

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Elgar: Cello Concerto & Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 2– April 24, 2026

By Jonathan Berkowitz

EDWARD ELGAR (1857 to 1934)

Note: The following biography first appeared in the 2024-25 season.

Why did 19th-century England not develop as strong and individualistic a school of composers as Germany, France, or Russia did? Elizabethan England had many skilled composers. But Handel's arrival in England in 1712 had both cataclysmic and catastrophic effects which seemed to stifle his successors. Mendelssohn was the next strong force on British music. A friend of Queen Victoria's, both were cautious, conventional, and conservative. The Queen wanted all music to sound like Mendelssohn's. Not a single major musical figure was produced in England between Handel's death in 1759 and Edward Elgar in the 1890s.

Elgar was different. His music, noble and dashing, had the confidence of Edwardian England. It reflected his love for a country at the peak of its imperial power. Elgar was born in 1857 in the picturesque village of Broadheath and, like many great composers, his humble beginnings gave no clue to the towering musical legacy he would later create.

As a young boy, Elgar showed early signs of talent and a deep love for music. He had almost no formal musical training and was self-taught. His musical father encouraged him to experiment with composing. Elgar studied violin and piano and worked for a while in a law office. He then decided to concentrate on music but struggled in obscurity for many years. The *Froissart Overture*, written in 1889, was his first significant work and showed his ability to write for a large orchestra. It wasn't until the success of the *Enigma Variations* in 1899 that he became a national figure and England's most famous composer. He was knighted in 1904. Even then, money was scarce, and he suffered from self-doubt and writer's block (or perhaps composer's block).

Elgar didn't tackle composing a symphony for many years because of the giant shadow cast by Beethoven. He completed his First Symphony at the age of 51, although he had tried to write one ten years earlier. At a time when Germanic influences dominated the classical world, Elgar emerged as a staunch advocate for English musical traditions. The First Symphony premiered in 1908 and was a resounding success. It was important for Britain, which the Germans had disparagingly called "das Land ohne Musik" ("the land without music"). The Symphony was performed nearly 100 times around the world within the first year of its publication.

The success of his First Symphony emboldened Elgar to continue exploring the form with a series of groundbreaking works. His Second Symphony, composed in the aftermath of World War I, captures the tumultuous emotions of a nation scarred by war yet yearning for hope and renewal. Some of Elgar's other symphonic works were left unfinished at the time of his death. Beyond his symphonies, Elgar's contributions to the world of music were vast and varied. His iconic *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, including the rousing *Land of Hope and Glory*, have become synonymous with British ceremony. His heartfelt *Nimrod* from the *Enigma Variations* is a timeless tribute to friendship, loyalty, and the power of music to transcend language and culture.

His final large-scale work was the Cello Concerto (1918-19) which ranks as highly as Dvořák's as the greatest of the genre. The Concerto displays a troubled, stormy soul hidden behind a calm exterior. After this, and for the final fifteen years of his life, his creativity ceased. He composed a few more things which are never performed. After the loss of his wife in 1920, he largely withdrew from musical contact. In 1924, Elgar was appointed Master of the King's Musick, a prestigious honour that solidified his status as a British musical icon. Only 40 years later the new British musical idols, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the rest of the "British Invasion" arrived on the scene. Elgar also recorded much of his music and was an early adopter of the gramophone to preserve his interpretive ideas for posterity.

Throughout his life, Elgar remained a tireless champion of British music, fiercely protective of his artistic vision and uncompromising in his dedication to excellence. Elgar's individuality makes it difficult to describe his music, but Harold Schonberg captured it well when he wrote, "An Elgar melody, with its curious tension, its wide intervals and exuberant leaps, its confident, strong British feeling immediately stands out, recognizable as the work of but one composer and no other in the history of music."

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85 – Elgar (1919)

Orchestration: 2 flutes (2nd=piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, strings, and solo cello

Some works announce themselves with confidence. Elgar's Cello Concerto begins with something closer to a question. Composed in 1919, in the shadow of the First World War, the Concerto was written at the end of Elgar's creative life and, in many ways, at the end of an era. The expansive Edwardian confidence of the *Enigma Variations* and the First Symphony had receded. What remains is something more inward: music of memory, restraint, and quiet desolation.

Elgar was recovering from illness and from the broader cultural dislocation of the war. The world that had embraced his earlier works had changed irreversibly. The Concerto reflects that shift. It is not a public statement but a private one, and its language is pared down accordingly. It speaks in shorter phrases, often hesitant, often reflective. Within this restraint lies Elgar's powerfully expressive response to the tragic war that resulted in the loss of a generation.

The Concerto's premiere in 1919 was a disaster, due to inadequate rehearsal, and the conductor's confusing demands. Critics could sense the work's potential, but the performance was lacking and it took a year for its second performance. The American premiere in 1922 also garnered little enthusiasm. In *The Record Guide* (1955), the authors commented about "the irresistible appeal of the Cello Concerto". But they noted, "the task of interpreting the solo is extremely difficult, [requiring] a reserved dignity that is peculiarly English". By the 1960s, the work had gained greater appreciation.

The Concerto is presented in four movements, rather than the traditional three. In fact, it is designed as two pairs of movements. The first two connect, as do the last two, and it has an unusual opening.

The first movement—**Adagio – Moderato**—begins with a short, dark recitative for the cello alone rather than an orchestral introduction: four chords, declamatory yet introspective. This opening figure will return later to frame the movement, and in a sense, the entire work. It is followed by a short answer from the clarinets, bassoons and horn, and then a modified scale played by the solo cello. The violas then introduce the principal theme (the *Moderato* part) and pass it to the solo cello which repeats it. Elgar considered it to be his tune. He said, “If you ever hear someone whistling this melody around the Malvern Hills, that will be me.” The string section plays the theme a third time, the solo cello modifies it, the orchestra reiterates it, and the cello plays the theme a final time before moving directly into a flowing middle section with a new theme. It is followed by a similar repetition of the first section, ending with solo cello that will then go quickly into the second movement. This is not a typical first movement—it is dark and slow. Elgar develops material through subtle variation instead of dramatic expansion. Listen for the recitative opening and its return near the close; the interplay between solo cello and lower strings; the way themes seem to hesitate, pause, and resume; and the absence of overt virtuosity in favour of phrasing and tone.

The second movement—**Lento – Allegro molto**—is brief, almost scherzo-like, and provides sharp contrast in character. After pizzicato chords in the cello, the music launches into rapid, light figuration. The cello introduces the main theme of the *Allegro molto* section, hesitantly at first, and then taking off, carrying the rest of the movement with it. The cello’s writing is agile, brilliant, and precise, yet never showy for its own sake. The movement is concise in every way, built essentially on just two figures. Listen for the rapid articulation of the solo cello; the transparent orchestration; and sudden shifts in texture. It is Elgar’s way of showing that introspection can still include vitality.

The third movement—**Adagio**—is the heart and emotional core of the Concerto. It starts and ends with a lyrical melody, a long, singing line by the cello, supported delicately by a pared down orchestra so that the solo cello can move freely above it. The major key provides warmth, but the unsettled harmony remains. Moments of tension appear and dissolve without dramatic resolution. Essentially the entire movement is in a single, continuous arch: opening statement, gradual intensity, and return to stillness. Listen for long phrases requiring sustained control; the interplay between the soloist and the woodwinds; and how the melody line breathes naturally without sentimentality. William Runyan comments, “The slow movement is an appropriate elegiac affair, almost a requiem for the lost generation.”

The finale—**Allegro – Moderato – Allegro, ma non troppo**—begins with a fast crescendo followed by recitative and cadenza, just as the opening movement began. The movement’s main theme is both stately and restless. Its undertones and many key changes provide an ambiguous mood suggesting complicated emotions. It is structurally complex, combining elements of a rondo and sonata forms. There are contrasting episodes, but the themes remain closely related. The tempo slows partway through allowing the theme from the third movement and the recitative from the first movement to return. This flows right into a reiteration of the main theme of the fourth movement, with a final burst that ends the work. Listen for how the driving rhythm is repeatedly interrupted; the return of the opening recitative; and how the closing bars are optimistic but restrained. It is a final resolution that suggests understanding, not victory.

The Concerto is unconventional in many ways, but undoubtedly a masterpiece. It is not in the Romantic concerto tradition. It is introspective and intimate. The technical demands lie in the

emotional maturity required, not in the usual showy virtuosity. The music speaks directly, without ornamentation.

A 1965 recording by Jacqueline du Pré and the London Symphony Orchestra brought the work to the prominence and acclaim it deserved. One critic noted that, “[It] even persuaded the Americans to listen enraptured to Elgar”. Since then, the Elgar Cello Concerto has been recorded more than seventy times and the work has become, along with the Dvořák Cello Concerto, one of the two most frequently performed cello concertos in international repertoire. William Runyan summarizes the Concerto eloquently, “It is not only a reflection of the forever altered world of Britain in 1919, but also the deep and apt expression of a great composer facing his own old age, and for that matter, an audience that soon saw him as an anachronism.”

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Note: The following biography first appeared in the 2024-25 season.

There was never a time when the music of Rachmaninoff was not played. He is as popular as ever, largely on the strength of two marvellous piano concertos, the Second and the Third.

His music is vastly different from that of Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Scriabin and Stravinsky, and the group known as The Five—Cui, Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov—who tried to create a truly national school of Russian music.

Rachmaninoff entered the Moscow Conservatory at the age of fourteen. He was described as dour, serious, taciturn, private, and stubborn. At seventeen he composed his First Piano Concerto, which he later revised. A one-act opera, written for his graduation, was admired by Tchaikovsky, who perhaps saw his successor in Rachmaninoff.

Although a formidable pianist, Rachmaninoff’s career—teaching and performing—progressed slowly. He wrote his famous *Prelude in C sharp minor* for piano in 1892. However, the premiere of a symphony three years later was a fiasco, liked by nobody. A crisis of confidence was remedied by a Moscow psychiatrist. Hypnosis and autosuggestion convinced Rachmaninoff that he would write “a concerto of excellent quality.” The result was the great *Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor*, the *Rach 2*, finished in 1901. It remains the most popular work he ever composed. Three pop songs have their roots in this concerto: *I Think of You* and *Full Moon and Empty Arms*, both made famous by Frank Sinatra, and *All By Myself*, a 1975 ballad by Eric Carmen.

Rachmaninoff completed two successful seasons as the conductor of the Imperial Opera at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. But he considered himself first and foremost a composer and felt that the performance schedule detracted from his composition time. He was also in constant demand as a performer of his own works at home and abroad. His *Piano Concerto No. 2* made him a celebrity, and by 1905 the recognition and acclaim were even more than the sociable Rachmaninoff could handle. He needed to escape. In 1906 he resigned from his Bolshoi post and took his wife and

infant daughter to Dresden, where he could work unknown and uninterrupted as a full-time composer. The move also meant an escape from the political tumult that was leading the Russian Empire to revolution. The family remained in Dresden for three years, spending summers at Rachmaninoff's in-laws' estate of Ivanovka. It was during this time that Rachmaninoff wrote not only his Second Symphony but also the tone poem *Isle of the Dead*.

Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1909 with his wife and daughters in a country house far away from Moscow. He loved how the natural setting stimulated his imagination. He commented, "...and they come: all voices at one. Not a bit here, a bit there. All."

Soon those voices sang a new work, his *Piano Concerto No. 3*. Years later, Rachmaninoff recalled that the first theme just 'wrote itself.' The piece grew into one of the towering masterpieces of the piano concerto repertoire. Rachmaninoff performed it at the premiere and many times after, including a memorable performance with Gustav Mahler conducting the New York Philharmonic.

Because of the Concerto's extreme technical requirements, most pianists shied away from playing it. Although dedicated to the pianist Joseph Hoffman, he never dared to play it. It was not until Vladimir Horowitz championed the Concerto in the 1930s that it began to be widely performed. It received another boost as the feature piece in the Academy Award-winning 1996 film *Shine*, based on the life of David Helfgott. Calvin Dotsey, writing for the Houston Symphony commented, "Today it is recognized as one of the greatest of all concertos, a test for all pianists and a breathtaking emotional journey for listeners."

Like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff wrote in a completely traditional framework but infused with Russian melancholy. His style of composition never really deviated from what he began with his Second Piano Concerto. Critics and the listening public were diametrically opposed in their opinions of his music. While admiring his pianistic prowess, critics sneered at his use of nineteenth-century models for his music. Rachmaninoff is summarily disposed of in only five paragraphs in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th edition.

But Rachmaninoff gets the last laugh. His music has indeed lasted and remains as popular as ever, for good reason. His music is internationally renowned, which is part of its appeal. Although he contributed little to twentieth-century form or harmony, he took the old forms and breathed new life into them, with memorable, distinctive melodies, just as Tchaikovsky did. You recognize his work after hearing just a few measures. And you leave the concert humming his melodies over and over again.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Rachmaninoff left Russia for good. He moved to Switzerland and started a new life as a piano virtuoso. Settling permanently in the US in 1935, he decided to concentrate on the piano. Tailored to his own spectacularly talented hands, his piano music was difficult. It made use of wide stretches and displayed tremendous virtuosity but without the pyrotechnics associated with Liszt. Compositions during his time in the US include the *Piano Concerto # 4*, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, *Symphony #3* and *Symphonic Dances*. Rachmaninoff died in Beverly Hills in 1943.

Symphony No.2, in E minor, Op. 27 – Rachmaninoff (1906-07)

Orchestration: 3 flutes (3rd = piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd = English horn), 3 clarinets (3rd = bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, and snare drum), and strings

The VSO will perform Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 during their April 2026 European Tour. It is a perfect choice to display the talent of the musicians of our world-class orchestra.

Rachmaninoff began work on his Second Symphony in Dresden in 1906. He was not altogether convinced that he was a gifted symphonist. But, with renewed confidence from the triumph of his Second Piano Concerto, he returned to the symphonic form to write what would turn out to be a smashing success.

Perhaps because of the lingering shadow of failure from the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, he kept his new work secret, even from close friends in Russia. After word leaked out in a German paper, he confessed in a letter from Dresden in February 1907, "I have composed a symphony. It's true! It's only ready in rough. I finished it a month ago and immediately put it aside. It was a severe worry to me and I am not going to think about it anymore. But I am mystified how the newspapers got onto it!" He resumed work on it, and after months of revisions he returned to Russia where he finished the orchestration. Rachmaninoff conducted two immensely successful premieres in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The triumphs restored Rachmaninoff's sense of self-worth as a symphonist.

Because of the Symphony's formidable length, many revisions were made which shortened the piece from nearly an hour to as little as 35 minutes. Before 1970, the piece was usually performed in one of its revised, shorter, versions. Since then, orchestras perform the complete version almost exclusively. The score is dedicated to Sergei Taneyev, a Russian composer, teacher, theorist, author, and pupil of Tchaikovsky. The Symphony remains one of Rachmaninoff's most popular and best-known compositions.

Some symphonies arrive with a clenched fist. Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony begins with a breath. The first movement—**Largo – Allegro moderato**—opens with the low strings in a minor key, presenting the essential theme which dominates the Symphony and appears in every movement. The seven-note "motto" came from a fragment of an abandoned work from Rachmaninoff's student days. Sometimes an introduction is just a preface, but here it provides the seeds that will grow throughout the Symphony. Clarinets and bassoons produce a thicker texture. The violins begin a series of elaborations that lead to an impassioned climax. Then follows an English horn (*cor anglais*) solo that takes the movement into the Allegro. When it arrives, the first theme surges upward, driven by syncopation and rhythm. The second theme, introduced by the strings, is one of Rachmaninoff's signature melodies: wide-ranging, tender, and harmonically rich. Herbert Glass comments that, "... it achieves the ultimate soulful Russian melancholy that has become synonymous with quintessential 'love music.'" Listen for how this theme unfolds gradually, supported by flowing inner lines.

The development section is stormy and moves through various keys. It intensifies by accumulating motifs, one atop another. Brass enter to build tension, but do not upset the smooth character of the

movement. When themes return in the recapitulation, they feel broadened. The building of a climax, which has been underway through the development, reaches its peak. The coda resumes the style and tempo of the development, gathering weight and ending with minor-key gravity. The movement culminates in two *fortissimo* outbursts. Listen for the low-string sonority of the opening, the arc of the second theme, countermelodies beneath the main line, and the sense of breadth, not haste, in climactic passages.

The second movement—***Allegro molto***—is a scherzo, or perhaps it just resembles a scherzo. It has the typical form, and the Symphony’s brightest moments, but the word scherzo seems too playful given the movement’s restless energy. After being announced by four unison horns, the main theme begins with biting string figures and abrupt dynamic contrasts. It then alternates with lush, march-like passages. The brass and winds keep a tight rhythmic profile. Midway, a fugue-like section emerges that shows off Rachmaninoff’s ability to write counterpoint, a skill learned during his studies with Sergei Taneyev, to whom this symphony is dedicated. You may detect fragments of the medieval *Dies Irae* plainchant, a motif Rachmaninoff would use in his large-scale works throughout his career. Listen for a reference to it in the horns. A return to the opening energy ends with the brass restating the *Dies Irae*, and a coda that dies away into *pianississimo* (very, very soft), perhaps in preparation for the upcoming gorgeous Adagio. Listen for the precise rhythm in the strings, the layered counterpoint in the fugue passage, and sudden shifts from agitation to lyrical interlude.

If the Symphony has a heart, the third movement—***Adagio***—is likely it. The movement begins with a memorable opening theme played by the first violins. It will later be restated both as a melody and as an accompanying figure. The opening theme is really an introduction to the main melody of the movement, a lengthy clarinet solo that is one of the most beloved, romantic and appealing melodies Rachmaninoff ever wrote. It is a typical Rachmaninoff creation, circling around single notes, accompanied by rich harmony.

A complementary theme is quickly presented, along with material from the first two movements, but continually returns to the main theme. The secret lies in its pacing; the theme grows naturally in long breaths, rising and then gently settling, without ever forcing a climax. When it finally surges, the effect is overwhelming. The lightly scored middle section is based on the “motto” theme from the first movement introduction. The oboe and English horn complement the violins. A long crescendo leads to an impassioned climax based on the opening’s romantic theme. The intensity subsides, and the central clarinet melody is restated by the first violins, with fragments of the opening theme in the accompaniment. After another romantic climax, the movement ends tranquilly, dying away slowly in the strings. Listen for the clarinet’s opening solo which is phrased like human speech: the interweaving of multiple melodic strands, and the retreat at the movement’s end as if the light has dimmed but is not extinguished.

The finale—***Allegro vivace***—bursts forth with rhythmic vitality that breaks the romantic mood. The fanfare-like main theme is full of rapid dancing triplets, followed by a brief march and a lyrical second theme. The violins and violas in unison octaves introduce another soaring melody. Subtly interwoven are references to the earlier movements, including a quotation from the Adagio movement. Steven Ledbetter calls the development section “one of Rachmaninoff’s greatest masterstrokes.” He explains how instruments, one at a time, begins to play a descending scale, “... overlapping and making an extraordinary noise, as if someone were ringing the changes on all the

bells of Moscow at once.” The recapitulation starts with just the first theme and then builds up to a triumphant restatement of the second theme. The Symphony concludes with a whirlwind coda that provides a wonderful conclusion. The transition from the opening movement in E minor to the blazing close in E major is not superficial. The tonal journey has been prepared by the Symphony’s cumulative energy and mirrors its psychological arc. Listen for the rhythmic buoyancy of the opening, the reappearance of the now transformed earlier motifs, brass chorales supporting a building climax, and the final affirmation in a major key.

Rachmaninoff achieves something rare: a Symphony that feels both personal and architectural. Its melodies are unforgettable, yet they rest on disciplined construction. Above all, the Symphony welcomes us into a world of sustained lyric thought.

Postscript: In 2008, Alexander Warenberg’s arrangement of the Second Symphony as a three-movement concerto for piano and orchestra was released. It was titled *Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 5*. It uses about forty percent of the source material plus some original scoring, with modifications including a new second movement and a revised finale. My query: Why mess with perfection?