

LSO St Luke's

CHAMBER MUSIC



Recorded for future broadcast on BBC Radio 3

RACHMANINOFF & FRIENDS: OLENA TOKAR & JAMES BAILLIEU

Friday 11 February 2022 1pm
Jerwood Hall, LSO St Luke's

A selection of songs by:
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
Alma Schindler-Mahler
Serge Rachmaninoff

Olena Tokar soprano
James Baillieu piano

The Russian art-song, or 'romance', took root in the early-19th century when Alexander Pushkin's poetry merged with Mikhail Glinka's talent for melody. Almost all later Russian composers wrote romances for performance in private drawing rooms or public concert halls. The genre reached its apogee in the songs of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Modest Mussorgsky: Serge Rachmaninoff was its last great practitioner. Here, songs by him and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov frame a set of late-Romantic Lieder by Alma Schindler-Mahler.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908)

The Nightingale and the Rose, Op 2 No 2
The Nymph, Op 56 No 1
It Was Not the Wind, Op 43 No 2
A Farewell, Op 27 No 4
The Flying Chain of Clouds is Thinning, Op 42 No 3
The Lark's Song is Ringing Louder, Op 43 No 1

A founder-member of the so-called 'Mighty Handful' of mid-19th-century nationalist Russian composers, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov is primarily celebrated for his vibrant orchestral scores. Much of his work, however, was based around the voice, including some 15 operas, choral music, and around 80 solo songs.

Olena Tokar and Igor Gryshyn begin with one of the earliest, *The Nightingale and the Rose*, which dates from 1866. It is based on a Russian translation of a Persian poem, and is an enchanting example of Rimsky-Korsakov's lifelong fascination with cultures

from the Near, Middle and Far East. His penultimate song, *The Nymph*, illustrates two more of his passions – water (he began his career as a naval officer) and the world of myth and legend. Apollon Maikov's poem tells of a water nymph who appears to lure passing sailors with her seductive song, accompanied by rippling piano arpeggios.

It Was Not the Wind is one of two songs in this programme from Rimsky-Korsakov's Op 43 setting texts by Count Aleksey Tolstoy, one of the most important Russian dramatists of the 19th century. Both this and *The Lark's Song is Ringing Louder* illustrate Rimsky-Korsakov's aptitude for vivid tone-painting, as does *The Flying Chain of Clouds is Thinning*, a pensive setting of Pushkin's elegy to the evening star, with its bitter-sweet memories of the fading grandeur of a Crimean coastal resort. *A Farewell*, composed in 1883, sets a poem concerning the painful parting of lovers by Nikolai Nekrasov (1821–77), whose compassionate portrayal of human suffering made him a hero of the 19th-century Russian intelligentsia.



Alma Schindler-Mahler (1879–1964)

Die stille Stadt (The silent town)
In meines Vaters Garten (In my father's garden)
Laue Sommernacht (Balmy summer night)
Bei dir ist es traut (With you it is pleasant)
Ich wandle unter Blumen (I stroll among flowers)

Alma Schindler grew up in what Stefan Zweig described as the 'sticky, perfumed, sultry and unhealthy' atmosphere of Vienna at the turn of the 20th century. Famous for her beauty, lively intelligence and magnetic personality, she married in succession three masters of their crafts – the composer Gustav Mahler, the architect Walter Gropius, and the poet Franz Werfel – and became the muse and lover of others, including the artists Klimt and Kokoschka and the composer Alexander von Zemlinsky.

Alma, a one-time student of Zemlinsky, had personal ambitions as a composer, only to have them firmly stamped on when she married Gustav Mahler. Both husband and wife suffered periods of depression during their nine-year marriage, and after Alma began an affair with Gropius, Gustav relented and agreed to encourage his wife's creative aspirations, resulting in the publication in 1910 of five of her songs.

Alma is thought to have composed at least 50 Lieder, of which only 17 survive. These five, probably composed at the turn of the century, mostly set texts featuring the imagery of night, love and loneliness favoured by Symbolist writers. Her settings are sultry and dramatic, their declamatory vocal lines partnered by complex, thickly-textured, chromatic piano accompaniments.

Die stille Stadt sets a poem by Richard Dehmel, whose *Verklärte Nacht* inspired Schoenberg's string sextet. *In meines Vaters Garten*, to a poem by Otto Erich Hartleben (who provided Schoenberg with the German translation of *Pierrot lunaire*), is a ballad about three fair princesses who sleep beneath an apple tree dreaming of their lovers. In *Laue Sommernacht*, two lovers meet and embrace in a forest on a balmy summer evening; while the texts of the last two songs, respectively by Rilke and Heine, are both love poems, the first an interior scene of quiet domesticity, the second a more passionate encounter in a garden.

Serge Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Dreams, Op 38 No 5
Lilacs, Op 21 No 5
How fair this spot, Op 21 No 7
Night is Mournful, Op 26 No 12
They answered, Op 21 No 4
What Happiness, Op 34 No 12
Spring Waters, Op 14 No 11

Serge Rachmaninoff's solo songs were all composed before he left Russia for voluntary exile in 1917. As might be expected of an exceptional pianist-composer, the piano adopts a virtually independent role, often incorporating extended introductions and postludes.

Dreams, Rachmaninoff's penultimate song, belongs to a group of six composed in the late summer of 1916 for the Ukrainian soprano Nina Koshetz. It sets a text by the Symbolist poet Fyodor Sologub, whose elusive language, praising the enchantment of sleep and dreams, is mirrored in a marvellously impressionistic setting characterised by exquisitely delicate piano writing, ending with a long piano postlude.

Lilacs, published in 1902 as the fifth of a set of twelve, Op 21, is one of Rachmaninoff's best-loved songs. The text of this entrancing setting, its translucent rippling accompaniment evoking a spring garden drenched in dew, is by the 19th-century poet Ekaterina Beketova.

How Fair this Spot comes from the same set, setting a romantic poem by an aristocratic children's author, Countess Glafira Einerling, while *They answered*, also from Op 21, sets a translation of a Victor Hugo poem in a question and answer format. Before that we hear *Night is Mournful*, a 1906 setting of a poem by Ivan Bunin, a master of Russian lyrical prose who later became the first Russian author to be awarded a Nobel Prize.

The penultimate song in this recital is the twelfth of a set of 14 romances completed in 1915, setting a passionate declaration of love by the mid-19th-century Romantic poet Afanasy Fet. The dramatic keyboard writing mirrors the singer's emotional outpourings, while a similarly ecstatic song, *Spring Waters*, joyfully welcomes the melting of winter snow and the arrival of spring. an interior scene of quiet domesticity, the second a more passionate encounter in a garden.

Olena Tokar

soprano

Olena Tokar graduated from Music College in Lugansk and continued her studies at the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy in Kiev and University of Music and Theatre in Leipzig. She was a member of the Young Singers Project at the Salzburg Festival (2011) where she took part in masterclasses with Ileana Cotrubas, Christa Ludwig, Michael Schade, and Alfred Brendel.

Olena was a finalist at the Ferruccio Tagliavini competition (2012) and a finalist at the Francisco Viñas competition. In the same year, she was awarded first prize at the Lortzing Competition, Leipzig and the ARD International Music Competition, Munich. She was a finalist at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition (2013) and joined the BBC New Generation Artist scheme (2013-15). Olena is currently a member of the Leipzig Opera.

James Baillieu

piano

Described by the *Daily Telegraph* as 'in a class of his own', James Baillieu is one of the leading song and chamber music pianists of his generation. He has given solo and chamber recitals throughout the world and collaborates with a wide range of singers and instrumentalists including Benjamin Appl, Jamie Barton, Ian Bostridge, Allan Clayton, Annette Dasch, Lise Davidsen, the Elias and Heath Quartets, Dame Kiri te Kanawa, Adam Walker, and Pretty Yende. As a soloist, he has appeared with the Ulster Orchestra, English Chamber Orchestra, and the Wiener Kammerphonie.

James is a frequent guest at many of the world's most distinguished music centers including Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Vancouver Playhouse, Berlin Konzerthaus, Vienna Musikverein, Barbican Centre, Wiener Konzerthaus, Bozar Brussels, Pierre Boulez Saal, Cologne Philharmonie, and the Laeiszhalle Hamburg. Festivals include Aix-en-Provence, Verbier, Schleswig-Holstein, Festspillene i Bergen, Edinburgh, Spitalfields, Aldeburgh, Cheltenham, Bath, City of London and Brighton Festivals.

An innovative programmer, he has curated many song and chamber music festivals including series for the Brighton Festival, Wigmore Hall, BBC Radio 3, Verbier Festival, Bath International Festival, and Perth Concert Hall.