

BEDFORDSHIRE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday 14 November 2026

Corn Exchange, Bedford, 7:30pm

Conductor: Bjorn Bantock

Soloist: Katya Apekisheva, piano

Programme

Polovtsian Dances from 'Prince Igor'

Alexander Borodin
(1833-1887)

Alexander Borodin was a self-described 'Sunday composer': a scientist by day, he wrote music in his free time but nonetheless won enough acclaim as a composer of Russian art music to gain a position among the country's 'Mighty Handful'. Because of his lifelong work in chemistry and medicine, Borodin's output is, relative to other composers, exceedingly small. His primary works include his *Second Symphony*, a handful of songs, a particularly notable String Quartet (the Second), and his opera *Prince Igor*, for which he wrote both the music and the libretto. Borodin worked on the opera for some two decades, but left it unfinished at his death in 1887. His colleagues Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov finished the work.

The Polovtsian Dances, often inclusive of a chorus, occur by the end of the second act of *Prince Igor*, when the title character has been taken prisoner by the Polovtsian Khan Konchak. The Khan, intrigued by his depressed captive, calls in a group of slaves to liven Prince Igor's spirits. The servants' songs begin as sentimental recollections of their homeland, but gradually gain vigour and become shouts in praise of the slaves' royal master. The instrumentation is brilliant and crystalline, reliant upon powerful brass and soloistic woodwinds to brighten the already exotic, lithe melodies, during which a flurry of energetic winds and percussion join in a sparkling, rhythm-driven dance. Borodin's bright tone colours, graceful melodic lines, and energetic rhythms create a general feeling of celebration and enthusiasm that make the work appropriate as a piece for both the operatic stage and the concert hall.

Programme notes: Jessica Schilling

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

Sergei Rachmaninov
(1873 –1943)

Rachmaninov's music for piano and orchestra spans his lifetime; his first concerto appeared in 1891 when he was 17, and the *Paganini Rhapsody*, his last significant work for piano and orchestra, in 1934 when he was over 60. The *Rhapsody* is a set of 24 variations on Paganini's A minor *Caprice* for solo violin, and Rachmaninov puts the tune through its paces with immense ingenuity. A reviewer, writing about the first performances of the *Rhapsody* with the composer at the piano, declared 'It's something for the audiences'. Alongside the Second

and Third Piano Concertos, this brilliant work today numbers amongst his best-known compositions.

After a brief introduction, the first variation is played, followed by Paganini's theme stated on strings with the piano picking out salient notes. Variations II to VI recombine elements of the theme, and the pauses and rhetorical flourishes for the piano in variation VI herald a change of tempo and tone. The piano next intones the *Dies Irae*, the 'day of wrath' plainchant from the medieval Mass of the Dead (to some degree, the Paganini theme is an inversion), while the orchestra accompanies with a slower version of the opening motif of the Paganini theme.

The slow 18th variation is by far the best known, and it is often included on classical music compilations without the rest of the work. It is based on an inversion of Paganini's theme. The tune is turned upside down and playing slowly in the key of D flat. The 24th variation is more playful in tone than most of the other variations, ending with a glissando sweep of the keyboard. This leads to a grotesque parody of the triumphant *Dies Irae* for full orchestra before leaving the piano to voice the original theme in the last bar.

Programme notes: Compiled, Uwe Radok

Soloist: Katya Apekisheva – piano

Described as a 'profoundly gifted artist' by Gramophone Magazine, Katya Apekisheva has earned her place as one of Europe's most renowned and gifted pianists. Born in Moscow, into a family of musicians, she attended the Gnessin Music School for exceptionally gifted children making her stage debut at the age of 12. She continued her studies in Jerusalem at the Rubin Music Academy and later at the Royal College of Music in London. From these auspicious beginnings she went on to be a Prizewinner of the Leeds International Piano competition and has gone on to enjoy a career performing with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Halle Orchestra, the Moscow Philharmonic, the Jerusalem Symphony, the English Chamber Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, working with renowned conductors such as Sir Simon Rattle, David Shallon, Jan Latham-Koenig and Alexander Lazarev.

Her latest disc is a collection of impromptus of which international piano called 'a fascinating and engrossing album'. As a recording artist, Katya has received widespread critical acclaim for her interpretations from Gramophone Magazine's Editor's Choice award and International Piano Magazine's Critics' choice to Classic FM's CD of the week as well as a Classical Brit award to name but a few. Katya's discography includes solo and chamber works by Mussorgsky, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Dvorak and Rachmaninov.

Recent and future highlights include performances in Russia, Norway, Japan, Switzerland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Australia and at home in the UK at the Bath Mozart Fest, St. George's Bristol and the prestigious Wigmore Hall – where she is a regular presence. Her intense artistry and delicacy makes Katya a most sought-after collaborative pianist, working with artists such as Janine Jansen, Natalie Clein, Guy Johnston, Maxim Rysanov, Jack Liebeck, Boris Brovtsyn, Alexei Ogrinchouk and Nicholas Daniel and she appears regularly at major chamber music festivals around the world. Katya also has a highly successful and personally rewarding piano duo partnership with Charles Owen, performing regularly at

festivals worldwide. Together they are co-Artistic Directors of the London Piano Festival which began in 2016.

Symphony No. 3 in E flat (Eroica)

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Allegro con brio

Marcia funebre: Adagio assai

Scherzo: Allegro vivace

Finale (Theme & Variations): Allegro molto - Poco andante - Presto

One of Beethoven's most celebrated works, the Eroica symphony is the large-scale composition that marked the beginning of the composer's innovative 'middle period'. Composed mainly in 1803–1804, the work broke boundaries in symphonic form, length, harmony, and emotional and cultural content. It is widely considered a landmark in the transition between the Classical and the Romantic era.

On the original title page of the Third Symphony, Beethoven wrote: 'Heroic Symphony, composed to celebrate the memory of a great man', the man being Napoleon Bonaparte. However, when Napoleon declared himself Emperor, Beethoven scratched out the dedication, stating 'So he too is nothing more than an ordinary man. Now he will also trample all human rights underfoot, and only pander to his own ambition. He will place himself above everyone else and become a tyrant'. The symphony was first performed in 1805 under the composer's direction.

Two peremptory chords open the first movement. Then comes the dignified theme, heard on the cellos and continued by the violins before being expanded by the full orchestra. There is an important subsidiary idea on the woodwinds before the second theme makes its appearance, following a descending fortissimo passage. This is developed and leads to a codetta, closing the exposition. The subsequent development section is elaborate, culminating in the notorious pianissimo passage during which a solo horn plays the first four notes of the principal theme in Eb, while the strings continue playing the dominant chord. Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven's pupil, who was present at the first rehearsal, later wrote that 'The first rehearsal of the symphony was terrible, and the hornist did, in fact, come in on cue. I was standing next to Beethoven and, believing that he had made a wrong entrance, I said, 'That damned hornist! Can't he count? It sounds frightfully wrong. I believe I was in danger of getting my ears boxed. Beethoven did not forgive me for a long time'. The recapitulation follows the normal course until the composer introduces a second development, after which the movement closes with a long and elaborate coda.

The introduction of a funeral march into a symphony was an innovation, and it appears to have had an earlier link with Napoleon. On the Emperor's death in 1821, Beethoven is reputed to have said that he had composed the music for that probable catastrophe 17 years earlier. The infinitely sad first theme, with its halting rhythm, is given out by the strings and echoed by the oboe. The second theme in E flat major breaks through like a shaft of sunlight, and the gloom is dispelled as the two themes are developed. Two episodes, the first a Trio section to the March and the second the March theme treated as a fugue in F minor, constitute the development. Towards the close of the movement a tranquil melody is heard on the violins, and then the coda reintroduces the halting rhythm of the opening.

At the beginning of the third movement *Scherzo*, six bars of pianissimo introduction on the strings precede the theme on the oboe and the first violins, which then bursts forth in a vigorous tutti with strong syncopations. Most of the material of the Scherzo is based on this exposition. The Trio provides a contrast, with a theme on three horns alternating with a passage for woodwind echoed by strings. The Scherzo returns in a modified form, and a brief coda ends the movement.

The *Finale* begins with an impetuous flourish on the strings, brought suddenly to a halt on the dominant chord. The outline of the movement's theme is then presented pizzicato on the strings before it is given in its entirety. Beethoven also used this theme in the Finale of his *Prometheus* ballet music, his Piano Variations in E flat, and the seventh of his twelve *Kontretanze*. In the first variation the theme is presented by the strings, while in the fourth it is treated fugally. The penultimate variation is an andante, richly harmonised, and providing a tranquil interlude before the majestic return of the theme on the horns in the closing section.

Programme notes: Compiled and edited from several sources

Several of these notes were supplied through the Programme Note Bank of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies, and from other sources.