

**80th Birthday
Season 2025/26**

**Boris Giltburg plays Prokofiev
and Rachmaninov**

Monday 17 November 2025

Royal Festival Hall

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In a nutshell...

Mussorgsky's *A Night on the Bare Mountain* was inspired by a story of a Witches' Sabbath on St John's Eve – and he completed the first version on St John's Eve itself, 23 June 1867.

Prokofiev and Rachmaninov were both acclaimed concert pianists, and both wrote their piano concertos to perform themselves. Rachmaninov was the soloist in his Piano Concerto No. 2, one of his most enduringly popular works, 143 times in his career.

The last time Boris Giltburg performed with the Philharmonia was in a multi-storey car park. In a UK first, we played all four Rachmaninov piano concertos in one concert, with four different pianists, at Bold Tendencies in Peckham.

Rachmaninov's concerto has been used in the soundtrack of several films, including *Brief Encounter*. It has also inspired two Frank Sinatra songs, Eric Carmen's 1975 ballad *All by Myself*, and Muse's 2004 song *Butterflies and Hurricanes*.

Welcome to this evening's concert

Philharmonia **80**

Boris Giltburg plays Prokofiev and Rachmaninov

Monday 17 November 2025, 7.30pm
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Lawrence Foster – conductor
Boris Giltburg – piano

MUSSORGSKY *A Night on the Bare Mountain* (13 mins)
PROKOFIEV *Piano Concerto No. 3* (27 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

RACHMANINOV *The Rock* (13 mins)
RACHMANINOV *Piano Concerto No. 2* (33 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 9.40pm

This concert was originally advertised with Evgeny Kissin as soloist, performing Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 1 and Scriabin's Piano Concerto. Unfortunately, due to ill health, Kissin is no longer able to perform with us. We are grateful to Boris Giltburg for stepping in at short notice.

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Philharmonia Social

Philharmonia Social is our new initiative to help everyone feel welcome at our concerts.

Our staff, players and volunteers will be on Level 2 next to the singing lift before and after the concert, and in the interval.

6.30pm: a short, informal introduction to the orchestra and this evening's performance

6.45pm, interval and 9.45pm: your chance to join the conversation, ask questions and connect with your fellow audience members



Francisco Goya: Witches' Sabbath

Modest Mussorgsky (1839 - 1881)

A Night on the Bare Mountain

(1867, arranged by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov 1886) (13 mins)

Mussorgsky regarded his *A Night on the Bare Mountain* as a great leap towards the creation of a Russian style that was distinct from the mainstream of European music. In a letter, he revealed the programme he had in mind for the piece: 'Witches gather on the Bare Mountain, gossiping and plotting while they wait for their Satanic master. He arrives in the guise of a goat, and the witches encircle his throne, singing to his glory. But this only angers Satan, and he commands that they begin the Sabbath forthwith... The form and character of my piece are Russian and original.'

In his choice of topic, we can detect Mussorgsky's fascination with Berlioz and Liszt, who were both famed for pieces depicting the demonic realm:

Berlioz, in the Witches' Sabbath of the *Symphonie fantastique*, and Liszt in his *Faust Symphony* and *Mephisto Waltzes*. Mussorgsky and the other members of The Five (Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Cui and Borodin) considered both these composers to stand outside the European mainstream, and they admired and studied these pieces. Mussorgsky took this 'progressive' music of Berlioz and Liszt, startling and full of invention, as his inspiration.

The disconcerting novelty of *A Night on the Bare Mountain* was too much even for Mussorgsky's musical colleagues, and the score remained unperformed during the composer's lifetime. Rimsky-Korsakov later made his own free arrangement, marshalling the original material into a more orderly composition, although the chaos of Mussorgsky's version was in keeping with the subject matter. He also reassured audiences with a new ending that begins with the tolling of church bells in the light of morning.

Programme note © Marina Frolova-Walker

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 - 1953)

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C, Op. 26

(1921) (27 mins)

Andante – Allegro

Theme and Variations

Allegro ma non troppo

In 1921, resigned to staying in the West until the turmoil in his native Russia had subsided, Prokofiev needed a bright and breezy vehicle with which to showcase his talents to American and European audiences. The Third Concerto, drawing extensively on past sketches and put together during an idyllic summer at St Brevin-les-Pins on the west coast of France, is the result.

Never predictable, the concerto makes a virtue out of its extreme contrasts. A note of tender lyricism is immediately established by the clarinet's very Russian melody at the beginning, only to be brushed aside by the bustle of a more extrovert passage, which in turn yields to a sarcastic little dance accompanied by castanets and a flyaway, splintered afterword. Instead of developing his material, Prokofiev then allows for a reverie on the opening theme before taking the fun and games to devilish heights.

The central variations on the quirky gavotte-theme have a compelling logic, progressively extracting its demonic

aspect before the atmospheric nocturne of the fourth variation yields to the wild cavalcade of the fifth (this is Prokofiev in the fierce mood of the *Scythian Suite*, his consciously 'barbaric' concert score extracted from a discarded ballet for Diaghilev).

The finale looks set to continue the devilment of the first movement, with some hair-raisingly difficult writing for the piano. Prokofiev's good friend and fellow-composer Nikolay Myaskovsky must have been thinking of this when he told him that 'no-one apart from you will be able to play it.' But he was also surprised by the lush, melancholy theme at the heart of the finale, more in the Rachmaninov or Scriabin tradition than anything else; its prominence and length led him to ask 'doesn't this give the impression of a man with a fat belly and short arms and legs?' Perhaps it does; but the short arms and legs go into spectacular overdrive for the exciting coda.

Prokofiev makes a racy, if rather rough-edged, argument for his work in the recording he made with Piero Coppola and the London Symphony Orchestra in 1932; in a good live performance, the panache and drive of the concerto never fail to stun.

Programme note © David Nice

Interval (20 mins)



Sergei Rachmaninov in 1892, Moscow Conservatory

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873 - 1943)

The Rock, Op. 7 (1893) (13 mins)

Rachmaninov's symphonic fantasy *The Rock* was his first major work after his graduation piece, the opera *Aleko*, which had impressed Tchaikovsky so much that he called for it to be produced at the Bolshoi. But his early professional success was tempered by the end of his relationship with Vera Skalon, whose parents forbade the pair to marry.

Perhaps this inner turbulence led him to the Chekhov story *On the Road*. The protagonist has made a mess of his life, but encounters a younger woman who responds to his story so warmly that he sees the possibility of a new beginning. Yet when the snowstorm that brought them together subsides, they go their separate

ways. As the woman's carriage takes her away, the man stands rooted to the spot, the snow settling on him until he looks like the snow-covered rocks around him.

Rachmaninov also noted the epigraph Chekhov had taken from a poem by Lermontov: 'A golden cloud rests all the night / Upon the breast of a mighty rock': these images led him to the initial contrast of a low, gloomy, unsettled theme in the basses and a light, cheerful, frolicking melody in the solo flute. Then follows a new motif, which is passed through the orchestra and picks up speed, developing into a longer theme full of longing. Russian composers made variation form a mainstay of their national style, and Rachmaninov mastered the form too. Here his new theme is transformed, and even assumes a galloping rhythm at one point.

But where the 'nationalists' like Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov were interested in the picturesque and in folklore, Rachmaninov was drawn instead to the depiction of human emotion, often in turmoil, and in this he is closer to Wagner or Tchaikovsky. *The Rock* is no exception, and its inner storm leads to a huge climax; it rings out tragically and then dissipates, leaving behind only a trace.

Programme note © Marina Frolova-Walker

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op.18
(1900-01) (33 mins)

Moderato
Adagio sostenuto
Allegro scherzando

The premiere of Rachmaninov's First Symphony in 1897 was drunkenly conducted by Glazunov and was heavily criticised, leaving the composer depressed and unable to write. Then in 1899 Rachmaninov was asked by the Philharmonic Society to perform his Second Piano Concerto at the Queen's Hall in London. There was one snag: Rachmaninov hadn't even started it yet. He sought the help of Nikolai Dahl, a doctor of psychotherapy and hypnotherapy. Therapy sessions took place daily between January and April, and by the summer, 'new musical ideas began to stir'.

Rachmaninov then visited Italy, and started work on the concerto. His ideas coalesced on his return to Russia in August, and the second and third movements were performed in December 1900, with the composer as soloist. Even in its incomplete state the concerto was warmly received, and Rachmaninov felt encouraged to write the first movement. Rachmaninov gave the premiere of the complete concerto in the winter of 1901, dedicating the work to Dahl.

The Piano Concerto No. 2 was a great success, winning Rachmaninov the first of five Glinka Prizes. Writing in Moscow

newspaper *Russkiye Vedomosti*, Joel Engel argued that: "The symphonic and chamber music of Russia is ... in strong, trustworthy hands. Here Rachmaninov is in the front rank. It is sufficient to recall his last three important works to convince oneself of this – the Second Symphony, the Second Piano Concerto, and the Cello Sonata. Each was an event in its field, each evidenced the growth of Rachmaninov's talent, and each broadened the circle of this talent's admirers."

The first movement opens with dramatic chords for piano alone, after which a brooding theme is unfurled by violins, violas and clarinets. A wistful, yearning theme is presented by the piano, and the movement ends with a brilliant coda. The achingly beautiful slow movement, which shows the influence of Tchaikovsky, is one of Rachmaninov's greatest achievements. The lyrical music ebbs and flows, teasingly building and then subsiding until a more animated section leads into the piano's cadenza, after which a climactic moment unleashes radiant piano chords and full-throated orchestral writing. The orchestra opens the finale, the piano answering with a flurry of activity before a series of glittering exchanges. Rachmaninov holds back the more lyrical theme, heard first on oboe and strings, to be taken up by the piano with increasing passion. The conclusion is sumptuous and exhilarating, building to thrilling final bars.

Programme note © Joanna Wyld

Lawrence Foster – conductor



Lawrence Foster © Marc Ginot

Lawrence Foster is known for his exhilarating and expressive performances across a wide range of repertoire. In the 2025–2026 season, his engagements include performances with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the George Enescu Philharmonic in Bucharest, the NCPA Orchestra in China, and a tour in Poland with the Janáček Philharmonic Ostrava.

Foster was awarded the Koussevitzky Prize at Tanglewood in 1966, became assistant conductor to Zubin Mehta at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and chief guest conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1969. He has since held many music directorships around Europe and the US.

Foster served as artistic director of the George Enescu Festival from 1998 to 2001, reopening the doors of this great cultural event after the fall of communism in Romania.

In recent years he has recorded intensively for Pentatone, including a wide range of symphonic works and operas.

Boris Giltburg – piano



Boris Giltburg © Sasha Gusov

Boris Giltburg is lauded as a deeply sensitive, insightful and compelling interpreter. During the 2025/26 season, he performs with many leading orchestras and conductors, and gives recitals in the world's most prestigious venues.

Following the success of his Beethoven Piano Sonatas cycle across eight sold-out concerts at the Wigmore Hall, he continues the project in Brussels, Valencia and Santiago de Chile.

Giltburg is widely recognised as a leading interpreter of Rachmaninov. Earlier this year he performed the complete Preludes at the Southbank Centre, and the Third Piano Concerto with the Philharmonia at Bold Tendencies, and released an album of Rachmaninov's Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2 alongside his own version of *The Isle of the Dead*.

Giltburg's blog *Classical Music for All* is aimed at a non-specialist audience, and he has written for *Gramophone*, *BBC Music Magazine*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*.

About the Philharmonia

Founded in 1945, the Philharmonia Orchestra celebrates its 80th birthday in the 2025/26 season.

Conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali took up the baton as Principal Conductor in 2021, and Marin Alsop joined him as Principal Guest Conductor in 2023.

They follow in illustrious footsteps: Herbert von Karajan, Otto Klemperer, Riccardo Muti, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Christoph von Dohnányi, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Esa-Pekka Salonen are some of the key conductors who have shaped the Philharmonia's reputation as one of the world's great orchestras.

The Philharmonia has premiered music by composers including Richard Strauss, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Errollyn Wallen and performs with many of the world's most admired soloists. Víkingur Ólafsson is this season's Featured Artist, and Gabriela Ortiz is Featured Composer.

Resident at the Southbank Centre since 1995, the Philharmonia also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, and tours extensively worldwide. Last month the Orchestra undertook a major US tour culminating in two concerts at Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonia's 80-year recording history includes many benchmark LPs and more than 150 film and video game soundtracks. The Orchestra's recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and immersive installations and virtual reality experiences introduce orchestral music to new audiences.

The Philharmonia is committed to nurturing and developing the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.



Santtu-Matias Rouvali and the Philharmonia © Mark Allan

Who's who

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The Principal Flute Chair is endowed by Norbert and Sabine Reis
June Scott
The No. 2 Flute Chair is endowed anonymously

PICCOLO

Robert Looman †

OBOES

Timothy Rundle

The Principal Oboe Chair is endowed in memory of Stephen Rundle
Imogen Davies
The No. 2 Oboe Chair is endowed by Michael Stott

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