

NSSO

National Schools Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Mark Shanahan

Soloist: Ronan O'Hora

28th July 2007

*Eton College
School Hall*



Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975)

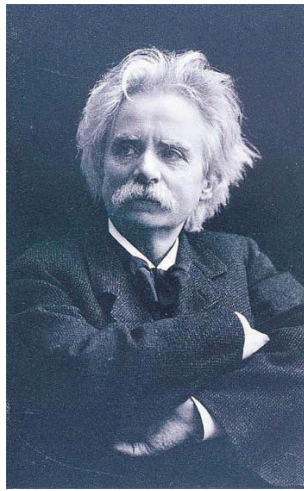
Festive Overture

Shostakovich's music, a collection of works providing the landscape of a torn man, is baldly Russian in style, yet diverse. It contains memorable themes stemming from Russian folk and popular song, jazz, and the traditions of Johann Sebastian Bach. As the musical voice of Soviet life, his output was extensive, having written 15 symphonies, 15 string quartets, various other chamber works, concerti, song cycles, solo piano pieces, operas, ballets, and film scores. The celebratory side of his achievements is demonstrated in the Festive Overture, written in 1954 for a concert commemorating the 37th anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power in Russia. Listeners will find little political sentiment in the short work, however, as it is an exuberant piece full of joy and enthusiasm.

The story behind the creation of the Festive Overture is one of those fantastic tales which reveals the true nature of a composer's genius, leaving all of the eye-witnesses shaking their heads in wonder. Shostakovich's friend Lev Lebedinsky related the story of how one time, when he was hanging out at the composer's apartment one day in the fall of 1954, they were visited by a conductor from the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra. Due to mysterious political manoeuvrings, the orchestra needed a new work to celebrate the October Revolution for a concert in only three days time.

Shostakovich had Lebedinsky sit down next to him and began to compose straight away. Lebedinsky relates: "The speed with which he wrote was truly astounding. Moreover, when he wrote light music he was able to talk, make jokes and compose simultaneously, like the legendary Mozart. He laughed and chuckled, and in the meanwhile work was under way and the music was being written down."

There is not a trace of haste or carelessness in the vibrant Festive Overture. Shostakovich always composed at a fast pace, writing down the notes with superhuman facility. We will never know whether or not he employed musical ideas which were already lurking in his imagination, or whether the entire work was simply an instantaneous flash of inspiration. It is amusing however to think of Shostakovich "laughing and chuckling" as he composed, for it is easy to imagine the pervasiveness of the composer's good humour driving this energetic, truly festive work.



Edward Grieg (1843 - 1907)

Piano Concerto

The Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16 was the only concerto Grieg completed. It is one of his most popular works and among the most popular of all piano concerti. The work is among Grieg's earliest important works, being written in 1868 in Sollerod in Denmark, during one of Grieg's visits there to benefit from the climate, being warmer than that of his native Norway. It is in three movements:

Allegro molto moderato

Adagio

Allegro moderato molto e marcato

Grieg's concerto is often compared to the Piano Concerto of Robert Schumann — it is in the same key, the opening descending flourish on the piano is similar, and the overall style is considered to be closer to Schumann than any other single composer. Grieg had heard Schumann's concerto played by Clara Schumann in Leipzig in 1858, and was greatly influenced by Schumann's style generally, having been taught the piano by Schumann's friend, Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel.

Additionally, Grieg's work provides evidence of his interest in Norwegian folk music — the opening flourish is based around the motif of a falling minor second followed by a falling major third, which is typical of the folk music of Grieg's native country. This specific motif occurs in other works by Grieg, including the *String Quartet*. In the last movement of the concerto, similarities to the halling (a Norwegian folk dance) and imitations of the Hardanger fiddle (the Norwegian folk fiddle) have been detected.

Grieg himself was an excellent pianist but the work was premiered by Edmund Neupert on April 3, 1869 in Copenhagen. Grieg was unable to attend the premiere owing to commitments with an orchestra in Christiania (now Oslo). Among those who did attend the premiere were the Danish composer Niels Gade and the Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein. The Norwegian premiere in Christiania followed on August 7, 1869, and the piece was later heard in Germany in 1872 and England in 1874. The work was first published in Leipzig in 1872.

Grieg revised the work at least seven times, usually in subtle ways, but amounting to over 300 differences from the original orchestration. In one of these revisions, he undid Franz Liszt's suggestion to give the second theme of the first movement (as well as the first theme of the second) to the trumpet rather than the cellos among other changes. The final version of the concerto was completed only a few weeks before Grieg's death, and it is this version that has achieved worldwide popularity.



Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918)

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (or *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*) was first performed in Paris, on December 22, 1894, conducted by Gustave Doret. It was inspired by the poem *L'après-midi d'un faune* by Stéphane Mallarmé and later formed the basis for the ballet of the same name by Vaslav Nijinsky. The Interlude and Final Paraphrase were never written but the Prelude has nevertheless become one of Debussy's most famous works and is considered a turning point in the history of music; Composer-conductor Pierre Boulez even dates the awakening of modern music from this score, observing that “the flute of the faun brought new breath to the art of music.”

Debussy wrote, “The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.”

The *Prélude* at first listening seems improvisational and almost free-form; however, closer observation will demonstrate that the piece consists of a complex organization of musical cells, motifs carefully developed and traded between members of the orchestra. A close analysis of the piece yields a deep appreciation of the ultimate compositional economy of Debussy's craft.

The opening flute part is one the most famous passages in musical modernism, consisting of a chromatic descent to a tritone below the original pitch, and the subsequent ascent. The main musical themes are introduced by woodwinds, with delicate but harmonically advanced underpinnings of muted horns, strings and harp. Recurring tools in Debussy's compositional arsenal make appearances in this piece: Bracing whole-tone scale runs, harmonic fluidity without lengthy modulations between central keys, tritones in both melody and harmony. The development of the slow main theme moves fluidly between 9/8, 6/8 and 12/8. Debussy explores voicings and shading in his orchestration brilliantly, allowing the main melodic cell to move from solo flute to oboe, back to solo flute, then two unison flutes (yielding a completely different feel to the melody), then clarinet, etc. Even the accompaniment explores alternate voicings; the flute duo's soaring, exotic melodic cells ride lush rolling strings with violas carrying the soprano part over alto violins (the tone of a viola in its upper register being especially sumptuous). And, in the first minute of the piece, Debussy mischievously throws in a bar of complete silence, giving the listener the opportunity to explore the musical quality of negative space within a gentle flowing river of sound.



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893) **Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture**

In 1869 Tchaikovsky was just 28 years old and an up-and-coming lecturer at the Moscow Conservatory, where he wrote an orchestral work entitled *Fate* and dedicated it to Mily Balakirev, who conducted the first St. Petersburg performance. Balakirev was one of the “Mighty Five” Russian composers in the mid-1800s. Despite the fact that Balakirev had many problems in his own musical life, he had a head full of ideas, and persistently gave detailed help to all the musicians he met. The piece received only a lukewarm reception, and the older composer wrote a detailed letter to Tchaikovsky explaining the defects. Tchaikovsky accepted the criticism, and the two continued to correspond. He then pressed Tchaikovsky to write a piece based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In suggesting this, Balakirev knew that Tchaikovsky had just emerged from what would be his only real infatuation with a member of the opposite sex, a Belgian soprano named Désirée Artôt. Tchaikovsky had indeed proposed to her, but their informal engagement came to nothing. Shortly afterwards, the opera company with which she was associated travelled to Warsaw, and there, without informing Tchaikovsky, she married the Spanish baritone Mariano Padilla y Ramos.

Balakirev wrote suggestions about the structure of *Romeo and Juliet*, giving details of the type of music required in each section, and even opinions on which keys to use. Tchaikovsky largely followed this advice and forwarded his first draft to Balakirev. Balakirev responded by praising the love theme: "I play it often, and I want very much to hug you for it", but then went on to grind away at him to make changes in the first section. Tchaikovsky accepted some of Balakirev's nagging and dedicated the completed work to him. His friend Nikolai Rubinstein was due to conduct it on March 16, 1870. Sadly, the first performance in 1870 was hindered by a sensational court case involving Rubinstein and inciting a noisy demonstration when he appeared on the concert platform, which proved much more interesting to the audience than the new overture. The result was not encouraging as a premiere for *Romeo and Juliet* and induced Tchaikovsky to rework the piece, now fully accepting Balakirev's criticisms, but the perfectionist Balakirev still quibbled that the ending was not powerful enough. In 1880, ten years after his first reworking of the piece, Tchaikovsky rewrote the ending, finally giving the piece a conclusion that Balakirev could endorse.

Although styled an 'Overture-Fantasy' by the composer, the overall design is a symphonic poem in sonata-form with an introduction and an epilogue. The work is based on three main strands of the Shakespeare story. The first strand, following Balakirev's suggestion, is the introduction representing the saintly Friar Laurence. Here there is a flavour of Russian Orthodoxy, but also a foreboding of doom from the lower strings. Eventually a single chord passed back and forth between strings and woodwinds grows into the second strand, the agitated theme of the warring Capulets and Montagues, including a reference to the sword fight. The forceful irregular rhythms of the street music point ahead to Stravinsky and beyond. The action suddenly slows, the key dropping from B-minor to D-flat (as suggested by Balakirev) and we hear the opening bars of the love theme, the third strand, passionate and yearning in character but always with an underlying current of anxiety. The strings enter with a lush, hovering melody over which the flute and oboe eventually soar with the love theme once again, signalling the development section. The recapitulation proceeds with the themes brought back and ends in four bars of abrupt chords, proclaiming the death of the star-crossed lovers.



Ronan O'Hora

Piano

Born in Manchester in 1964, Ronan O'Hora studied with Ryszard Bakst at the Royal Northern College of Music. He has performed extensively throughout the world, playing with such orchestras as the London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, BBC Symphony, English Chamber Orchestra and Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields. He has performed in every major country in Europe as well as in the USA, Canada, Australasia and South Africa, and has appeared at many of the most prestigious music festivals, including Salzburg, Gstaad, Ravinia, Montpellier, Bath, Harrogate and Brno.

Ronan O'Hora has made many highly acclaimed recordings over recent years for the Virgin Classics, Tring International, Dinemic and Fone labels. These include concertos by Mozart, Grieg and Tchaikowsky, and solo repertoire by Schubert Brahms, Debussy, Schumann, Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, Mendelssohn and Satie, as well as chamber music by Faure, Britten, Debussy, Dvorak and Mozart, amounting to a discography of over thirty CDs.

In recent seasons Ronan O'Hora has performed at the Salzburg Festival, the Kennedy Centre in Washington, and Sydney Opera House, in addition to tours of USA, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Australia and New Zealand.

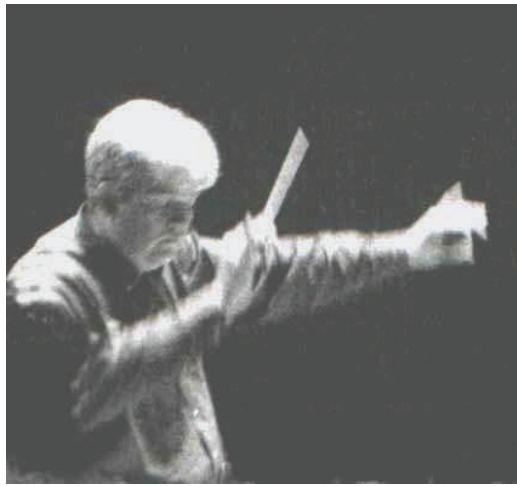
Ronan O'Hora was appointed Head of Keyboard Studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in September 1999.

Luke Harris

Leader

Luke is a student at Pate's Grammar School in Cheltenham where he is studying Music, Geography, Economics and Politics at A level. A member of NSSO since 2005, Luke started playing the violin at the age of 8 and the viola at 10. A former member of the National Children's Orchestra, Luke is now also a member of the Gloucestershire Youth Orchestra with whom he made his solo debut performing Hindemith *Die Travermusik* earlier this year.

Luke has been a student at the Junior Conservatoire in Birmingham since 2004 studying under David Joyce, Carmel Kaine and Tim English. After A levels, Luke intends to continue his music studies at University and hopes to become a professional orchestral musician in the future.



Mark Shanahan **Conductor**

Born in Manchester of Irish parentage, Mark studied at Chetham's School of Music. He then studied at London University before joining the post-graduate conducting course at the Royal Academy of Music as the Sir Henry Wood conducting Scholar. He won the NAYO Conducting Competition for European Music Year.

His orchestral work includes broadcasts and concerts with the BBC, National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, RTE Concert Orchestra. He received invitations from the Stavanger Symphony, the Orchestre Filarmonica de Gran Canaria, Netherlands Symphony, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, The English Northern Philharmonia and the Halle Orchestra.

Mark has conducted for Opera Ireland, English Touring Opera and the Wexford Festival. For Grange Park Opera he has conducted *La Traviata* and the acclaimed production of *I Capuletti e I Montecchi*, for Opera North *La Traviata* and *The Queen of Spades* and *Don Giovanni* for Royal Northern College of Music. Since 1993 he has been associated with English National Opera as a guest conductor, particularly associated with Italian repertoire, where productions have included *La Forza del Destino*, the *Barber of Seville*, *Leoncavallo* and Puccini *La Boheme*, *La Traviata*, *Otello* and *Tosca*, described by the Times as 'a musical triumph'.

He is a guest at the Opera and Orchestra Department at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Guest Professor of Conducting at the Royal Academy of Music, London and Visiting Conducting Fellow at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester.

In addition to concert engagements, this year he has conducted *Death in Venice* in Frankfurt and *Rigoletto* for Opera North. He made his debut in France where his production of Janacek *Jenufa* was awarded best dramatic performance in the French annual awards.

He is an inspirational musician whose talents are appreciated by both students and coaches. NSSO is fortunate to be able to claim that Mark has conducted more than half of its concerts and is delighted to welcome him back this summer.

PROGRAMME

Dmitri Shostakovich
Festive Overture

Edward Grieg
Piano Concerto in A minor

SHORT INTERVAL

Claude Debussy
Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture

NSSO 2007

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