

# Royal Conservatory Orchestra conducted by Earl Lee

Friday, November 22, 2024 at 8pm

This is the 1,343<sup>rd</sup> concert in Koerner Hall

**Earl Lee**, conductor

**Anna Štuba**, violin

**Royal Conservatory Orchestra**

## PROGRAM

Richard Strauss: *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*, op. 28

Benjamin Britten: Violin Concerto, op. 15

I. Moderato con moto

II. Vivace – Cadenza –

III. Passacaglia: Andante lento - con moto

## INTERMISSION

Sergei Rachmaninov: *Symphonic Dances*, op. 45

I. Non allegro

II. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)

III. Lento assai – Allegro vivace

## Richard Strauss

Born in Munich, Germany, June 11, 1864; died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, September 8, 1949

### ***Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*, op. 28 (1894-5)**

Till Eulenspiegel is the eternal joker of German folklore, constantly at war with pompous authority. Often, he is the irrepressible underdog, occasionally the unfeeling practical joker. With an irresistible element of self-identification to explore within his roguish hero, Strauss first tested the idea by writing a scenario for a folk opera. The medium of the tone poem, however, was better suited to the sequence of adventures that Strauss was to title “Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks, after the old rogue’s tale, set for large orchestra, in a rondo-form.”

With the experience and success of three earlier tone poems in the late 1880s – *Don Juan*, op. 20, *Macbeth*, op. 23, and *Death and Transfiguration*, op. 24 – Strauss began work on a fourth. The tender, lyrical string opening conveys what Strauss described as a “Once upon a time there was a roguish jester” feeling to the score. The jester appears, tentatively at first, but then bursts out in a gloriously attention-grabbing theme from the horn, a theme which builds to the first of many climaxes. Soon, we have another side of Till, developing out of the first theme – “He was a wicked goblin,” as Strauss characterises it. Although generally reluctant to reveal too many details, Strauss did pencil in additional phrases into his score, including for the next section: “Up to new tricks.” Till eventually sails too close to the wind and is punished on the scaffold with a savagery reflective of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Wilhelminian Germany. The work’s first performance in Cologne in 1895 was a great success and the piece has remained the most popular of the composer’s tone-poems ever since.

## Benjamin Britten

Born in Lowestoft, England, November 22, 1913; died in Aldeburgh, England, December 4, 1976

### ***Violin Concerto*, op. 15 (1938–39, rev 1950, 58)**

Britten began work on his Violin Concerto in November 1938, in the shadow of the Spanish Civil War. He had visited Spain with Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa to perform his own Suite for Violin and Piano, op. 6. Soon, however, he would have friends from home who enlisted on the Republican side of the war. With Franco’s victory over the Republicans, compounded by a looming war in Europe, Britten and the tenor Peter Pears, both pacifists, set sail for North America at the end of April 1939. Their port of entry was Quebec City and it was in St. Jovite, QC that Britten completed the concerto.

Britten did not leave war and conflict behind, however. Their presence is felt throughout the concerto as a profound melancholy, which prevails through the brilliance and virtuosity of the composer’s writing for the soloist. Subtle Spanish echoes in the score include castanet rhythms and flamenco gestures in the violin writing, plus an arresting motto-rhythm with a feeling of foreboding, heard on timpani at the very beginning, and recurring throughout.

Structurally, the Violin Concerto represents a radical re-thinking of the traditional three-movement concerto. Here, a brilliant scherzo is enclosed within an intricately developed opening movement and, in a valedictory finale, a sombre sequence of variations over a ground bass. The soloist introduces both melodic ideas in the opening movement. The first is a long-spun, high-soaring lament, punctuated by restless rhythmic figures from the opening timpani motto-rhythm. The second is more agitated, initially presented on the violin’s lowest string, but quickly reaching the heights. The two ideas are skilfully explored as Britten develops his motivic material, weaving the ideas together as the music arrives at a radiant D major-minor high point. With the Spanish rhythms haunting the score, the music dies away over a broad coda.

The central scherzo is an incisive moto perpetuo, punctuated by an other-worldly, fantastic trio with an eastern flavour in which the violin soars over stabbing rhythmic chords from the orchestra. At its peak, a lone tuba and fluttering piccolos supported by a harmonic tremolo from the strings take over the scherzo theme. It is a remarkably creative example of the 25-year-old Britten’s virtuosity in orchestral writing, though quickly overtaken by the moto perpetuo and the violin as it launches the scherzo theme into a cadenza. This reviews key themes and the drum motto from the first movement, reflecting intensely until three trombones, heard for the first time in the concerto, stealthily present the sombre theme from the Passacaglia. Britten’s use of this variation technique built over a reiterated bass is another first for the composer, who would write some of his most impressive music with this structure. With each of its nine variations, Britten moves the theme down a semitone, changing its rhythm, orchestration, and character. By the eighth, a feeling of utter serenity begins to fall over the music, again in a floating

D major-minor tonality, with the orchestra chanting a fragment of the theme while the violin soars and sobs inconsolably in a concluding threnody.

## **Sergei Rachmaninov**

Born in Semyonovo, Russia, April 1, 1873; died in Beverly Hills, California, March 28, 1943

### ***Symphonic Dances*, op. 45 (1940)**

Whether by accident or design, the *Symphonic Dances* are Rachmaninov's valedictory opus: three substantial dance movements that embrace a lifetime's musical experience. The composer weaves quotations from his own compositions into the fabric of the score – from the First Symphony, whose devastating premiere still haunted the composer almost a half century later, to the ever-present sombre strains of the *Dies irae*, which recur throughout his music. When the score was first drafted, in a two-piano version, Rachmaninov told Eugene Ormandy that, when orchestrated for the Philadelphia Orchestra, it was to be called *Fantastic Dances*. He also considered titling the movements 'Noon', 'Evening,' and 'Midnight' as though reflecting a journey through life. Whether there is a program or not, Rachmaninov certainly viewed the score as material for a ballet, having discussed it with Mikhail Fokine, a neighbour, while he composed on a large estate on Long Island in the summer of 1940. Fokine's death ended the project but the energy and rhythmic vitality in the piece bear witness to the idea. "I do not know how it happened," the 67-year-old composer commented after the premiere on January 3, 1941, as though surprised at the vigour of his half-hour score. "It must have been my last spark."

In the first dance, a crisp, driving march encloses a dreamy, languorous melody which Rachmaninov spins out at great length. The march has something of Prokofiev's sardonic quality and its chords are underlined by the *Dies irae*. The second dance starts uneasily, with strident, fanfare-like chords and three false attempts to get underway. When it arrives, there is a palpable disquiet and a restless beat to the waltz theme with a detached fin de siècle quality, not unlike that of Ravel's *La Valse*. The finale is a more complex mosaic of *Dies irae* fragments, tolling bells, Lisztian diablerie, and Russian church music. Towards the end, where a new chant puts to end a battle between the *Dies irae* theme and a chant from his own *Vespers*, Rachmaninov writes the word 'Ailuya' on the score. His last composition ends with the words "I thank Thee, Lord."

The piano version of this piece will be played by Yuja Wang and Vikingur Ólafsson on February 17 and 18.

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## **Earl Lee**

### **Conductor**

Winner of the 2022 Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award, Earl Lee is a renowned Korean-Canadian conductor who has captivated audiences worldwide. Music Director of the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra since 2022, he recently finished a successful three-year tenure as assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

In addition to a full season of concerts with the Ann Arbor Symphony, Earl's 2024-25 season includes debuts with the Atlanta, New World, Colorado, Sarasota, and Victoria Symphonies and the Juilliard Orchestra, and he returns to the San Francisco Symphony and the Royal Conservatory Orchestra.

Earl's 2024-25 programs with the Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra include contemporary works by William Bolcom, György Kurtág, Jessie Montgomery, Andrea Casarrubios, and Katherine Balch, as well as standard repertoire from Mozart to Shostakovich. He leads the orchestra in its return to Detroit Orchestra Hall in January 2025 in a concert during the Sphinx Organizations's annual SphinxConnect convention.

Earl previously held positions as associate conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony and as the resident conductor of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. In 2022, he appeared with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam as a participant in the Ammodo masterclasses led by Fabio Luisi.

He studied cello at the Curtis Institute of Music and The Juilliard School, and conducting at Manhattan School of Music and the New England Conservatory. He lives in New York City with his wife and their daughter.

## **Anna Štuba**

### **Violin**

18-year-old Latvian violinist Anna Štuba has astounded audiences with her depth of expression throughout her international performance career devoted to sharing the compassion and humanity of music.

As a featured artist on *CBC Music's* 2022 "30 Under 30" roster, Anna made her solo debut at age 13 with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra after receiving the Grand Prize at the Canadian Music Competition. Her notable awards include First Prize at the 2019 OSM Manulife Competition as their youngest ever winner and the Grand Prize at the 2024 Glenn Gould School Chamber Competition.

Selected as their MacLachlan Ridge Emerging Artist, Anna is slated to perform with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra in their 2024-25 season. She has also played with the National Ballet of Canada Orchestra, Calgary Civic Symphony, and Kensington Sinfonia.

A passionate chamber musician, Anna has collaborated with preeminent ensembles such as the legendary Kronos Quartet and the award-winning LGT Young Soloists. She has also worked with acclaimed musicians including Noah Bendix-Balgley, Christian Tetzlaff, Mihaela Martin, James Ehnes, Philip Setzer, and Midori among many others.

Anna has made festival appearances as a featured artist at the 2023 Banff International String Quartet Festival, the 2022 Rockport Chamber Music Festival, at the Toronto Summer Music Festival, as well as on *NPR's* "From The Top" program.

A recipient of the prestigious 2024 Sylva Gelber Music Foundation Award, Anna is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Music at The Glenn Gould School with Jonathan Crow, where she is the recipient of the full-tuition Sondra & Brett Lindros Scholarship.

Anna plays on a 1667 Andrea Guarneri violin and bow generously loaned by Roger Dubois and the CANIMEX Group.

## **Royal Conservatory Orchestra**

### **Joaquin Valdepeñas, Resident Conductor**

The Royal Conservatory Orchestra (RCO), part of the Temerty Orchestral Program, is widely regarded as an outstanding ensemble and one of the best training orchestras in North America. Through the RBC Guest Conductor Program, four renowned conductors work with the RCO each season, allowing Glenn Gould School students to gain experience through professional rehearsal and performance conditions. A full week of rehearsals culminates in a Koerner Hall performance under the batons of such distinguished guest conductors as Sir Roger Norrington, former Ichnatowycz Chair in Piano Leon Fleisher, Bramwell Tovey, Johannes Debus, Peter Oundjian, Gábor Takács-Nagy, Ivars Taurins, Tania Miller, Andrei Feher, Mario Bernardi, Richard Bradshaw, Nathan Brock, Julian Kuerti, Uri Mayer, Tito Muñoz, Andrés Keller, and Lior Shambadal. With four annual performances, participation in the RCO ensures that instrumental students in the Bachelor of Music and the Artist Diploma Program of The Glenn Gould School graduate with extensive orchestral performance experience. Additionally, winners of The Robert W. and G. Ann Corcoran Concerto Competition have the opportunity to appear each year as soloists with the RCO. Graduates of the RCO have joined the ranks of the greatest orchestras in the world, including the Cleveland Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the BBC Orchestra, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Tafelmusik, the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, the Calgary Philharmonic, the Quebec Symphony Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra of Manchester, the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and Leipzig Gewandhaus. In addition to performances in Koerner Hall, the RCO has performed on numerous occasions at the Isabel Bader Performing Arts Centre in Kingston, has been heard repeatedly on the national broadcasts of the *CBC Radio*, and in May 2024 made its Carnegie Hall debut under Maestro Peter Oundjian.