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Hisaishi x Scriabin

Friday 5 June 2026, 7.30pm

Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Rachmaninoff *Isle of the Dead* 19 mins

Hisaishi *The Border, Concerto for 3 Horns
and Orchestra* *London premiere* 25 mins

Interval: 20 minutes

Scriabin *Symphony No.3, 'The Divine Poem'* 48 mins

Vasily Petrenko Conductor

Alexander Edmundson, Ben Hulme and Katy Woolley Horns

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra



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Tonight's performance is being recorded by BBC Radio 3 for broadcast on Tuesday 14 July 2026, 7.30pm. It will be available to stream for 30 days after the broadcast on BBC Sounds (bbc.co.uk/sounds).

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Hisaishi x Scriabin

Rachmaninoff Isle of the Dead

Hisaishi The Border, Concerto for 3 Horns and Orchestra

Scriabin Symphony No.3, 'The Divine Poem'

'Is it possible to connect a composer like Scriabin with any tradition whatsoever?' Igor Stravinsky famously asked. 'Where does he come from? And who are his forebears?' These are fair questions to ask about a composer who was a direct contemporary of Sergei Rachmaninoff and yet who bears almost no trace of his Russian heritage and no musical similarities to Rachmaninoff whatsoever. Alexander Scriabin pursued his own musical language, created his own forms, and invented his own tonalities, guided by his own brand of 'theosophy' and a belief in the transcendental power of music. His extraordinary imagination is the driving force behind this programme, where fantastical worlds meet new musical traditions in the hands of three innovative, creative thinkers.

Isle of the Dead, Op.29 (1909)

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

In 1907, Sergei Rachmaninoff accepted an invitation from Serge Diaghilev, an impresario and promoter of the arts, to join him in Paris for a series of Russian concerts, in which Rachmaninoff would appear as the soloist in his Second Piano Concerto, which had restored Rachmaninoff's popularity with the public after the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony. It was during his stay in Paris that he came across a black and white reproduction of Arnold Böcklin's painting, *Isle of the Dead*, a painting that was then so popular that prints could be found hanging not just on the walls of private homes, but even in the studies of Sigmund Freud, Vladimir Lenin and Georges Clemenceau. Böcklin, who painted at least six different versions between 1880 and his death in 1901, described the painting as 'a dream picture: it must produce such a stillness that one would be awed by a knock on the door.' Although the different versions vary in their finer details, in each one the central focus is a bleak, rocky island, made up of steep cliffs and towering cypress trees. In the foreground, a small rowing boat approaches the island, bearing a coffin and a mysterious figure shrouded in white.

Did you know?

Adolf Hitler was known to have bought the third version of Böcklin's painting, *Isle of the Dead*. He hung it on the wall of his private study at the Berghof, and later moved it to his office in the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin.

The idea for the symphonic poem came to Rachmaninoff as soon as he set eyes on the painting, although it would take him two years to sit down and compose the score. 'When composing', he explained, 'I find it very helpful to have a book in mind, a beautiful picture or a poem... And they come: all the voices at the same time. Not one piece here, one piece there. Everything. The whole emerges. Thus the *Isle of the Dead*.' It was only after he had completed the work that Rachmaninoff came to know the original full-colour painting, which he found far less arresting. 'If I had seen first the original, I probably would not have written my *Isle of the Dead*. I like the black and white.'

Rachmaninoff's music opens with the ominous rumble of lower strings, timpani and harp, as we look

upon the dark expanse of the water and the shadowy spectre of the island beyond. The orchestra swells as the island looms into view, and glimmers of light in the upper strings begin to pierce the gloom as the landscape comes sharply into focus. When we arrive at the island, it is with a thundering crash of the waves, the rowboat beating an irregular 5/8 metre as it navigates the tumultuous waters on its approach. And yet, in the second half of the work, we leave behind the earthly journey for one more ethereal, coursing through anguish and despair, before eventually arriving at a state of cathartic transcendence and acceptance, the waves now lapping gently at the shore.

The Border

Concerto for 3 Horns and Orchestra (2020)

London premiere

Joe Hisaishi (b. 1950)

Crossing Lines

The Scaling

The Circles

Composer, conductor, pianist and musical director Joe Hisaishi's career is as rich and diverse as his musical output. Best known for his film scores to Japanese anime adventures, including *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Spirited Away* and *Ponyo*, with more than 100 film scores to his name, Hisaishi has been called Japan's answer to John Williams, and his collaborations with director Hayao Miyazaki likened to Williams with Steven Spielberg. But such comparisons do not account for the extraordinary breadth of his output, which has seen him found his own recording studio, release multiple albums of experimental electronica, and provide the soundtrack to the 1998 Winter Olympics – all while continuing to compose music for the concert hall. In 2024, he became the RPO's Composer-in-Association, forming a musical partnership that has celebrated his works in concerts around the world.

Hisaishi's musical language is just as unique, combining western and Japanese classical traditions with effortless ease. His collaborations with the likes of Bryce Dessner, Philip Glass and Terry Riley speak to his love for rhythm and melody, and a distinct minimalist thread runs through almost everything he writes. 'When I discovered minimal music I felt I could create my vision', he explains, 'it was totally different to traditional music.' His *Concerto for 3 Horns and Orchestra*, *The Border*, is a case in point. Written at the request of horn player Nobuaki Fukukawa and premiered in Tokyo in February 2020, *The Border* is a rhythmic tour de force, a joyous exploration of time, texture and timbre that delights in playing with patterns.

Did you know?

Joe Hisaishi was born Mamoru Fujisawa, but took the inspiration for his stage name from the legendary American producer Quincy Jones. The 'Joe' coming from Jones, and 'Hisaishi' created from translating the sounds of the name Quincy into written Japanese (kanji).

The first movement, *Crossing Lines*, is dominated by pulsing irregular rhythms and a furious flurry of irrepressible momentum. A stream of unceasing semiquavers is punctuated by accents on an irregular series of offbeats, driving the music ever onwards while threatening to wrong-foot the listener at every turn. The second movement, *The Scaling*, offers a chance for some welcome pause and contemplation, which plays out in a series of melismatic and expressive statements from the three horns (including some quirky moments of 'sing-playing'). Like the first movement, this one is also structured around repeated patterns, but here it is a tonal pattern of seven notes (G#-A-B-C#-D-E-F#) that provides the movement's governing motif.

The final movement, *The Circles*, returns us to the frenetic energy of the opening, with alternating rondo-like sections that switch between the three soloists and full orchestra. Reconfigured from the third movement of Hisaishi's Chamber Symphony for Electric Violin and Chamber Orchestra, it is transformed here, in Hisaishi's words, into 'a completely different piece', with glimmers of Bernstein's *West Side Story* in its infectious, dance-like syncopations.

Joe Hisaishi

RPO Composer-in-Association

Joe Hisaishi, a composer, conductor and pianist, has established himself as a formidable force in contemporary music for his delicately crafted symphonic and solo works, as well as his globally successful film music. Hisaishi is greatly in demand as a conductor, performing with the most notable symphony orchestras across the globe. With nearly 40 solo albums and over 100 film scores to his name, he is one of the most celebrated composers of our time.



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Since becoming the RPO's Composer-in-Association in 2024, the partnership has seen performances to tens of thousands of people in Seoul, Tokyo, Paris and London. Amongst their joint performances at the Royal Albert Hall was their 2025 BBC Proms concert, where he conducted his own work *The End of the World* and Steve Reich's *The Desert Music*. He will conduct the RPO in a performance of his Concerto for Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall this November.

joe-hisaishi.com

Interval

Symphony No.3 in C minor, 'The Divine Poem' (1904)

Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

Lento – Luttet (Struggles)

Voluptés (Delights)

Jeu Divin (Divine Play)

Like Rachmaninoff, Alexander Scriabin was most at home at the piano. His mother had been a concert pianist and, as a child, Scriabin became so fascinated by the inner workings of the house piano that he made various attempts at building his own. He would go on to graduate from the Moscow Conservatory with a Gold Medal in piano while failing to complete his degree in composition, but as his career as a pianist morphed into one as a pianist-composer, he became fixated on composing

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for solo piano. As a consequence, he wrote comparatively little for orchestra: just an early orchestral miniature (*Rêverie*), a piano concerto, three symphonies, and two tone poems that are symphonies in all but name.

But what Scriabin's orchestral works lack in number, they more than make up for in their conceptual ambition. In his symphonies, Scriabin attempted to distil his far-reaching mystical and philosophical beliefs, and to grasp at the infinite, to truly grapple with what it means to be human, and how to be human is to be divine. Inspired by the writings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kant, Scriabin hoped to liberate his symphonies from traditional musical paradigms and to give a voice to the ineffable, to find a language that reaches beyond our earthly world to convey something deeply transcendent.

It took time for Scriabin to fully realise these grand artistic ambitions, and his early works, including his first two symphonies, are still recognisably rooted in romantic forms and tonalities. But by the time he composed his Third Symphony, 'The Divine Poem', he began to feel that his ideas were taking flight. 'This was the first time I found light in music... the first time that I felt a stir, a liberation, knew the breathlessness of happiness.' Spun over three movements, 'The Divine Poem' presents a journey from the mortal to the divine, a process of liberation that begins with a recognition of our earthly selves and a rejection of our long-held religious beliefs. Scriabin put it somewhat poetically in his own explanation to the piece:

'The Divine Poem represents the evolution of the human spirit, which, torn away from a complete past of beliefs and mysteries which it surmounts and overturns, arrives, having passed through Pantheism, at the intoxicated, joyous affirmation of its liberty and its unity with the universe (the divine 'I').'

The first movement, *Luttes (Struggles)*, depicts a battle between two states: a humanity 'enslaved' by a traditional personified deity, and an enlightened version of humanity that recognises that divinity comes from within. These opposing conditions are manifested in the Symphony's two-part opening theme, which begins with an ominous question posed by the trombones and bass instruments, and is answered by a rising trumpet figure. Over the next 20 minutes, the two jostle for supremacy, ebbing and flowing with alternating feelings of joy and despair. When the theme returns in its original guise in the movement's closing bars, it is still not clear who has won the battle.

So it is with a sense of precarious unease that we topple into the second movement, *Voluptés (Delights)*, a scene of hedonistic delights and sensual pleasures (with more than a passing resemblance to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*) that threatens to lure us back to the earthly world. It takes strength to leave this ecstatic rapture behind and to abandon 'mortal weakness' for something more meaningful and long-lasting. Only in the final movement, *Jeu Divin (Divine Play)*, is this eventually achieved and a new state of transcendence attained. As we surrender to the joy of existence, and to the divinity within ourselves, the opening theme is tested once more – but this time the heavenly facing trumpet motif emerges triumphant.

Did you know?

Scriabin was born on Christmas Day 1871 according to the Julian calendar (later adjusted to 6 January 1872 with the adoption of the Gregorian calendar), something he later came to see as deeply symbolic of his duty to humanity. 'I am God!', he famously exclaimed. In a surprising parallel, he went on to die just after Easter.



Enjoying this free programme?

We hope that this programme is the perfect accompaniment to today's concert. During the interval or after the concert, we'd be very grateful if you would scan the QR code here (or visit rpo.co.uk/freeprogrammes) and tell us what you thought about your experience.

Fancy an encore?

After the concert, why not continue your own musical journey by visiting rpo.co.uk/moremusic where you can find a specially selected playlist of works inspired by today's concert and further pieces from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra x Vasily Petrenko series. Today, we recommend...

- ▶ **Scriabin's Symphony No.4, 'The Poem of Ecstasy'** (1908), a single-movement tone poem which follows the path of the spirit as it ascends into a state of consciousness.
- ▶ **Hisaishi's Harp Concerto** (2024), which, like so many of his works, plays with conceptual norms. 'The harp is usually associated with graceful, gentle, and calm music, but this concerto is intense, wild, and dynamic.'
- ▶ **Rachmaninoff** wrote only four tone poems but **The Rock** (1893), one of the remaining three, was also inspired by an artistic rendering of a rocky outcrop – in this case a poetic couplet by Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov.

Programme notes and listening recommendations by Jo Kirkbride, 2026



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