

Friday 13 March / 7.30pm
Sinfonia of London
Elgar's Enigma Variations

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Don Juan - tone poem after Nikolaus Lenau, Op.20

What kind of 24-year old composer has the nerve to portray the great seducer Don Juan in music? A rocketing flurry, a cocksure fanfare: you can tell right away that this is going to be a swashbuckler. *Don Juan* was premiered on 11th November 1889 by the Weimar court orchestra, and someone asked Strauss whether he was a Wagnerian or a Brahmsian. "Neither" he replied "I'm a selfian".

Strauss took his version of *Don Juan* from a drama by the poet Nikolaus Lenau. A solo violin introduces Juan's first conquest but the swooning love music soon yields to the next call to action; and the adventures continue until he's stopped in his tracks by his one true love - a poignant melody for solo oboe. Juan hesitates, then rises to the challenge with a ringing, virile call for all four horns. This is young man's music, after all (Strauss told his orchestra, "those of you who are married, play it as if you've just got engaged"). But even as a young man, the artist in Strauss saw further. Overwhelmed by melancholy, Lenau's hero discards his sword at the height of a duel. Strauss's final bars – a sudden, chilling, fade to black – are the work of a realist, not an escapist.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Concerto No.3 in C, Op.26

Andante; Allegro - Tema con variazione - Allegro ma non troppo

Sergei Prokofiev composed his Third Piano Concerto in France in the summer of 1921, but he'd planned "a large virtuoso concerto" as far back as 1911. "In 1913, I had composed a theme for variations...in 1916-17 I tried several times to return to the Third Concerto". Yet it all fits beautifully together. That's not so startling; composers often let ideas gestate for years until their final shape becomes clear.

So the clarinet sings a lyrical theme, the orchestra joins in and with a sudden, thrilling acceleration, the piano leaps on board - both an energising and a subversive force. The second movement begins with the theme – deadpan and balletic – that Prokofiev had noted down before the war. The piano leads it on a series of five variations, by turns delicate, angular, rhapsodic, martial and finally...resigned? Nostalgic, even? Whatever: Prokofiev the joker is back at the opening of the *Finale*, as bassoon and piano launch a *rondo* that finds room for episodes of soaring, luminous song before the piano ignites the final conflagration. The Russian poet Konstantin Balmont, hearing the concerto, responded with a sonnet:

*An exultant flame of a crimson flower,
A verbal keyboard sparkling with flames*

*That suddenly leap forth in fiery tongues...
Prokofiev! Music and youth in bloom...*

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma), Op.36

Theme: Enigma - I (C.A.E.) - II (H.D.S.-P.) - III (R.B.T.) - IV (W.M.B.) - V (R.P.A.) - VI (Ysobel) - VII (Troyte.) - VIII (W.N.) - IX (Nimrod) - X Intermezzo (Dorabella) - XI (G.R.S) - XII (B.G.N) - XIII Romanza (*) - XIV Finale (E.D.U.)*

After a day of violin teaching in October 1898, Edward Elgar lit a cigar and sat down at his piano. "I began to play, and suddenly my wife interrupted by saying 'Edward, that's a good tune...play it again'". He tried the tune differently: "Whom does that remind you of?" "That's Billy Baker going out of the room" she replied. Out of that parlour-game grew the greatest orchestral work yet written by a British composer. The *Enigma*

Variations were premiered in London on 19th June 1899.

The theme and its fourteen variations are structured like a miniature symphony, with a first movement (I-VII), a slow movement (VIII-XIII) broken by a delicate intermezzo (*Dorabella*), and a grand finale (XIV). Yet just as much, they're a set of 15 perfect, self-contained musical portraits of Elgar's friends. You don't have to be a musicologist to enjoy the pictures of distant liners (***) and George Sinclair's bulldog Dan splashing in the Wye (G.R.S.) - or to respond to *Nimrod*: inspired (so Elgar said) by a conversation about Beethoven with his German-born publisher Augustus Jaeger.

And the "Enigma"? Elgar loved cryptic puzzles. Is it the counterpoint to another famous tune, or an abstract theme like friendship? Elgar's only response was "No – nothing like it." We're left with the music, and Elgar's dedication: "To my friends pictured within":

John Wilson conductor

John Wilson is in demand at the highest level across the globe, having conducted many of the world's finest orchestras over the past 30 years. In 2018 he relaunched Sinfonia of London: described as 'the most exciting thing currently happening on the British orchestral scene' (*The Arts Desk*), Wilson and the Sinfonia's much-anticipated BBC Proms debut in 2021 was praised as 'truly outstanding' (*The Guardian*) with its 'revelatory music-making' (*The Times*). They are now highly sought-after across the UK, regularly returning to the BBC Proms, Aldeburgh Festival and London's Barbican Centre among other festivals.

Wilson's large and varied discography with Sinfonia of London has received near-universal critical acclaim, and in the autumn of 2024 they released their twenty-fourth album since 2019. Their recordings have earned several awards, including numerous *BBC Music Magazine Awards* for recordings of Korngold's Symphony in F sharp (2020), Respighi's Roman Trilogy (2021), Dutilleux's *Le Loup* (2022), *Oklahoma!* (2024) and a disc of works by Vaughan Williams, Howells, Delius and Elgar which won both the Orchestral Award and Recording of the Year. *The Observer* described the Respighi recording as "Massive, audacious and vividly played" and *The Times* declared it one of the three "truly outstanding accounts of this trilogy" of all time, after those by Toscanini (1949) and Muti (1984).

Born in Gateshead, Wilson studied composition and conducting at the Royal College of Music where, in 2011, he was made a Fellow. In March 2019, John Wilson was awarded the prestigious ISM Distinguished Musician Award for his services to music and in 2021 was appointed Henry Wood Chair of Conducting at the Royal Academy of Music.

Alexandre Kantorow

In 2019, aged 22, Alexandre Kantorow became the first French pianist to win the Gold Medal at the International Tchaikovsky Competition, along with the rarely awarded Grand Prix, granted only three times in the competition's history. In 2024, he was recognised once again when he received the esteemed Gilmore Artist Award, solidifying his place as one of the world's leading pianists. Gramophone magazine has described him as "the real deal, a fire-breathing virtuoso with a poetic charm and innate stylistic mastery". He is in demand at the highest level across the globe, performing in the world's finest halls both in recital and with the most renowned orchestras and conductors.

Highlights of Kantorow's 25/26 season include a tour of Japan with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and Mäkelä, European tours with the Filarmonica della Scala and Chailly and the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Paavo Järvi, a tour of Asia with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and van Zweden, and a tour to the US with the Philharmonia and Alsop which includes a performance at Carnegie Hall. He will also embark on a major recital tour of North America, make his debut with the San Francisco Symphony and return to the Rotterdam Philharmonic and Bavarian Radio Symphony orchestras.

Kantorow performs in recital regularly across the globe, in venues such as Carnegie Hall, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Vienna Konzerthaus, London's Wigmore Hall, Philharmonie de Paris, Tokyo Suntory Hall, and at festivals such as Edinburgh, Salzburg, La Roque d'Anthéron, Piano aux Jacobins, Verbier, Rheingau and Klavierfest Ruhr. Chamber music is one of his great pleasures and he performs regularly with artists such

as Janine Jansen, Renaud Capuçon, Gautier Capuçon and Matthias Goerne. With Liya Petrova and Aurélien Pascal he is co-artistic director of the Musikfest and "Rencontres Musicales de Nîmes" and the Pianopolis festival in Angers.

In recent seasons, Kantorow has performed with many of the world's finest orchestras such as the New York Philharmonic, LA Philharmonic, Orchestre de Paris, Berlin Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic and Budapest Festival orchestras and with conductors including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Manfred Honeck, Ivan Fischer, Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Sir Antonio Pappano.

Alexandre Kantorow records exclusively for BIS. His recordings have received the highest critical acclaim worldwide, and most recently he was awarded the Gramophone Award in the Piano category for his Brahms and Schubert recording. In 2024, he was awarded the title of Chevalier of the National Order of Merit by the French President of the Republic, having previously been made a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the Minister of Culture. In July 2024, Kantorow performed Ravel's Jeux d'eau at the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympic Games. Alexandre Kantorow studied with Pierre-Alain Volondati, Igor Lazko, Frank Braley, and Rena Shereshevskaya.

Sinfonia of London

Sinfonia of London is an award-winning orchestra, led by its Artistic Director, conductor John Wilson

Often described as a 'super-orchestra' (ArtsDesk), it brings together outstanding musicians from the UK and abroad, creating exceptional musical experiences for audiences either through live events or via an ever-growing catalogue of recordings.

Launched in 2018, Sinfonia of London revived the legendary studio orchestra of the same name, founded in 1955. It made its live debut in 2021 at the BBC Proms and has appeared there on an annual basis since. It has subsequently appeared throughout the UK, including at London's Barbican Centre and at the Aldeburgh Festival. In 2024 it was named as an Artistic Partner of the Glasshouse, Gateshead. It will make its international debut this autumn at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, frequently cited as one of the world's greatest concert halls.

The orchestra has quickly built a celebrated range of over 30 recordings on the Chandos label, covering a wide range of music from the likes of Korngold, Respighi, Ravel, Strauss, Rachmaninoff, Britten, Walton, Bliss, and Rodgers & Hammerstein, with the orchestra's most recent release being Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*.

BBC Music Magazine has said 'Wilson and his hand-picked band of musicians continue to strike gold with almost anything they turn their hands to' while *The Mail on Sunday* declared the album of English Music for Strings 'dazzling... some of the finest string playing ever put on disc by a British orchestra'.

Alongside outstanding reviews ('leaves music critics ready to die for joy', in the words of iNews), the orchestra has received five BBC Music Magazine Awards in five years, and, in 2022, a Gramophone Award

The orchestra is regularly featured on BBC Radio 3, BBC Four, iPlayer and Marquee TV.

Find out more about the orchestra and forthcoming concerts and recordings at sinfoniaoflondon.com