



NYO Victory

Khachaturian & Prokofiev

Wellington

Fri, 05 July, 6.30pm
Michael Fowler Centre

Palmerston North

Sat, 06 July, 7.30pm
Regent on Broadway

Tianyi Lu Conductor
Shan Liu Piano

Programme

Jessie Leov *Speculations on a Rainbow*

Khachaturian Piano Concerto

INTERVAL

Prokofiev Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major, Op. 100

It's both a pleasure and a privilege for the Adam Foundation to be the Principal Sponsor of the NZSO National Youth Orchestra for a quarter of a century.

The great American conductor Leonard Bernstein once said that it's "the artists of the world, the feelers and the thinkers, who will ultimately save us; who can articulate, educate, defy, insist, sing, and shout the big dreams."

My late husband Denis and I always enjoyed those "big dreams" whenever we sat in a concert hall to enjoy a performance by the National Youth Orchestra. While many young musicians have played in the orchestra, the same energy, passion and commitment can be seen and heard year after year. Every concert is memorable, every experience has been remarkable.

In celebrating the National Youth Orchestra's 65th anniversary this year, we continue to be reminded of how crucial the orchestra is as a training ground and launch pad for young musicians, conductors and composers.

For the 65th anniversary performances I'm also delighted that New Zealander Tianyi Lu, who has been enormously successful on the world stage, will conduct. Equally exciting is gifted pianist Shan Liu, one of the youngest soloists ever to perform with the National Youth Orchestra, and hearing the extraordinary *Speculations on a Rainbow* by NYO Composer-in-Residence Jessie Leov.

Thank you for joining us for an unforgettable evening of music.

Verna Adam
Adam Foundation

Jessie Leov (1994–)

Speculations on a Rainbow

Jessie Leov is a young Kiwi composer going places. Literally! She recently received Creative New Zealand funding to go to Princeton, New Jersey, as one of four early-career composers selected for the Edward T. Cone Composition Institute, to workshop her piece *Speculations on a Rainbow*. Despite this imminent future performance, we in New Zealand get to hear this piece first tonight.

Speculations on a Rainbow is inspired by a work by New Zealand artist Judy Millar. Lauded in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* for work both “energetic and overwhelming”, Millar is best known for her abstract paintings. The Millar work that fired Leov’s imagination was *The Rainbow Loop*, a wood-and-canvas artwork in which a wide, vibrantly painted strip perches, coiled like a rainbow apple peel, against a starkly patterned black-and-white surface. Leov’s interest was triggered by “the duality of Millar’s sweeping strokes of vibrant colour, offset by stark, monochromatic landscapes”. Consequently, “*Speculations on a Rainbow* weaves its way through a shifting canvas of stability and turbulence, stillness and motion, offering a brief glimpse into the temporary twisted world of *The Rainbow Loop*.”

A marimba and vibraphone repetitive ostinato sets the scene for Leov’s *Speculations*. Energetic but not frenetic, this ostinato develops an atmosphere of dreamy momentum. Some listeners might recognise a minimalist influence in the Philip Glass-ian repetitions and in the hard left turns into new keys, reminiscent of John Adams’ harmonic ‘gates’. As more and more layers coalesce, the work’s texture fills out, before we enter a new harmonic region, now with grand strokes of orchestral colour sweeping broadly over the constant up-down chopping ostinato. A lone triangle ‘ting’ cleverly brings this section to an end. Bassoon and clarinet curl up and around, all against the still hypnotic ostinatos. Listen for the return to material from the opening section, now without vibraphone or marimba, but retaining the generally positive feel. Long horn notes paint their noble colour against the wistful pastels of the strings. Soon enough, the brass swell and crash in climax, before an abrupt cut-off.

8 minutes

Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978)

Piano Concerto in D-flat Major, Op. 38

- I. Allegro ma non troppo e maestoso
- II. Andante con anima
- III. Allegro brillante

Aram Khachaturian's Piano Concerto was the work that put the young composer on the map – at least for Westerners. Written in 1936, the Piano Concerto was the happy fruit of Khachaturian's study at the Moscow Conservatory. But the work was also the product of Khachaturian's specific background. Born and raised in Tbilisi, Georgia, Khachaturian was ethnically Armenian through and through. In particular, John Henken, writing for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, notes that "the ashugh tradition of Armenian bards was an important influence on Khachaturian". Khachaturian even wrote a work for violin and piano in 1929 called *Song-Poem In Honour of an Ashugh*. The ashugh (aşik in Turkish, ashik in Arabic) was a bard, a poet who sings his poetry, while accompanying himself on a long-necked lute, often a bağlama or saz. On listening to ashugh music, you might notice the non-Western harmonies (often sounding more minor than major), the expressive portamenti (bends between notes), the repeated notes and, above all, the ornamental melisma – when the singer adds runs, turns, trills and other decorations to the melody in an often highly virtuosic way.

In his Piano Concerto, Khachaturian takes these aspects of ashugh music – especially the ornamental virtuosity – and turns the dial up to 11. The concerto begins with the initial theme in the piano (note the stentorian repeated notes). The orchestral tutti repeats the initial theme – remember this tune, Khachaturian is saying, it's important! – conveying grandeur and scale. Note the flashy figures in the piano, skipping down scales, as the orchestra maintains its maestoso splendour. A tantalising oboe solo calls out, followed by a solo violin, with both solos filled with expressive dissonances and Eastern flavour. The piano takes up the main theme with melismatic ornamentations in what is, interestingly, the first of not one but two cadenzas. In between these two cadenzas, we get to hear episodes of relentless orchestral madness next to moments of surprisingly colourful solo writing, particularly for the winds.

The second movement is bookended by mournful bass clarinet solos. The piano first enters very high and delicate, underlaid by low rich flute, again showing Khachaturian's ear for interesting orchestration. Speaking of which, this movement famously includes a part for flexatone, a kind of percussion instrument that produces a high eerie sound. Sometimes, the flexatone is substituted with musical saw or even violin. The third movement is unexpectedly jazzy, with definite shades of Gershwin in both the catchy

syncopations and the absolute tour de force pianism required of the soloist. The recitativo, essentially yet another solo cadenza, gives the pianist one more backbreaking chance to dazzle, before the final maestoso returns us to – you guessed it – a big broad singing-out of the very first theme in the work.

When the Piano Concerto premiered, it brought Khachaturian to the instant keen attention of Western European audiences.

35 minutes

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major, Op. 100

- I. Andante
- II. Allegro marcato
- III. Adagio
- IV. Allegro giocoso

Sergei Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony may or may not prove that good things take time. On the one hand, the Fifth, arguably one of his most celebrated and popular symphonies, took only a single month to draft. On the other hand, the Fifth was Prokofiev's first attempt at a symphony in 14 years, and some of the work's themes were sketched out years before – in some cases, as many as 12 years prior.

This long-gestating work's quick labour was probably accelerated by World War II. In 1944, Prokofiev was evacuated from Moscow, to which he had recently moved, out to Ivanovo, a composer's retreat 150 miles away where composers were fed and housed in safety, away from any kind of front line, allowing them to continue to work. While at Ivanovo, Prokofiev managed to complete the whole Fifth Symphony in two-piano form. From there, the symphony was fully orchestrated and completed for its eventual premiere four months later in January 1945, at a time when the Red Army was crossing Europe, pushing back the Nazi foe. At the premiere, Prokofiev ascended to the podium to conduct and raised his baton. At that exact moment, artillery fire rang out outside – a signal that the Red Army had triumphantly crossed into Germany. Pianist Sviatoslav Richter, who was in the audience, observed that Prokofiev "began [conducting the symphony] only after the cannons had stopped. There was something very significant in this, something symbolic. It was as if all of us – including Prokofiev – had reached some kind of shared turning point." And indeed, they had. The war's tide had turned. Five months later, Germany surrendered and Japan followed suit in September that year, ending the war for good.

This societal turn towards hope matched the overall positive mood of the Fifth Symphony, probably fuelling its massive instant popularity. Of course, the work itself is intrinsically appealing, full to the brim with examples of Prokofiev's prodigious gift for melody. The first movement's very first theme is a beautiful case in point, with flute and bassoon soaring in tandem two octaves apart. But the symphony's wartime context still makes itself known, in the militaristic sounds of snare drum and the dotted rhythms snapping us to attention. Note that this movement is quite slow. Elizabeth Schwarz, writing for the Oregon Symphony, argues that Prokofiev has actually structured the symphony like a Baroque sonata, its movements ordered as slow, fast, slow,

fast.

The fast second movement is one of Prokofiev's cheekiest scherzos, a satirical merry-go-round of catchy tunes. Early clarinet licks betray Prokofiev's familiarity with jazz, probably absorbed during his years living in Paris. A slower melody that gracefully glides up and down echoes Prokofiev's ballet scores (and may indeed be drawn directly from *Romeo and Juliet*, as he did rework discarded material from that ballet into this movement of the symphony). A bassoon solo midway through points towards omen and suggests the foreboding heard in full in the third movement Adagio. This movement initially starts almost like a densely textured waltz, but the flowing lyricism of the first movement soon takes over here too. The third movement similarly has roots in another Prokofiev work, namely a score intended for a proposed film of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*.

The fourth movement is, like the scherzo, upbeat and fun, beginning with a variation of the first movement's main theme. As buoyant as a hot air balloon, the music is peppered by quotes from the three previous movements. Prokofiev leaves the cleverest trick to last: the work builds to a full orchestral tutti, with grand blasts from the brass, before suddenly cutting down to just string soloists, percussion, piano and harp to carry the symphony headlong into its final chord of triumph.

46 minutes

Tianyi Lu

Conductor

Internationally known for her thrilling energy on the podium, her deeply creative approach and her open-hearted style of leadership, Chinese-born New Zealander Tianyi Lu collaborates with major orchestras and opera houses worldwide. Her work is driven by an ethos of empowerment, creating connection and compassion across diverse communities through music.

After winning First Prize at both the Sir Georg Solti International Conductors' Competition in Germany and the International Conducting Competition Guido Cantelli in Italy, Lu has been recently appointed Conductor-in-Residence with the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra in Norway. She is also the Female-Conductor-in-Residence with the Welsh National Opera and Principal Conductor of the St Woolos Sinfonia in the UK.

Recent highlights include concerts and recordings with the Noord Nederlands Orkest, Philharmonie Zuid-Nederland, Västerås Sinfonietta, Phion Orkest, Lapland Chamber Orchestra, Gulbenkian Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Ulster Orchestra and Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Passionately committed to diversity, equity and inclusion and to building a more empathetic world through the arts, Lu is an Artist Ambassador for Opera for Peace and is regularly invited to work with and speak to communities and institutions about her experiences in empowering leadership, transforming cultures, resilience and wellbeing. An inspiring and eloquent communicator, Lu has appeared in and hosted Welsh National Opera's Podcast The O Word, has spoken as a guest for London Marathon Events and the Do More Good podcast and conducted and hosted Ears Wide Open concerts with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Lu completed her Bachelor of Music with First Class Honours at the University of Auckland with Uwe Grodd and Karen Gylls, before studying at the University of Melbourne with John Hopkins. In 2015, she completed her Master of Music in Orchestral Conducting with Distinction at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, where she studied with David Jones.

She has assisted or attended masterclasses with Sir Andrew Davis and Xian Zhang with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Daniele Gatti with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Bernard Haitink with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra and is an alumna of the Hart Institute for Women Conductors at The Dallas Opera. Other teachers and mentors have included Sian Edwards, Carlo Rizzi, Neemi Järvi, Alexander Polyanichko, Kenneth Kiesler, Carlo Montanaro, Eckehard Stier and Alice Farnham.

Shan Liu

Piano

Shan Liu, a 14-year-old pianist and Year 10 student at Westlake Boys' High School, embarked on his musical journey close to the age of eight when he commenced formal piano lessons. Under the guidance of esteemed music educator Stephen De Pledge, Liu has garnered notable achievements in national and international piano competitions.

His accolades include the Grand Jury Prize at the 5th Freiburg EU Conservatory of Music Youth Piano Competition (2018), the Grand Jury Prize at the 2nd Everade National Youth Piano Competition (2018), the Grand Jury Prize at the 8th Macao International Piano Competition (2019), the Grand Gold Prize at the Pacific Rim (PRM) International Music Competition (2022) and the Gold Award at the GOCAA New York International Music Competition (2023).

Additionally, Liu has secured first place in many prestigious competitions such as the 2020 Cesar Franck International Piano Competition (Belgium), the 2020 Kings Peak International Piano Competition (USA), the 2021 New Zealand Young Artist Piano Concerto Competition, the 2022 International Piano Competition for Young Musicians (The Netherlands) and the 2023 GOCAA New York International Music Competition NZ National Round. Notably, in 2023, Liu was the winner of the Lewis Eady National Junior Piano Competition, becoming the youngest winner in the event history. In 2023, Liu also received the Variety Artists Club of New Zealand Classical Music Award.

In recognition of his exceptional talent, Liu was awarded a full scholarship to Germany in August 2019 to participate in a masterclass with Manfred Fock at the Lübeck Conservatory of Music.

Liu's performances have graced renowned venues such as Carnegie Hall in New York, Sydney Opera House and Auckland Town Hall. In April 2022, he received an invitation from the International Music Festival Beethoven Orbit 2022 to present his solo piano recital concert in Aachen, Germany, earning acclaim from local media for his remarkable artistry.

A seasoned collaborator, Liu began performing with orchestras at the tender age of nine. He has had the privilege of appearing as a piano soloist with esteemed orchestras including New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, NZSO National Youth Orchestra, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, Auckland Symphony Orchestra, Manukau Symphony Orchestra, Bay of Plenty Symphonia, St Matthews Chamber Orchestra and Orchestra Auckland.

Beside piano, Liu loves playing percussion and is the section leader of Westlake Boys' High School concert band. Liu also like playing chess, badminton and table tennis, swimming and reading.