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The RNO Festival: A Chance to Hear Russia's Finest Symphonic Orchestra

By Raymond Stults

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The Russian National Orchestra was founded by eminent Russian pianist and conductor Mikhail Pletnev in 1990. **RNO**

For the eighth year in a row, the Russian National Orchestra, one of the country's very finest symphonic ensembles, inaugurates the classical music concert season with its Grand Festival, which runs from this evening until September 26.

Though somewhat reduced in scale this year, no doubt due to current economic conditions, the festival has nonetheless come up, as usual, with a diverse array of concerts that promise to be among the most memorable to be heard all season long.

The festival begins tonight and tomorrow with a pair of concerts on a chamber scale at Philharmonia-2, the acoustically superb concert hall that opened two years ago in southwest Moscow's Olympic Village.

Tonight's concert consists entirely of Franz Schubert's "Winterreise," (Winter Journey) probably the greatest of all German-language song cycles. One of the composer's very last works, it features 24 songs that form a monologue on the subjects of lost and unrequited love.

Vocal soloist is German baritone Stephan Genz, a noted interpreter of the German song repertoire. Accompanying him at the piano will be RNO artistic director Mikhail Pletnev.

Pletnev plays again tomorrow evening, in a rare solo recital of works by Johann Sebastian Bach, Edvard Grieg and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, three composers of whose music he has proved an outstanding exponent throughout his long and distinguished career at the keyboard.

September 14 brings a return to the festival of 88-year-old Italian maestro Alberto Zedda, perhaps the world's leading authority on the music of Gioacchino Rossini. Having enjoyed enormous success at past RNO festivals with his concert performances of Rossini's operas "Tancredi" and "Semiramide," he this time leads a much lesser known Rossini work, "Ermione," one that disappeared from the stage soon after its 1819 premiere in Naples and was revived only in 1987. Since then, it has enjoyed considerable success in a fair number of European and American productions.

Assuming the title role will be highly acclaimed American soprano Angela Meade, joined by a trio of guest singers from Italy in the other principal parts

Next, on September 18, Pletnev takes the stage as conductor to lead Joseph Haydn's magnificent biblical oratorio "The Creation." The performance boasts a strong line-up of principal soloists, including Belgian soprano Sophie Junker, Australian bass Morgan Pearse and frequent Bolshoi theater guest tenor Roman Shulakov, together with the superb Intrada Vocal Ensemble, which specializes in stylistically informed interpretations of the music of past eras.

Titled "Classical Music in 3D," the festival's fifth concert, on September 23 combines orchestral music with a display of video art. On the program are two orchestral works from the early 20th century that particularly lend themselves to accompanying visual effects — Claude Debussy's "La Mer" (The Sea), subtitled "three symphonic sketches for orchestra," and English composer Gustav Holst's massive seven-part suite "The Planets." They will be performed with a group of works by American philanthropist and composer Gordon Getty, who has been closely associated with the RNO since its founding 26 years ago. Leading the varied assortment of music will be Bulgarian-born Swiss conductor Mischa Damev.

The festival closes on September 26 with a concert performance of Pyotr Tchaikovsky's last opera, "Iolanta," under the baton of Maestro Pletnev. Written simultaneously and first performed together with the ballet "The Nutcracker," the tenderly lyrical and musically forward-looking "Iolanta" has been rather poorly treated in the half-dozen productions seen on Moscow stages over the past quarter-century. The most recent of these was the deadly dull new version that appeared early last season at the Bolshoi.

With a seasoned interpreter of Tchaikovsky's music like Pletnev in charge, the festival's audience seems likely to hear real justice done to the opera's many musical virtues.

The festival has assembled what looks like a strong cast, headed by soprano Anastasia Moskvina, from Belorussia, who enjoyed a triumph two years ago in Musica Viva chamber orchestra's concert performance at Tchaikovsky Hall of Carl Maria von Weber's opera "Oberon."

For more information and ticket sales see russiannationalorchestra.org

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