

GAVRYLYUK & RACH 3

7.30PM, Thursday 12 February
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Piano Concerto No.3 (1909)

- I. *Allegro ma non tanto*
- II. *Intermezzo: Adagio*
- III. *Finale: Alla breve*

DURATION: c.40'

'The most intoxicating sound I have ever heard,' wrote pianist Earl Wild of Sergei Rachmaninov's piano performance. 'He never played like some pianists today, looking up at the sky, pouncing on the pedals... The presentation was always direct and simple. There was no sense of ego.'

The opening of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto, which he wrote for his first concert tour to America, encapsulates the 'serene dignity' that was such a hallmark of his performance style, opening with a chant-like melody performed with both hands in unison.

The concerto also acted as a vehicle for Rachmaninov's formidable technique, with cadenzas in the first and second movements that defy the ear to be played by just 10 fingers. The acrobatic third movement is a recklessly-paced test of stamina few pianists in the composer's lifetime dared to venture.

Rachmaninov believed that 'music should speak from the heart... my desire to compose is actually the urge within me to give musical expression to my feelings — just as I speak to give utterance to my thoughts.' On the other hand, he freely acknowledged the acquisition of skill to eloquently convey and perform these musical feelings was hard-won: 'One does not soar to the heights of art like an angel. The work, the climb is there. But the difference is that the great artist usually forgets that he is working, so completely does his love and enthusiasm for what he is doing camouflage drudgery.'

Written in his mid-thirties, this concerto is a summit of years of that enthusiastic climb, as Rachmaninov honed his musical craft on three axes — pianist, conductor, and composer.

INTERVAL

Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942)

The Mermaid (1902-03)

- I. *Sehr mässig bewegt* (very moderate pace)
- II. *Sehr bewegt, rauschend* (very agitated, thunderous)
- III. *Sehr gedehnt, mit schmerzvollem Ausdruck* (very stretched, with anguish)

DURATION: c.45'

Alexander Zemlinsky's tone poem *The Mermaid* was inspired by a central figure in turn-of-the-century musical Vienna — Alma Schindler. Sought after for her legendary beauty, she was also

Conductor Giordano Bellincampi
Piano Alexander Gavrylyuk

a budding composer, and in 1900 began to take lessons from Zemlinsky, who later taught many other notable Viennese composers such as Schoenberg and Korngold.

They soon became entangled in a tempestuous love affair, bonding over music, but at odds over their goals: Zemlinsky wanted cozy musical discussions at home while Schindler wanted to be admired in the salons of Vienna's cultural elite. In her letters to him, passionate declarations are accompanied with cruel remarks on his appearance, calling him a "small, ugly gnome". Schindler ended their relationship in 1901 in favour of another composer, Gustav Mahler, whom she married soon after.

The Mermaid, based on the Hans Christian Anderson's tragic fairy tale, was a form of catharsis for Zemlinsky — here Schindler is not the mermaid but the prince, who marries another while the anguished mermaid is overlooked.

The work opens in the lowest registers of the orchestra, illustrating the opening lines of Anderson's tale. "Far out in the ocean, where the water is as blue as the prettiest cornflower, and as clear as crystal, it is very, very deep; so deep, indeed, that no cable could fathom it."

A solo violin introduces the mermaid, yearning for the world above and the movement evolves into a storm, abruptly cut off as the mermaid rescues the prince and delivers him to shore. The second movement evokes ballroom fanfare of the Merking's palace, but Zemlinsky constantly pulls back the curtain on the sparkling percussion and celebratory brass with the mermaid wistful longing for her beloved prince in the lands above.

There is no Disney ending — Zemlinsky holds true to Anderson's original: The final movement brings the mermaid onto land, where she is in torment watching the prince marry another. Refusing the Merwitch's bargain to regain her tail by killing the prince, the mermaid is transformed into an air sprite: Zemlinsky's solo violin line gently evaporates at the movement's close.

For reasons that Zemlinsky never stated, he withdrew the work after just a few performances and the first movement of the manuscript remained in Vienna when he and his family fled to America leading up to the outbreak of WWII. It was not until the 1980s that musicologists reconnected the orphaned movement and the work re-entered concert programmes, where it has become one of Zemlinsky's most performed works.

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