Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

CONCERT PROGRAM

An American in Paris

Friday 30 October at 7.30pm
Melbourne Town Hall

Emirates
Principal Partner
WHAT’S ON NOVEMBER 2015 – FEBRUARY 2016

TCHAIKOVSKY AND GRIEG
Friday 13 November
Saturday 14 November
Asher Fisch conducts three masterworks that defined the Romantic era. Tchaikovsky’s stirring *Romeo and Juliet* is followed by Grieg’s poignant Piano Concerto and the high-voltage intensity of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony.

SIBELIUS’ FINLANDIA
Thursday 19 November
Friday 20 November
Yan Pascal Tortelier celebrates the 150th anniversary of two Nordic masters. Sibelius’ majestic *Finlandia* is balanced against Nielsen’s spirited Violin Concerto. Also featured in this program is Sibelius’ Symphony No.5 and tone poem *The Swan of Tuonela*.

BRAHMS AND TCHAIKOVSKY
Thursday 26 November
Friday 27 November
Saturday 28 November
*Divertimento*, Bartók’s dark take on the Baroque, kick-starts this night of European festivities. Brahms’ Violin Concerto delivers a fiery, gypsy-inspired rondo and Tchaikovsky’s Serenade for Strings pays homage to Mozart.

MESSIAH
Saturday 5 December
Sunday 6 December
Join conductor Bramwell Tovey, the MSO Chorus and renowned international soloists for one of the MSO’s most beloved Christmas traditions, Handel’s *Messiah*.

CHRISTMAS CAROLS
Saturday 12 December
Sunday 13 December
Bramwell Tovey joins the MSO as conductor, pianist and host in this celebration of the great musical traditions of Christmas, from famous orchestral works and favourite Christmas songs to the most beloved of Yuletide carols.

HITCHCOCK AND HERRMANN
Friday 5 February
Saturday 6 February
Immerse yourself in scenes from Alfred Hitchcock’s classic films on the big screen and hear Bernard Herrmann’s astonishing scores in 3D – performed live by the MSO.
ARTISTS

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

Nicholas Milton conductor
David Fung piano
Calvin Bowman organ

REPERTOIRE

Gershwin
An American in Paris

Ravel Piano Concerto in G

— Interval —

Saint-Saëns
Symphony No.3 Organ

This concert has a duration of approximately 2 hours including one 20 minute interval.

This performance will be recorded for broadcast on ABC Classic FM on Wednesday 4 November at 1pm.

Pre-Concert Recital
6:30pm Friday 30 October, Melbourne Town Hall
Ticket-holders are invited to attend a free pre-concert recital by Dr Calvin Bowman, on the Melbourne Town Hall grand organ.
One of the cultural treasures of this great city is the Melbourne Town Hall organ. The sound of this majestic instrument perfectly complements the burnished grandeur of the hall itself. Tonight it will be put through its paces by Calvin Bowman in one of the greatest showpieces for organ: Saint-Saens’ Symphony No.3, universally known (unsurprisingly!) as the *Organ Symphony*. The composer himself remarked of this powerful work (which truly may be said to ‘pull out all the stops’) ‘I gave everything to it I was able to give.’

The program, conducted by Nicholas Milton, also includes Ravel’s infectious, jazz-inspired Piano Concerto in G with David Fung, and the evening begins in flamboyant style with George Gershwin’s *American in Paris*. There’s a lot to enjoy!

Sir Andrew Davis  
Chief Conductor
With a reputation for excellence, versatility and innovation, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra is Australia’s oldest orchestra, established in 1906. The Orchestra currently performs live to more than 200,000 people annually, in concerts ranging from subscription performances at its home, Hamer Hall at Arts Centre Melbourne, to its annual free concerts at Melbourne’s largest outdoor venue, the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

Sir Andrew Davis gave his inaugural concerts as Chief Conductor of the MSO in April 2013, having made his debut with the Orchestra in 2009. Highlights of his tenure have included collaborations with artists including Bryn Terfel, Emanuel Ax and Truls Mørk, the release of recordings of music by Richard Strauss, Charles Ives, Percy Grainger and Eugene Goossens, a 2014 European Festivals tour, and a multi-year cycle of Mahler’s Symphonies.

The MSO also works each season with Principal Guest Conductor Diego Matheuz, Associate Conductor Benjamin Northey and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Chorus. Recent guest conductors to the MSO have included Thomas Adès, John Adams, Tan Dun, Charles Dutoit, Jakub Hrůša, Mark Wigglesworth, Markus Stenz and Simone Young. The Orchestra has also collaborated with non-classical musicians including Burt Bacharach, Ben Folds, Nick Cave, Sting and Tim Minchin.

The MSO reaches an even larger audience through its regular concert broadcasts on ABC Classic FM, also streamed online, and through recordings on Chandos and ABC Classics. The MSO’s Education and Community Engagement initiatives deliver innovative and engaging programs to audiences of all ages, including MSO Learn, an educational iPhone and iPad app designed to teach children about the inner workings of an orchestra.
Australian-born conductor Nicholas Milton has established an outstanding reputation for his charismatic stage presence and thrilling interpretations of an extensive repertoire spanning both concert and opera.

In September 2014, Nicholas was named General Music Director and Chief Conductor of the State Opera House (Saarländisches Staatstheater) in Saarbrücken, Germany.

Appointed as one of the youngest-ever concertmasters of a major Australian orchestra, Nicholas enjoyed a distinguished career as a violinist and chamber musician before dedicating himself exclusively to conducting. Now based in Europe, he is a regular guest at several leading opera houses.

In 2015, he conducts Tosca for Opera Australia at the Sydney Opera House, performances of Die Fledermaus in Stuttgart, The Tales of Hoffmann in Berlin – as well as return engagements with the Stuttgarter Philharmoniker, Dortmunder Philharmoniker, Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana, Philharmonisches Orchester Freiburg and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Nicholas served as General Music Director of the Jena Philharmonic Orchestra from 2004 until 2010. Since 2001, he has been Chief Conductor of the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra, and since 2007, Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra. He will continue to serve as Chief Conductor of the Innviertler Symphonie Orchester of Austria until 2017.

David Fung has appeared as guest soloist with all the major orchestras in his native Australia, and internationally with orchestras including the Israel Camerata Jerusalem, Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, National Orchestra of Belgium, Royal Chamber Orchestra of Wallonia, San Diego Symphony, San Francisco Symphony and the Xiamen Philharmonic Orchestra. He is a frequent guest artist of concert series and festivals throughout the world. As Artistic Director of the Bari International Music Festival in Italy, his innovative programming has led to sold-out performances in the Auditorium Diocesano La Vallisa, one of the oldest churches and most prestigious cultural venues in the city.

His debut album with Yarlung Records includes Liszt's Sonata in B minor and Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este, and Ravel's Jeux d'eau and La valse. His second album, Evening Conversations, features a solo recital of intimate works by composers ranging from Mozart to Tan Dun.

David Fung garnered international attention as a prize winner of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels and the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Master Competition in Tel Aviv. He was the winner of the 2002 ABC Symphony Australia Young Performer of the Year Award.
An accomplished organist, Dr Calvin Bowman has presented the complete Bach organ works twice in public, once in 1995 and then again in 2009 for the Melbourne Festival when he performed them in a single seventeen hour sitting. For the latter feat he was nominated for a Helpmann Award for Best Individual Classical Music Performance. Calvin has also premiered major keyboard works by Philip Glass, Peter Sculthorpe, Ross Edwards, Graeme Koehne, Richard Mills and Andrew Schultz, and appeared as keyboard soloist with many Australian orchestras including the Melbourne, Adelaide, West Australian and Tasmanian Symphony Orchestras, and Orchestra Victoria.

As a composer, Calvin has been awarded an Australia Council Fellowship and continues to be commissioned widely. His works have been conducted and performed by musicians such as Sir Neville Marriner, Sebastian Lang-Lessing, Brad Cohen, Emma Matthews, Jacqueline Porter, Greta Bradman and Sara Macliver; recorded for Deutsche Grammophon and ABC Classics; and played by the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte Carlo as well as by Australian orchestras. His most recent significant work, *The Magic Pudding – The Opera*, was commissioned by Victorian Opera and first performed in 2013.

Calvin was the first Australian to graduate with a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Yale University with the assistance of a Fulbright scholarship.
A Parisian in America, Maurice Ravel was much impressed by George Gershwin's performance of the Rhapsody in Blue at a New York party in his honour in early 1928. Gershwin is said to have asked Ravel for lessons – actually, Gershwin seems to have made a habit of dazzling established composers and then asking for lessons; possibly, the inevitable polite refusal became a badge of honour – but Ravel famously told him he should be 'a first-rate Gershwin rather than a second-rate Ravel'.

Gershwin and his brother Ira spent three months in Paris shortly after this, warmly welcomed by Ravel among others; Ravel would pay Gershwin the compliment of imitation in his G major Piano Concerto the following year. On an earlier visit Gershwin dashed off a piece that he noted was 'very Parisienne'. During and after his 1928 visit, and in response to a commission from Walter Damrosch of the New York Philharmonic, he returned to this fragment, elaborating it into An American in Paris, a 'rhapsodic ballet' which 'depicts the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere'. (The score provides the climactic finale to the 1951 MGM film An American in Paris, a ballet in which characters played by Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron declare their love against a backdrop of famous French paintings.)

Gershwin was no 'untutored genius'; while working as a successful song-writer, between 1915 and 1921 he had been taking lessons in 'classical' harmony and counterpoint, and while works such as Rhapsody in Blue were indeed orchestrated by others, Gershwin was at pains to note that the orchestration of An American in Paris was all his own work. (In fact, the published version was slightly revised by Frank Campbell-Watson.) In an interview with Musical America that he gave while composing the piece, Gershwin noted that 'the opening part will be developed in typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and the Six, though all the themes are original', a clear signal that he rightly considered himself a peer of his Parisian art-music contemporaries.

The piece is, broadly speaking, in ternary form with a final coda. The opening 'gay' section, which refers to the maxixe, a fashionable Brazilian dance, depicts Paris' bustle through the repetition of short rhythmic cells, including those produced by taxi-horns (of which Gershwin purchased several for the New York Philharmonic's premiere of the work), which add a knockabout air to the score. The first section is also notable for its deft use of tuned percussion.

A violin cadenza leads into what Gershwin described to Musical America as:

*a rich blues ... Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simpler than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax, followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impression of Paris.*

© Gordon Kerry 2014

The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra first performed An American in Paris on 3 November 1960 under conductor Henry Krips, and most recently at the 2014 Myer Free Concert with Benjamin Northey.
It is scarcely surprising that Ravel wrote two of the greatest piano concertos of the 20th century. He was, after all, a concert pianist himself, as well as a composer of the highest calibre for solo piano, and arguably the greatest orchestrator of his generation. What was unexpected, however, was that he took so long to get around to the task, only writing the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand and the Piano Concerto in G simultaneously at the end of his career. Prior to those two masterpieces from the early 1930s, the closest he ever came to the form was an aborted Rhapsody (or Suite) for piano and orchestra based on Basque folk melodies in 1914.

During the 1920s, however, Ravel turned hip. Always given to a degree of dandyism, he began frequenting the late-night jazz clubs then springing up all over Paris. This influence is most clearly observable in the G major Piano Concerto. The idea for the opening theme came to him in 1927 as he was travelling by train from Oxford to London. He then lifted themes from his old Basque Rhapsody and reworked them into a more distinctively modern idiom.

Perhaps the biggest impetus of all came in 1928 when, while on a concert tour in America, Ravel encountered Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue and met the composer. In Rhapsody and reworked them into a more distinctively Gershwinesque feel. Ravel originally intended to perform the solo part of the concerto himself (which may explain why it is written with so much more of a jazz feel than the Left Hand Concerto written for Paul Wittgenstein), but in the end his ailing health prevented him from doing so. Instead, the concerto was premiered by Marguerite Long at the Salle Pleyel in 1932, with Ravel himself conducting. She was to become an indefatigable champion of the work, and she and Ravel recorded it soon after the premiere.

For all its hipness, there is no mistaking that this is a ‘classical’ concerto in the strict, Mozartian sense of the term. According to Ravel:

Planning the two concertos simultaneously was an interesting experience. The one in which I shall appear as the interpreter is a concerto in the true sense of the word: I mean that it is written very much in the same spirit as those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. The music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be lighthearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or dramatic effects.

Indeed so keen was Ravel to keep the concerto from self-indulgent solemnity that he considered calling it a ‘Divertissement’. In any case, it became a true concerto in which fun, self-parody and exquisite beauty all play their part; but there is a ‘brittleness’ in the concerto’s high spirits, not to mention a pervasive and ‘in spite of itself’ sadness to the slow movement.

It begins, appropriately enough, with a crack-of-the-whip and it barely stops racing during the entirety of its first movement. Scored with virtuosic dexterity and lightness, the jazzy rhythm drives on through spiky arpeggios in the piano, a piccolo solo, tremolos and pizzicati in the strings, and a trumpet solo. Even the harp takes the spotlight, while a mixture of broad, lurching, Gershwinesque themes (some sounding like they’ve had one martini too many) dominates the middle section. Despite the wealth of invention, the sense of direction and purpose never falters, and before breath can be drawn, the movement hurtles to its abrupt conclusion.

The sublime Adagio was modelled on the equivalent movement in Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet. Writing painstakingly, two bars at a time, Ravel agonised over this movement for many months, confessing later that it ‘almost killed him’. Its prevailing mood is that of a nocturne, and the piano’s achingly beautiful main theme seems almost hesitant, yet somehow inexorable and assured. After the main theme is completed, the middle section becomes more agitated and tonally ambiguous. Following some strident, stifling chords, the main melody is once more ‘released’, in the woodwind with the piano weaving arabesques and delicate arpeggios around it. Finally, amidst trills on the piano, this most astonishing of slow movements draws to a close. (Interestingly, on the recording which Ravel made with Marguerite Long, he conducts the slow movement at a considerably faster tempo than that indicated in the score!)

Ravel told Marguerite Long that he was going to end the concerto on those piano trills, but in fact he added a finale in which the frenetic pace of the opening movement is actually exceeded. Supposedly a rondo (although at this pace it’s not easy to tell), it is filled with jazz sounds and dazzling piano effects. In the wink of an eye it presents percussive flourishes, trombone glissandi and brief snatches of big band imitations from brass and woodwind, before racing on to its sudden but emphatic end.

Martin Buzacott
© Symphony Australia

The first performance of Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra took place on 16 October 1954 with conductor Eugene Goossens and soloist Natasha Litvin. The Orchestra’s most recent performance was in July 2012 with Tadaaki Otaka and Jean-Efflam Bavouzet.
In 1887 Charles Gounod heard the Parisian premiere of Saint-Saëns’ ‘Symphony No. 3 in C minor, with Organ and Two Pianos’ and famously gushed, ‘There goes the French Beethoven.’ Hyperbole, of course, but the work has remained hugely popular ever since. The reasons for its continued currency are easy to find: Saint-Saëns believed that ‘the time has come for the symphony to benefit by the progress of modern instrumentation’ and his orchestration is masterly, with a dramatic range of sounds from the diaphanous to the massive. The ‘Organ’ Symphony is, moreover, replete with memorable tunes and intricate counterpoint, traversing an emotional landscape from deepest melancholy to sheer joy.

It was commissioned and first performed under the composer’s baton by the London Philharmonic Society in 1886. During the composition Saint-Saëns’ old friend Liszt visited him and admired the score; sadly, Liszt died weeks before the premiere, inspiring Saint-Saëns to dedicate the symphony to his memory. Liszt had been a great mentor ever since 1857 when, hearing Saint-Saëns improvising at the organ of the Madeleine church, he had declared the young Frenchman to be ‘the finest organist in the world’. Saint-Saëns for his part fought for the due recognition of the older man as composer as well as pianist, leading Debussy grudgingly to admit, ‘We are indebted to him for having recognised the tumultuous genius of Liszt.’

Perhaps, though, there is more than just hyperbole to the Beethoven comparison. Like many a symphony of Beethoven’s, especially the Fifth, the ‘Organ’ Symphony begins in darkness and turbulence and only toward the end does it reach the bright affirmation of C major. And like Beethoven in the Fifth, Saint-Saëns is remarkably economical with his thematic material: it is possible to trace almost all those melodies back to the motifs heard in the work’s introduction and the opening of the following Allegro moderato. How the composer elaborates these into such a contrasting abundance of melodies is by the principle of thematic transformation developed by Liszt.

In his program note for the first performance, Saint-Saëns wrote that ‘this symphony is divided into two parts. Nevertheless, it embraces in principle the four traditional movements, but the first is altered in its development to serve as the introduction to the Poco adagio, and the scherzo is connected by the same process to the finale.’ In other words, the four movements are grouped in pairs, with the main dramatic weight carried by the second of each.

The opening Adagio is deliberately vague in direction, containing almost inconsequential motifs that, as we have noted, become transformed in the course of the work. The static nature of the introduction enhances the release of energy in the Allegro moderato whose febrile theme begins with the same notes as the plainchant for the Dies irae. Saint-Saëns had, after all, been trained as a church musician and taught at the Ecole Niedermeyer, a school whose founder was an authority on how ‘modern harmony is submitted to the form of the ancient modes’. This fast music, however, seems to peter out, subsiding into the beautifully sombre and emotionally searching Poco adagio. It is here that the organ makes an appearance, providing a velvet backdrop for the questing second theme of the movement.

Part II opens with a turbulent scherzo punctuated by timpani. It too builds in sound and fury but mysteriously winds down to a quiet, simple texture built on another chant-like motif. Only now does Saint-Saëns unleash the full power of the organ. A shattering C major chord opens onto a world of sparkling piano figurations, chorale melodies and an overpoweringly joyful final peroration.

Gordon Kerry © 2009
The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra first performed Saint-Saëns’ Organ Symphony on 11 August 1965 under conductor Willem van Otterloo, and most recently in October 2009 with Richard Gill.
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**Harp**
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Leigh Harrold*  
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