

A close-up photograph of two copper cymbals resting on a light-colored, textured surface. The cymbals are positioned diagonally, with one in the foreground and one slightly behind it. The lighting creates highlights on the metallic surfaces, emphasizing their curved shape and texture. A small, faint star is visible on the surface near the bottom right.

# London Philharmonic Orchestra

## **RACHMANINOFF** **THE ISLE OF THE DEAD** **SYMPHONY NO. 1**

**VLADIMIR JUROWSKI** *conductor*  
**LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA**

## SERGE RACHMANINOFF

### THE ISLE OF THE DEAD, OP. 29

'I have aged terribly. I am very tired and terribly afraid that I will soon go to the Devil.' Whether or not Rachmaninoff's feelings on New Year's Day 1909, conveyed in a letter to a friend, were anything more than seasonal blues, it was not long before he rallied: by the middle of April he had completed his most convincing and successful orchestral tone-poem, *Ostrov myortvykh* ('The Isle of the Dead'), and on 1 May he conducted the premiere in Moscow. Yet maybe something of those gloomy thoughts remains in the new work.

The idea for it came from a painting of the same name from the 1880s by the Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin, which shows a steep-sided, rocky island dotted with sepulchral openings and (like many a southern European cemetery) cypress trees. The painting was a popular one at the time, and had already inspired two tone-poems by lesser composers, as well as finding its way into Strindberg's play *The Ghost Sonata*. A small boat is shown apparently approaching or returning from the island, bearing a standing figure dressed in white and rowed by a dark-clad oarsman. Böcklin offered no explanation of these figures, but to associate them respectively with a recently departed soul and Charon, the boatman of Greek mythology who conducted the dead to Hades, seems obvious. Interestingly, Rachmaninoff's first view of the

painting would have been even more stygian than the painter intended; a friend had shown him a reproduction of it, and when the composer later saw the real thing he said not only that he preferred it in black and white, but that had he seen the original first he might not have thought of writing the piece at all.

The piece begins with a quiet and sinister *ostinato* in 5/8, suggestive of the slow rhythm of the boatman's oars, to which melodic fragments are gradually added in a build to a climax. Many of these phrases are related to the plainchant melody associated with the *Dies irae* section of the Latin Requiem that would feature again in Rachmaninoff's music. There is a contrasting middle section in a more settled 3/4 metre: the composer himself declared that it 'did not refer to the painting', and that it should be played 'with more excitement and passion ... First death, then life'. Nevertheless, it is the initial mood that, following the most explicit reference to the *Dies irae* yet (low on clarinet and *tremolo* violins) and a short consolatory melody passed down through the woodwind, returns to end the work.

## SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN D MINOR, OP. 13

*Grave – Allegro ma non troppo*  
*Allegro animato*  
*Larghetto*  
*Allegro con fuoco*

It is one of music history's most famous fiascos. 27 March 1897, and the promising young composer Serge Rachmaninoff – who at the age of 24 has already produced a piano concerto, a number of piano and chamber compositions and a well-received one-act opera – delivers his first full-scale symphony to almost unanimous derision. The images of him lurking on an iron spiral staircase in the wings of the St Petersburg Philharmonic Hall while the most important premiere of his career heads for spectacular failure, and then hurrying out of the building by a back exit without taking a bow or speaking to anyone, are vivid and distressing. One can well imagine that many other composers of his age would have found it an ordeal from which there was no recovery.

For Rachmaninoff the well-known end to the story is that he locked the score away before enduring a three-year crisis of confidence that only a course of hypnosis eventually dispelled, freeing him to achieve a resounding comeback success with the Second Piano Concerto. Yet

there are signs that his mental turmoil was mixed with a measure of clear-eyed detachment; only two months after that premiere he was writing to a friend: 'I am not at all affected by its lack of success, nor am I disturbed by the newspapers' abuse; but I am deeply upset and heavily depressed by the fact that my Symphony, though I loved it very much, and love it now, did not please me at all after its first rehearsal.' Having gone on to assign some of the blame (apparently with some justification) to the inept conducting of Alexander Glazunov, he concludes 'I will not reject this Symphony, and after leaving it alone for six months I'll look at it, perhaps correct it, and perhaps publish it, but perhaps by then my partiality for it will have passed. Then I'll tear it up.' Maybe he did, eventually. Although he talked briefly of revising the work in 1908 and mentioned its existence again in a letter of 1917, his own score has never been found. In 1945, however, two years after his death, the original orchestral parts were discovered, enabling the Symphony to receive a second performance, this time in Moscow. A full score reassembled from these parts was published in 1947, since when this bright, youthful and in places exhilarating work has slowly but surely made its way into the repertoire.

Listening to the Symphony today, it is hard to see quite how it could have stirred up such intemperate reviews as

that of the composer César Cui, whose description of it as a grotesque amalgam of Wagner, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov was only the most polite of his assessments. Rachmaninoff later admitted that the work contained 'much that is weak, childish, strained and bombastic', but maintained nevertheless that it had 'some good music'. Probably few would deny that now, and if there are places where it can seem to lose its way, and others which may have sounded brash and disjointed to the ears of the 1890s, it is certainly true that this is a work whose striking personality is easily recognisable as that of Rachmaninoff.

It is also a work of considerable motivic economy. Within a minute of the start we have heard most of the melodic fragments that will audibly dominate all four movements – the tight little curl of the first four woodwind notes, the five-note figure that follows immediately in the strings, a rippling semiquaver response first heard in the lower strings. Later, a longer undulating theme announced by a solo oboe after a winding, rhapsodic lead-in from the violins, is also significant. The central development is inaugurated by an orchestral 'crash' (based on the curling figure) and a vigorous fugue, and the main themes are then recapitulated with changed scoring, before another crash kicks off the long coda.

The curling figure returns to open the second movement, as it will do the third and fourth. In this case what follows is a *scherzo* with the characteristic light touch recognisable to anyone familiar with Rachmaninoff's later music. If there is a feeling that the gloomy middle section of the slow third movement flags a little, surely few could find anything to criticise in the long-breathed, oriental-tinged woodwind melodies of its outer sections. The finale contains one of the Symphony's most exciting and inspired passages in the fanfare-laden, martial extension of the first movement's five-note theme, and Rachmaninoff shows considerable restraint in not bringing it back. Instead he opts to alternate rhythmic drive with broadly yearning Romantic melody, surging to a crashing tam-tam climax which clears the way for a slow but massively intense coda.

*Programme notes © Lindsay Kemp*

# VLADIMIR JUROWSKI

*conductor*



One of today's most sought-after conductors, acclaimed worldwide for his incisive musicianship and adventurous artistic commitment, Vladimir Jurowski was born in Moscow in 1972. In 1990 he relocated with his family to Germany.

In 2017 Vladimir Jurowski took up the position of Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin and also celebrated ten years as Principal Conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. 2021 will see him take up the position of Music Director of the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich. In addition he holds the titles of Principal Artist of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Artistic Director of the Russian State Academic Symphony Orchestra, and Artistic Director of the George Enescu International Festival, Bucharest. He has previously held the positions of First Kapellmeister of the Komische Oper Berlin, Principal Guest Conductor of the Teatro Comunale di Bologna, Principal Guest Conductor of the Russian National Orchestra and Music Director of Glyndebourne Festival Opera.

Vladimir Jurowski appears regularly at festivals including the BBC Proms, the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, the George Enescu Festival of Bucharest, Musikfest Berlin, and

the Dresden, Schleswig Holstein and the Rostropovich Festivals. In 2017 he made an acclaimed Salzburg Festival debut.

He collaborates with many of the world's leading orchestras including the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Staatskapelle Dresden, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras, New York Philharmonic, Chicago and Boston Symphonies, the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras.

A committed operatic conductor, Jurowski has conducted at the Metropolitan Opera New York, the Opera National de Paris, Teatro alla Scala Milan, the Bolshoi Theatre, the State Academic Symphony of Russia, the Semperoper Dresden, the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, the Komische Oper Berlin and the Bayerische Staatsoper.

Jurowski's discography includes CD and DVDs with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, the Russian National Orchestra, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment.

# LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

The London Philharmonic Orchestra is one of the world's finest orchestras, balancing a long and distinguished history with its present-day position as one of the most dynamic and forward-looking ensembles in the UK. This reputation has been secured by the Orchestra's performances in the concert hall and opera house, its many award-winning recordings, trail-blazing international tours and wide-ranging educational work.

Founded by Sir Thomas Beecham in 1932, the Orchestra has since been headed by many of the world's greatest conductors, including Sir Adrian Boult, Bernard Haitink, Sir Georg Solti, Klaus Tennstedt and Kurt Masur. Vladimir Jurowski was appointed the Orchestra's Principal Guest Conductor in March 2003, and became Principal Conductor in September 2007.

The Orchestra is based at Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall in London, where it has been Resident Orchestra since 1992, giving around 30 concerts a season. Each summer it takes up its annual residency at Glyndebourne Festival Opera where it has been Resident Symphony Orchestra for over 50 years. The Orchestra performs at venues around the UK and has made numerous international tours, performing to sell-out audiences in America, Europe, Asia and Australasia.

The London Philharmonic Orchestra made its first recordings on 10 October 1932, just three days after its first public performance. It has recorded and broadcast regularly ever since, and in 2005 established its own record label. These recordings are taken mainly from live concerts given by conductors including LPO Principal Conductors from Beecham and Boult, through Haitink, Solti and Tennstedt, to Masur and Jurowski. [lpo.org.uk](http://lpo.org.uk)



## Vladimir Jurowski on the LPO Label

For more information or to purchase CDs visit [lpo.org.uk/recordings](http://lpo.org.uk/recordings)

LPO-0088



**Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 3**  
'Stands with Rachmaninoff's own performance at the top of a long list' *BBC Music Magazine*

LPO-0078



**Zemlinsky: A Florentine Tragedy**  
'A blistering performance... decadent in all senses of the word' *Presto News*

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**Shostakovich: Symphonies**  
'This is by far the most stunning Shostakovich disc I have heard this year' *BBC Music Magazine*

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**Shostakovich: Piano Works**  
'One of the most impressive performances ... I've heard in recent years' *BBC Music Magazine*

**SERGE RACHMANINOFF** (1873–1943)

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|-----------|--------------|------------------------------------------|
| <b>01</b> | <b>21:25</b> | <b>The Isle of the Dead, Op. 29</b>      |
|           | <b>43:18</b> | <b>Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13</b> |
| 02        | 13:46        | Grave – Allegro ma non troppo            |
| 03        | 08:01        | Allegro animato                          |
| 04        | 08:50        | Larghetto                                |
| 05        | 12:32        | Allegro con fuoco                        |

**VLADIMIR JUROWSKI** *conductor*

**LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA**

**Pieter Schoeman** *leader*

*Recorded live at Southbank Centre's* **ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL**, London