calm down for a while. The tension unwinds and here we are introduced gently to one of the world's most well-known melodies – the cor anglais sings its tenor-oboe theme along with the violas, a passionate tune that will cause many people to sigh with love and relief. There is a passage which weaves through many harmonic twists, slow but genuinely hard to play, until the lovers are left in peace momentarily. Alas the vendetta isn't over, the fighting resumes briefly, until interrupted by a rushing upward scale the full orchestra plays the soaring love theme again – this iconic yet incredibly jagged melody on the strings has been used a hundred times in film and TV scores.

Fate says the passion can't last, the family feud is too strong. Our lover-hero, who has killed his rival, goes into hiding and although the Friar tries to help, the plan goes wrong, because his fake poison fools everyone. So when one lover seems to die, the other takes their own life. Tragedy. Listen as throbbing timpani and double-basses act out the failing heart-beat, while upper strings cry with clashing harmonies that hardly resolve. We hear the monks' choir chords come back, followed by the harp and woodwind pleading for a happy ending, but no. After 6 or 7 deadly hammer blows, only these major chords give hope.

Apparently, this overture is all that remains of a proposed opera that Tchaikovsky had in mind and, from only a fragment, the love duet was completed and orchestrated by Sergey Taneyev. It was Mily Balakirev, the leading composer of the "Mighty Handful" group (along with Borodin, Mussorgsky, Cesar Cui, and Rimsky-Korsakov) who had suggested that Tchaikovsky should write an opera, but he was feeling stuck with writer's block at the time. Subsequently over the years, with Balakirev's encouragement, he made many attempts and drafts of this piece - hard to believe now.

There is more Russian music to come in the second half, but for extra Tchaikovsky sometime, if you enjoyed this overture and don't know the 4th symphony, the beginning of that is similar in mood and style.



LEON McCAWLEY - Piano

Praised for his unfailingly communicative playing, British pianist Leon McCawley has been delighting audiences worldwide since winning First Prize in the International Beethoven Piano Competition in Vienna in 1993, and Second Prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition. His many concert performances and extensive discography have established him as a pianist of great integrity and variety, bringing freshness and vitality to Classical, Romantic and 20th century repertoire. McCawley's 2024 release 'Natural Connection' for SOMM Recordings is no exception: "This scintillatingly varied recital combines sensuous virtuosity, compelling charm and musical probity. Highly recommended." (Gramophone, February 2024).

An acclaimed exponent of Mozart, he has performed and recorded the complete cycle of Mozart piano sonatas. Notable recitals in past seasons include: Wigmore Hall (where is a regular performer and was Artist-in-Residence in 2021/22 season), International Piano Series at London's Southbank Centre, Hong Kong Arts Festival,New York's Lincoln Center, Singapore International Piano Festival and Piano Visions in Stockholm. He can be frequently heard on BBC Radio 3 both in performance and interview with recent broadcasts including In Tune, Wigmore Hall BBC Lunchtime Series and Performance on 3. As a concerto soloist, Leon has performed with many leading British orchestras and made several appearances at the BBC Proms. Further afield, McCawley has made concerto appearances extensively in the USA, Ireland, Malaysia, Netherlands, South Korea and Spain with many of the world's best known conductors.

Leon studied at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester with Heather Slade-Lipkin before continuing his studies at the Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia with Eleanor Sokoloff. He also received invaluable guidance from Nina Milkina in London.

As a collaborative musician, he has performed at many prestigious concert venues including BBC Proms Chamber Series, BBC Radio 3 Lunchtime Series at Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh, Brighton, Cheltenham, Edinburgh, Galway, Lofoten (Norway) and Westport international festivals. Recent chamber music partners have included Castalian and Simply Quartets, Michael Collins, Nicholas Daniel, José Franch-Ballester and recitals with baritone Roderick Williams. He has appeared as juror and adjudicator of many competitions including The International Edvard Grieg Piano Competition and BBC Young Musician.

McCawley's discography includes a double disc of Schumann Piano Music, The Complete Piano Works of Hans Gál, The Complete Mozart Piano Sonatas, Beethoven's Choral Fantasy, Vaughan Williams Double Piano Concerto with John Lenehan, Stanford's Piano Concerto in B flat, and ten solo albums for SOMM Recordings. His most recent disc for SOMM, released in January 2024, is a compilation album of nature-inspired piano works entitled 'Natural Connection'.

Leon McCawley has been professor of piano at London's Royal College of Music since 2008. He is married to the painter Anna Hyunsook Paik.

PIANO CONCERTO in A minor, Opus 16
Edvard Grieg (1843 – 1907)

This was the first piano concerto ever to be made into a record (not vinyl then, of course) which could only squeeze in six minutes of music, played by pianist Wilhelm Backhaus in 1909. Since then, technology has moved on, and it's one of the most recorded of all concertos, often compared in style with Schumann's. It was written in 1868, and actually Grieg had heard Schumann's concerto 10 years earlier, played by Clara Schumann in Leipzig - he was greatly influenced by Schumann's style generally, having been taught the piano by his friend Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel.
Grieg was in his mid-twenties when he wrote the piece, while enjoying the healthy peace of the Danish countryside with his wife and new-born daughter. It is one of his most important early works, and is heavily influenced by Norwegian folk music – the falling semitones of the opening (also appearing in his string quartet no.1) and other elements, are typical of certain folk tunes and the Hardangar fiddle sound.
Unfortunately, it is Grieg's only concerto.
Unlike some premieres, this work was successful from the beginning, with Edmund Neupert as soloist on 3rd April 1869, in Copenhagen, Denmark – it may be that Grieg himself was intended to play in this debut, but he was unavailable at the time. The Norwegian premiere in Christiania (now Oslo) followed on August 7th 1869.
In the first movement, as with the Schumann and Tchaikovsky's 1st concertos, there's a frightening opening and cascade on the piano, giving the impression of a stormy movement to come, but actually it's mainly lyrical if melancholy. Grieg revised the work at least seven times throughout his life (he also arranged it for 2 pianos), and he eventually ignored Liszt's suggestion to give the second theme to the trumpet, and so that it appears in the cellos, a longing melody. As the movement progresses these 2 main themes return in altered forms until, after a stunning cadenza, the movement ends as it began.
The second movement starts with muted strings playing a dreamy folk-like theme, then after a couple of minutes of this introduction the soloist brings in a different idea. We keep the gentle mood until high trills on the piano sneak us into the fast third movement. This has strident rhythms and powerful changes of dynamics/volume, but also heart-warming romantic turns. Finally though, with trumpets leading the way, we have a broad and noble ending with full orchestra.
Parts of the concerto have been used in the films 'Intermezzo', starring Leslie Howard and Ingrid Bergman, and 'The Seventh Veil' ; others have used it including musical comedian Bill Bailey, as well as Morecambe and Wise of course - although these are the right programme notes, they're not necessarily in the right order!

- INTERVAL -

SCHEHERAZADE - Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Solo violin – David Burton

Listen carefully to the opening notes of this piece, and imagine a famous voice - like Richard Burton, Judi Dench, or Brian Blessed – beginning a narration; "the great tale commences!" The work is in four parts, which make up a symphony in all but name. The first programme music i.e. the composer suggesting a story, is often said to be Vivaldi's Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter concertos; similarly Beethoven's 6th symphony ('Pastoral'), with the composer's lyrical headings. Throughout Scheherazade, Rimsky-Korsakov "hints to …give the impression that it is an oriental narrative of some numerous fairy-tale wonders", as he said in his autobiography.

The main recurring themes we'll hear are those of the pleading heroine – represented by the solo violin with harp – and her angry captor, the Sultan – by low strings, woodwind and brass.
The Sultan has a hatred of women because of a betrayal, and demands that every evening one of his wives in his harem must tell him a story, and then be executed in the morning! However, one of them, called Scheherazade, won't reveal the conclusion of her story until the next evening. The intrigued Sultan gradually falls in love with her and the execution is delayed again and again for a 1,001 nights, and her life is spared.

Hence, the <u>first movement</u>, headed *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship,* begins the Arabic story of The Thousand and One Nights, as told by Scheherazade, daughter of the chief vizier.
So now, after the big declamation of the Sultan's theme, there's a description of a great sea-journey, with perhaps one the best images of rolling waves and spray ever depicted in classical music. (Rimsky-Korsakov combined his composition and teaching with a career in the Russian navy as a first officer, and later an inspector of naval bands.) And listen for the flutes and piccolos.

In the <u>second movement</u>, headed *The Story of the Kalandar Prince,* we're introduced to the Kalandar people, entertainers and story tellers. There's a short solo violin and harp passage, then the prince is portrayed by the bassoon, accompanied uniquely by 4 solo double-basses – what excellent orchestration to depict the exotic orient. Now listen to the way the opening melody changes as the movement develops, by turns both nostalgic or wild… solos by oboe with harp; one of the most delicate and lyrical string passages ever; a cello solo, also flute, and horn; aggressive interruptions by trombone and trumpet; a clarinet from a minaret? a bassoon from an oasis? Finally, after a quiet moment, the full orchestra climax is a breath-taking stampede.

Third movement *The Young Prince and the Young Princess*. This is a love-story, pure and simple, with hardly a sign of the sultan's anger now.

The fourth movement is headed *Festival at Baghdad. The Sea. The Ship Breaks against a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman.* It starts with the Sultan's brash theme, quickly followed by a violin cadenza, then the frantic dancing begins. (You can decide yourself where the Bronze Horseman fits into all this!) Very cleverly, there are echoes of previous movements. A storm breaks out, and the structure of this quasi-symphony is nicely rounded off with themes from the beginning and another violin solo, ending as mysteriously as…

Rimsky-Korsakov was one of a group of composers with Balakirev, Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Cesar Cui (as I said earlier in this programme). That was at a time before it could be called a paid profession to just write music - Borodin for instance, was famous as a chemist. Although at times Rimsky-Korsakov eschewed traditional Western compositional methods, he became a professor of musical composition, harmony, and orchestration at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1871. After this, he took more account of the styles of Wagner, Berlioz, and Liszt, as well as his four friends. So he had a lasting influence through education, and writing a textbook on orchestration. Through his nationalist style the Russian musical character lived on; even outside his own country there are echoes of it in Ravel, Debussy, Dukas, and Respighi.

Imagine then what it must have been like for our conductor Alexander Walker, conducting this work while he was a student at the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory in St. Petersburg, with a portrait of the composer peering down on him from a large portrait on the wall!

To hear Russian music with a twist of Spanish lemon, one of this composer's best-known pieces, *Capriccio Espagnol*, is being performed here at the Hexagon on Wednesday.

Henley Symphony Orchestra

Violin 1
David Burton
Carsten Maass
Sylvia Rose
Benjamin Slade
Cerian Mellor
Frances Yeowart
Carolyn Nash
Rory James
Trevor Howell
Colin McBean
Marianne Harrold

Violin 2
Amanda Sadler
Anne Ricketts
Anna Del Nevo
Kate Lorimer
Judy Whittaker
Mo Gannon
Elaine Dudeney
Lindy Farrell
Jill Atkins
Win Eyles

Viola
Jo Anderson
Katie Mole
Ruth Thomas
Geraldene Compton
Elisabeth Cawood
Jonathan Storey
Joel Wilson
Claire Popple

Cello
Alison Wagland
Clive Sieling
David Sadler
Maureen Idowu
Frances Barton
Jo Woolliscroft
Tamsyn Wilson

Double Bass
Karen Aplin
Emma Sieling
Andrew Tyler
Helen Fraser
Louise Lloyd
Kate Addis

Harp
Jenny Broome

Horn
Alex Makepeace
Helen Grieves
Gary Hamilton
Alistair Butt
Jeremy Fletcher

Flute
Olivia Raven-Meadows
Sarah Boddy
Koza Unal

Piccolo
Sarah Boddy
Koza Unal

Oboe
Alice Rivers
Alice Carter

Cor Anglais
Alice Carter

Clarinet
Jeremy Gouldstone
Julia Woodroffe

Bassoon
Jacqui Chick
Sandy Godfrey

Trumpet
Richard Powell
Richard Cave

Trombone
Charlie Vereker
Nicholas Kershaw
Ian Barlow

Timpani
Harry Jackson

Percussion
Jon French
Manu Joste
Oli Pooley
Oli Butterworth

ORCHESTRAL VACANCIES

We currently have vacancies for Violin, Double Bass and Trombone.
Players should be Grade 8 or above, so if interested please contact HSO secretary:
Maureen Idowu on 07910 435240 or via www.henleysymphonyorchestra.co.uk

NEXT CONCERT

Saturday 28th June 2025 - 7.30pm
St. Mary's Church, Henley

Nielsen: Helios Overture
Elgar: Violin Concerto *Alda Dizdari – Violin*
Sibelius: Symphony No. 7

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Emma & Clive Sieling March 2025