ROYAL LIVERPOOL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Four Last Songs

Thu 5 November, 7:30pm

Please note that all timings are approximate and may be subject to change. Performers are correct at time of uploading.

Karel Deseure *conductor*
Elizabeth Llewellyn *soloist*

Nikolai Tcherepnin *La Princesse lointaine (8')*

Strauss *Four Last Songs (25')*

- INTERVAL – (20')

Rimsky-Korsakov *Scheherazade (47')*

First Violins
Zoë Beyers
Mihkel Kerem
Peter Liang
Martin Richardson *
Concettina Del Vecchio
Stephan Mayer *
Ruth McNamara
Susanna Poole
Elizabeth Lamberton
Emily Mowbray
Qian Wu
Momoko Arima
Helen Boardman
Nathan Fenwick

Second Violins
Kate Richardson *
Sophie McQueen
Kate Marsden
James Justin Evans *
Sally Anne Anderson
David Rimbault
Olga Smoleń
Frances Evans
Chu Yu Yang
Pak Ho Hong
Natalie Purton
Dewi Tudor Jones

Violas
Catherine Marwood
Gwendolyn Cawdron
Sarah Hill
Fiona Stunden *
Rachel Jones
Ian Fair
Amy Hark
Daniel Sanxis
Jayne Coyle
Emily Davies

Cellos
Karen Stephenson
Hilary Browning *
Ian Bracken *
Ruth Owens
Alexander Holladay
Mark Lindley
Anna Crawford
Lucy Hoile

Double Basses
Marcel Becker
Nathan Knight
Ashley Frampton *
Nigel Dufty *
Anthony Williams
Filipe Dandalo

Flutes
Cormac Henry
Helen Wilson
Abi Fletcher

Piccolo
Sameeta Gahir

Oboes
Helena Mackie
Catrin Ruth Davies *

Cor Anglais
Drake Gritton

Clarinets
Miquel Ramos Salvadó
Emma Burgess

Bass Clarinet
Elliot Gresty

Bassoons
Josh Wilson
Rebekah Abramski

Contrabassoon
Gareth Twigg

Horns
Timothy Jackson
Simon Griffiths
Catherine Hewitt
Timothy Nicholson
Bob Ashworth
Molly Bielecki

Trumpets
Corey Morris
Hannah Mackenzie
James Nash

Trombones
Simon Cowen
Simon Powell

Bass Trombone
Simon Chappell

Tuba
Robin Haggart *

Timpani
Neil Hitt

Percussion
Matthew Brett
Josephine Frieze
Scott Lumsdaine
Ben Gray
Tom Hall
Stan Talman

Harp
Elizabeth McNulty

*Denotes 25 years' service

Four Last Songs
Programme Notes

About the Music

Nikolai Tcherepnin (1873-1945): *La Princesse lointaine*

Composed: 1896
First Performed: 1896(?), Russian Symphonic Concerts series, cond. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

When Nikolai Tcherepnin (pronounced 'Cher-ep-neen') first began to make his name as composer and conductor in the 1890s, Russian was still Tsarist, and Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky were the musical gods. Tcherepnin's orchestral Prelude, *La Princesse lointaine* ('The Distant Princess') was composed while he was still a student with Rimsky-Korsakov, and the influence of the latter's hugely successful *Scheherazade* can be felt in places, but it's an atmospheric and melodically appealing piece in its own terms.

Tcherepnin composed *La Princesse lointaine* as a curtain-raiser for a play by the then-popular French writer Edmond Rostand, a ripely romantic story of a medieval troubadour and his highly idealised feelings for his 'distant' beloved. Tcherepnin's music captures the minstrel's ardour beautifully – along with a sense that this maybe the kind of love that works best from a distance.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949): Four Last Songs

1. Früling (Spring)
2. September
3. Beim Schlafengehen (Going to Sleep)
4. Im Abendrot (At Dusk)

Composed: 1947-8
First Performed: 22 May 1950, London, Royal Albert Hall, Kirsten Flagstad (soprano), Philharmonia Orchestra cond. Wilhelm Furtwängler

When Richard Strauss composed these four exquisite, at time almost painfully tender songs, just two years after the catastrophe of World War Two, many composers were struggling to forget the past and embracing the challenge of Schoenbergian modernism. For them, Strauss's ripe, very late romanticism was the sound of the Old World, hopelessly tainted by association with the very culture that had made Hitler's rise to power possible.

And yet *Four Last Songs* survives while the efforts of most of his modernist detractors is forgotten. The explanation lies partly in the music's melodic fertility, gorgeous harmonies and orchestration and the superb writing for the

soprano voice – the distillation of Strauss's long experience in the opera house. But even more it is the humanity of the message that makes people turn again and again to this music. Here is a sharply focussed sense of joy in life and shared love, intensified by awareness of the closeness of death. How Strauss was able to do this so persuasively with Germany in ruins and the terrible human cost of Nazism growing more apparent by the day is hard to say, but the fact remains that he did. For many, *Four Last Songs* is simply his greatest creation.

It is not clear in what order Strauss intended these songs to be performed, but not long after the premiere the current sequence was decided on, and it has stuck. We begin, naturally enough, with Spring (*Frühling*), renewal, but as witnessed by an older man. *September* brings images of autumnal decay after summer's ripeness, and ends with a touching solo farewell for the horn – the instrument on which Strauss's father excelled. In *Beim Schlafengehen*, the image of the soul floating free in the 'magic circle of the night' is captured in a rapturous duet for soprano and solo violin. Then the sunset of a long-shared marital life is then evoked in *Im Abendrot*. Strauss's marriage to the formidable Pauline de Ahna had not exactly been stress-free, but his comment to Gustav Mahler that 'she's what I need' was evidently sincere. At the close, two piccolos recall the poem's pair of trilling larks flying together into the distance – an image that surely needs no explanation.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908): Scheherazade, Op. 35

1. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship
2. The Tale of the Kalender Prince
3. The Young Prince and the Young Princess
4. Festival in Bagdad - The Sea - The Ship goes to pieces on a rock surmounted by a Bronze Warrior – Conclusion

Composed: 1888
First Performed: 28 October 188, St Petersburg, Russian Symphony Concerts series, cond. Rimsky-Korsakov

As well as being a magician when it came to orchestration, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was a master musical storyteller. At first it was Russian folklore that got his imaginations working, but in the late 1880s he began to look more widely for inspiration - to the dismay of some of his nationalist friends. An encounter with Wagner's operas left a deep impression, and around the same time he began to look to other cultures for inspiration – Spain for the popular *Capriccio Espagnol* ('Spanish Caprice', 1887), followed by perhaps his most famous work, the 'symphonic suite for orchestra *Scheherazade* (1888), based on the famous collection of stories known as 'The Arabian Nights'. Here we meet the Sultan Shakriar, one of literature's most spectacular misogynists. Convince of the falsity of all women, the Sultan vows to execute each one he takes to wife after their first night together. But the wily Scheherazade gets the better

of him by telling him stories, each finishing on an enticing cliff-hanger. Gradually the Sultan's heart melts, and he renounces his vow.

Rimsky-Korsakov later insisted that he didn't follow any of Scheherazade's stories in detail: 'All I had desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as *symphonic music*, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders and not merely four pieces played one after the other and composed on themes common to all the four movements.' But the stern, brassy opening theme has to be the Sultan, while the soaring solo violin and harp tendrils that follows is clearly Scheherazade herself, weaving her poetic spell as she sets the scene for her first tale. The swirling string figures in the first movement then vividly evoke Sinbad's ship ploughing through the waves.

Rimsky did have a point –perhaps it's best to let the 'theatre of the mind' work for itself and picture our own heroic adventures for 'The Tale of the Kalender Prince', while any pair of star-crossed lovers will do for 'Young Prince and Young Princess'. It's possible to follow Rimsky's synopsis stage by stage in the finale (the ship crashing onto the rock to a loud gong stroke), or you can simply to treat it as a wonderfully colourful and dramatic symphonic summing up. At the end though the symbolism is unmistakable: Scheherazade's free-floating solo violin and the Sultan's stern opening theme are combined in harmony, and the last word is left to Scheherazade herself.

About the Artists

Karel Deseure

Flemish conductor Karel Deseure is an artist of natural conducting talent and authority, as those who have seen him conduct at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall in the past will attest.

Deseure started his musical career as a flautist, studying for a Masters at the Royal Flemish Conservatoire in Antwerp before going on to train as a conductor at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague. In 2012 he was awarded the prestigious Anton Kersjes Foundation Scholarship for conductors, and in 2014 he took masterclasses with Bernard Haitink at the Lucerne Festival. Five years ago, he was appointed professor of conducting at the Amsterdam University of the Arts.

Deseure is sought after as both a concert and opera conductor, with recent concerts and productions including Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Puccini's *Le Villi* with Opera Zuid, and Mozart and Beethoven with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

Elizabeth Llewellyn
Known internationally for her "rich, opulent voice" (The Times) as well as for her "beautiful depth of expression and emotional intelligence" (The Telegraph), Elizabeth was awarded an MBE in The Queen's Birthday Honours 2022 for services to classical music and was made a Fellow of the Royal Northern College of Music in 2019.

As a regular concert soloist, highlights have included the world-premiere of James MacMillan's When *Soft Voices Die* at the First Night of the BBC Proms 2021, the UK premiere of Martinsson's *Ich Denke Dein*, R. Strauss' *Vier Letzte Lieder* twice with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, under the batons of Donald Runnicles, Carlo Rizzi, and Martyn Brabbins respectively, Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with Esa-Pekka Salonen, and most recently Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* with the Münchner Rundfunk Orchester conducted by Patrick Hahn.

Elizabeth is making her Liverpool debut with the Orchestra in this concert.

About the Composers

Nikolai Tcherepnin

A contemporary of Glazunov, Scriabin and Rachmaninov, Nikolai Tcherepnin was a prominent late 19th and early 20th Century conductor, pianist and composer.

Tcherepnin was born in St Petersburg in May 1873 where his father, also Nikolai, was a wealthy and well-known physician – and strict disciplinarian - who knew artists like Modest Mussorgsky and Fyodor Dostoevsky (he was at the writer's deathbed). Tcherepnin's mother died when he was a baby.
At his father's insistence, he studied law at university, but he also then attended the St Petersburg Conservatory – studying composition with Rimsky-Korsakov. Tcherepnin later taught at the Conservatory himself where his students would include Sergei Prokofiev.

It was in 1896, while studying under Rimsky-Korsakov, that a young Tcherepnin composed an evocative overture for Edmund Rostand's play *La Princesse lointaine*.

After his graduation he conducted the Russian Symphony Concerts at home, and in 1909, on an invitation from Diaghilev, the first season of the famed Ballet Russes in Paris – the start of a five-year tenure, where he was on the podium for the performance of his first ballet, *Le Pavillion d'Armide*, which he has composed while at the Conservatory. It had originally been premiered in St Petersburg two years earlier with Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinksy in the title roles.

Tcherepnin the composer became known principally for ballets, symphonic poems, songs and piano music. In addition to *Le Pavillion d'Armide* – widely considered his masterwork - his ballets included the one-act *Narcisse et Écho*, *The Masque of Red Death*, inspired by Edgar Allen Poe, and *Bacchus / Dionysus*.

Having fled revolutionary St Petersburg for a position as director of the conservatory in Tblisi, when Georgia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1921, Tcherepnin moved west, settling permanently in Paris where he led a Russian conservatory.

He died at Issy-les-Moulineaux near Paris on June 26, 1945, at the age of 72. Did you know? Nikolai Tchernepnin was the founder of a four-generation (and counting) musical dynasty which includes his son Alexander, a composer and pianist; grandsons Serge – a composer and electronic instrument maker, and Ivan, an award-winning experimental composer, and now great-grandsons Sergei and Stefan who are both artists working with sound.

Richard Strauss

Richard Strauss was a young composer in a hurry – by the time he was 18 he already had 100 works to his name. Over the course of a seven-decade career, he produced more than 200 major compositions, among them the operas and tone poems for which he is best known.

The first child of horn player Franz Joseph Strauss and his wife Josepha, Strauss was born in Munich in 1864 and showed an early aptitude for music. He started piano lessons at four, violin at eight and also learned from sitting in on rehearsals of the Munich Court Orchestra, whose assistant conductor gave him tuition in theory and orchestration. At the age of 21 he was appointed assistant conductor to Hans von Bülow at the Meiningen Orchestra. One of the other candidates he beat to the post was Gustav Mahler.

Described as a Post-Romantic, Strauss' breakthrough as a composer came with *Don Juan* in 1888, and by the turn of the 20th Century he had consolidated his international standing as both composer and conductor. His opera *Salome* was so successful he could then afford to build a home in the Bavarian alpine resort of Garmisch-Partenkirchen (a favourite spot for conductors, composers, singers and authors), where he lived until his death in September 1949.

While early works were influenced by the Romantics, including Wagner, Strauss developed his own musical style over time, one which has been described as encompassing rich, textured orchestration and dramatic, expressive power, and utilising dissonance and extended tonality. Towards the end of his life his work became more conservative. In 1920, Strauss co-founded the Salzburg Festival. He received many honours over the years, including the French Croix de Chevalier and the Royal Philharmonic Society's Gold Medal.

Enjoy images from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* set to Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov

But for a 180-degree change of career, **Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov** might have made a name for himself not as a composer but as an officer in the 19th Century Imperial Russian Navy.

As it turned out, the Tsar's fleet's loss was classical music's gain when the 27-year-old – at that point sailing a desk ashore - was offered a professorship at the St Petersburg Conservatory despite having no real experience. He would eventually lose his post there after supporting students' right to demonstrate as part of the 1905 Revolution.

Born into an aristocratic Russian family in 1844 (an ancestor was a short-lived lover of Catherine the Great), Rimsky-Korsakov was expected to go to sea and joined the navy aged 12.

After six years of training, he set off on a three-year, around-the-world voyage which included stops in New York, England, Italy, France, Spain and Norway and during which he composed what would become the first of three symphonies.

Ahead of that, aged 18, Rimsky-Korsakov had been introduced to Mily Balakirev who in turn introduced him to Cesar Cui and Modest Mussorgsky. Little can the teenager have known then the quartet, along with Alexander Borodin, would one day come together to promote and create a distinctly 'Russian' body of music and would be known as **'The Mighty Handful' or 'The Five'**.

Initially, Rimsky-Korsakov ran both naval and musical careers in parallel (he apparently taught classes in naval uniform) but eventually he jumped ship and made teaching and composition his sole occupation. He also became the holder of posts including Inspector of the Navy Chorus and Assistant Director of the Imperial Chapel Choir.

From the 1870s onwards, he enjoyed a musical mutual admiration society with **Tchaikovsky**.

He remains best known for his exotic symphonic suite *Scheherazade*, inspired by the One Thousand and One Nights tales, *Capriccio Espagnol*, *The Flight of the Bumblebee* from the opera *The Tale of Tsar Sultan*, *The Snow Maiden*, and the *Russian Easter Festival Overture*. Troubled with angina from the 1890s, Rimsky-Korsakov died at his estate in Liubensk, 120 miles south of St Petersburg, in June 1908 at the age of 64.

Did you know? Rimsky-Korsakov's older brother Voin was a renowned navigator, hydrographer and explorer who was initially much more famous than his younger sibling. In the 1850s and 60s, Captain Rimsky-Korsakov researched an area of the Sea of Japan and there is small archipelago near Vladivostok named after him.

Enjoy Rimsky-Korsakov's *Russian Easter Festival Overture.*