Elgar & Rachmaninoff

Friday, March 23 – 7:30 pm
Saturday, March 24 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor
Andreas Brantelid, cello

Afterthoughts, Friday post-performance in the Main Lobby with Alexander Prior & Andreas Brantelid
Symphony Prelude, Saturday 7 pm in the Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with D.T. Baker

BRITTEN
***Peter Grimes*: Four Sea Interludes, Op.33a** (16')*
- Dawn
- Sunday Morning
- Moonlight
- Storm

ELGAR
Cello Concerto in E minor, Op.85 (30')*
- Adagio – Moderato
- Lento – Allegro molto
- Adagio
- Allegro – Moderato – Allegro, ma non troppo

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

RACHMANINOFF
Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op.13 (43')*
- Grave – Allegro ma non troppo
- Allegro animato
- Larghetto
- Allegro con fuoco

program subject to change
*indicates approximate performance duration

***Peter Grimes*: Four Sea Interludes, Op.33a**
Benjamin Britten
(b. Lowestoft, 1913 / d. Aldeburgh, 1976)

First performance of the opera Peter Grimes: June 7, 1945 in London
First performance of the Four Sea Interludes: June 13, 1945 in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire
Last ESO performance: February 2013

With the success of the 1945 opera *Peter Grimes*, Benjamin Britten revived English opera to a level it had not seen since the death of Henry Purcell, exactly 250 years before. Based on a part of George Crabbe's poem *The Borough*, Britten and librettist Montagu Slater fleshed out the villainous character of Crabbe's version into a man absolutely at odds with the world. It was a subject, Britten said later, "very close to my heart – the struggle of the individual against the masses. The more vicious the society, the more vicious the individual."

The story centres around a fictional town on the east coast of England, where Grimes is a fisherman. The sea, therefore, plays an integral role in the unfolding drama, and is given special focus in the opera's music. While serving principally as entr'actes, much of the purely orchestral music Britten wrote for the opera evokes the sea as a metaphor for the overwhelming tide of fate which no one, particularly Grimes, can escape. Following the opera's premiere, Britten extracted this music from his score and created a stand-alone suite for the concert hall, called *Four Sea Interludes* and, as the opera had been published as Opus 33, the suite was labeled Op.33a. The sequence of the movements for the concert hall gives a symphonic cohesion to the suite, which begins with the shimmering Dawn. Sunday Morning is an Allegro in which a spritely and even optimistic dance is constantly intruded upon by ominous, dissonant, slightly off-rhythm accents. Moonlight is the third section, a gentle idyll in which a beautiful processional theme builds slowly in grandeur, then departs in an aura of uncertainty and resignation. The final movement is a Storm, churning and roiling menacingly, the timpani pounding out the rhythm of the waves. The central section becomes uneasily quiet, but the final moments bring back the violence and menace in their final, crashing chords.

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op.85
Edward Elgar
(b. Broadheath, 1857 / d. Worcester, 1934)

First performance: October 27, 1919 in London
Last ESO performance: September 2012

Edward Elgar began composing his only cello concerto in 1918, when England and indeed all of Europe was pulling itself out of the ruins of the First World War. At the same time, Elgar's beloved wife was gravely ill; she died in 1920, months after the concerto's premiere. In the pages of the concerto – the last major work Elgar found himself capable of completing – the composer let the melancholy and

passion he was feeling find its vent. Two cellists had a hand in the construction of the concerto. Felix Salmond was the virtuoso who performed the premiere of the piece, and helped inspire its composer. There was also Elgar's friend Basil Nevinson (the "B.G.N." of the famous *"Enigma" Variations*) who most likely led Elgar to his choice of solo instrument.

The work is in four movements played without a pause between them. The soloist takes the lead, intoning a recitative-like passage in which the orchestra joins. This theme is constantly developed throughout the Moderato of the rest of the opening movement. A short passage bridges the first and second movements, the latter of which is a quick, technically demanding Allegro molto. The third movement is one of aching contemplation, slow and introspective, with the soloist seemingly taking the role of Elgar's spirit. The finale is a Rondo, but not in conventional concerto style. The recurrences of the main material are almost sturdy and solid, as if reaffirming that life must still be lived. As the work draws to a close, the cello recalls the recitative of the opening movement, just prior to the return of the main Rondo theme.

Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op.13
Sergei Rachmaninoff
(b. Oneg, Novgorod, 1873 / d. Beverly Hills, 1943)

First performed: March 28, 1897 in St. Petersburg
This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Rachmaninoff's *First Symphony* has become so wrapped up in the infamous story of its premiere, it is difficult now to separate the music from the event which so shattered the composer's confidence as a musician. Time has lent a certain hyperbole to the events: the conductor, Alexander Glazunov, was drunk; Rachmaninoff was a wreck; his career was almost destroyed just as it was beginning. It makes for good copy, but overstates the facts.

Rachmaninoff was 26 at the premiere – still young, but hardly a stripling. He himself expressed some doubts about the symphony's weaker points – hardly surprising for anyone's first attempt at such an ambitious work. And certainly, it was under-rehearsed prior to its premiere, and the reviews were harsh. But Glaznuov was actually kindly disposed toward the piece. "I have looked through Rachmaninoff's symphony, have found some slips of the pen, but on the whole I approve it, especially the orchestration," Glazunov wrote to a colleague in November 1896.

While the work's first performance was, overall, disastrous, some astute listeners heard past the inadequate presentation. "Rachmaninoff's D minor symphony was not very successfully interpreted, and was therefore largely misunderstood," wrote Nikolai Findeisen in the *Russian Musical Gazette*. "This work shows new impulses, tendencies toward new colours, new themes, new images…The first movement, and especially the furious finale with its concluding Largo, contain much beauty, novelty, and even inspiration."

Unfortunately, Findeisen's sympathetic acumen came too late for Rachmaninoff's frail sensibility. But even here, Rachmaninoff was not as devastated as legend would have us believe. In May, less than two months after the supposed fiasco, Rachmaninoff was able to write: "I'm not at all affected by its lack of success, nor am I disturbed by the press' abuse; but I am deeply distressed and heavily depressed that my Symphony…did not please *me*…So two surmises remain. Either, like some composers, I am unduly partial to this composition, or this composition was poorly performed."

In subsequent years, and following Rachmaninoff's triumphant "return" as a composer with the *Second Piano Concerto*, he did write more symphonies. The First, alas, he set aside, and it was not until it was reconstructed from newly-discovered parts that it was heard again, in 1945, two years after its creator had died.

Rachmaninoff dedicated the symphony to "A.L.," the initials of the wife of a wealthy patron, Pyotr Lodyzhensky. Rachmaninoff developed a bit of a crush on Anna Lodyzhenskaya, and the touches of gypsy music in the symphony are likely a reference to her own family heritage. But the bulk of the symphony's musical underpinning is Russian orthodox chant. Thematic transformation is also integral to the work, with elements presented early on in the first movement adapted and reused in the subsequent movements. "This is not simply a very thoughtful work," writes David Brown in *A Guide to the Symphony*, "it is also an abundantly fertile one."