

Total performance time: approximately 100 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Sinfonia Smith Square

Sinfonia Smith Square (formerly Southbank Sinfonia)

Karen Kuronuma piano

Simon Over conductor

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor, Op.18 (1901)

35'

- i. Moderato*
- ii. Adagio sostenuto – Più animato – Tempo I*
- iii. Allegro scherzando*

INTERVAL

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Symphony No.2 in D, Op.73 (1877)

45'

- i. Allegro non troppo*
- ii. Adagio non troppo*
- iii. Allegretto grazioso (quasi andantino)*
- iv. Allegro con spirito*

Some works have such a troubled inception that the wonder is not how well-crafted they are, but that they were created at all. **Rachmaninoff's** Piano Concerto No.2 enjoyed instant success after its premiere in Moscow with the composer himself at the piano. It's now established as one of the most popular works in the whole classical music repertoire, and music that has leached beyond the concert hall out into wider cultural consciousness – most famously in the UK due to Noël Coward's film *Brief Encounter*, but also *The Seven Year Itch* a decade later (with Marilyn Monroe), in Eric Carmen's 1970s kitsch soft-rock ballad *All By Myself* (which lifts the second movement's melody) and the song *Full Moon and Empty Arms* (which borrows a tune from the finale) sung by Frank Sinatra only two years after Rachmaninoff's death.

Yet Rachmaninoff composed nothing in the three years before commencing work on the concerto, suffering a period of deep depression triggered by the disastrous premiere of his first symphony. In his memoirs the composer wrote 'A paralyzing apathy possessed me. I did nothing at all and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent on a couch'. With the help of sessions of hypnotherapy from the physician Nikolai Dahl (whose patients also included composers Skryabin and Stravinsky), he returned to writing music. This piece is the result. It is dedicated to Dr Dahl.

Its enduring popularity has been earned despite – or perhaps because of – some unorthodox features. Take the opening solemn chords for piano alone, like the tolling of cathedral bells. It was unusual – but not unheard of – for the solo instrument to open a concerto. But these striking chords, building from an expectant pianissimo to fortissimo within eight bars, are no statement of a great melody but instead a harmonic progression, an upbeat to the first theme, marked 'con passione' ('with passion') played by the orchestra with thunderous accompanying figures from the soloist. It is remarkable how much time the soloist devotes to the art of accompaniment in this first movement. It is nearly three minutes into the piece before we hear anything approaching an extended melody given to the piano (the yearning, chromatic second theme). There is no solo cadenza – the showstopper preface to a movement's conclusion that knits together musical themes whilst providing the soloist a vehicle for their virtuosity. Instead, the movement ends with devilishly insistent semi-quaver figurations in the piano accompanying an increasingly urgent orchestral quick march.

This close union of soloist and orchestra is further strengthened in the slow movement's famous melody; the piano modestly sets the scene first for flute then clarinet to take centre stage, then joins the clarinet's long-breathed phrases together with shy interpolations of just a few quavers here, a chromatic transition there. And what a melody! It meanders round – and never strays far from – a single pitch (G sharp), underpinned by gentle piano arabesques. Alternating between two and three slow beats in a bar, so it is never foursquare or predictable, we listeners never quite know where we are in its construction, losing ourselves in one of the composer's loveliest creations.

The finale opens with jittery orchestral fragments before – at last – the piano opens the throttle for a bravura solo display that introduces some stormy interplay with the orchestra. The contrasting second theme, initially given to violas and oboe, is, if anything, even more memorable than the slow movement's melody. Returned to several times as lyrical contrast to the jagged pulsing opening material, it is this sweeping tune that eventually wins out, full orchestral forces and piano joining in a showstopping concluding rendition.

Brahms wrestled long with his First Symphony, whose premiere preceded tonight's work by less than a year. Revered as the purest form of abstract music, a symphony was a sure test of a young composer's mettle. From first sketches to first performance, the composer himself acknowledged it took him 21 years to write. The music consequently seems hewn out of granite – stern, noble, portentous. (The conductor Hans von Bülow swiftly nicknamed it 'Beethoven's Tenth' mainly due to the purported similarity in the last movement's melody to the 'Ode to Joy' theme; 'any ass can see that', bristled Brahms.)

The Second Symphony couldn't be more different. It was written in a matter of weeks in an Austrian lakeside resort, amidst the grandeur of high peaks and beauty of alpine meadows and pastures. The idyllic nature of the composer's countryside retreat seems to have found its way into the music. From the opening bars, the mood is relaxed and sunny, albeit with musical processes that are taut and ingenious. Friend and confidante, the pianist-composer Clara Schumann praised its 'inspiration and wonderful working out' after hearing Brahms play the first movement to her on the piano. The simple three-note figure heard in the lower strings in the very first bar – drooping by a semitone and returning home – and the radiant answering horn call form the basis of almost all that follows, not only in this movement but the rest of the work. These tiny cells are inverted, stretched, developed, joined together and repeated – a typically Brahmsian synthesis of a seemingly endless stream of inspiration with balance, structure and control.

The second movement unfurls an exquisite theme, ripe for extension and development ('The melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one', deadpanned Brahms to his publisher). It's not without a wistful bittersweet undercurrent, though. The following scherzo dispels any clouds with something akin to a couple of (closely related) country dances. A hesitant, shy waltz is briefly transformed into lively passages propelled by obsessive repetitions of a 'short-long' rhythm.

Brahms toys with us at the last movement's mysterious opening. Marked 'sotto voce' ('in an undertone') the strings play in unison a little circling melody (the contours of which hark back to the first movement's horn call). The suppressed energy suddenly bursts into life in a joyously boisterous finale that scampers to a blazing conclusion, the movement's opening motif on unison strings transformed into heraldic brass fanfares.