

Tonbridge Philharmonic Society: Welcome to Tonbridge! What inspired you to choose a Russian themed programme for your first concert conducting Tonbridge Philharmonic Orchestra?

Mark Biggins: Well I thought that a really big repertoire piece like Tchaikovsky's Fifth would be a great way to introduce myself to the orchestra (and vice versa) in my first concert. I've been wanting to programme Sadko for a while - I was introduced to it back when I was a PhD student in America, and I thought then that it deserves to be programmed much more often - it's an interesting and important piece. Finally, I had worked with Yume Fujise at the Royal College of Music on the Prokofiev Concerto, and it seemed like the perfect partner to make an all-Russian evening!

TPS: Rimsky-Korsakov's Sadko is often recognised as the first Russian tone poem. What makes it such a significant work?

MB: Well, firstly it marked a significant turning point for Rimsky-Korsakov personally as it marked the moment when he turned to compositional full time. Just imagine if he'd never left his first profession in the navy and we didn't have Scheherazade. The idea for the piece (including aspects of its musical structure) was concocted by Balakirev who wanted to use this depiction of a Russian folk tale as a way to promote Russian musical nationalism. But in pure musical terms, Rimsky-Korsakov combines Russian folk elements with really novel harmonic structures to portray Sadko's journey into an underwater kingdom.

TPS: The Prokofiev Concerto is the most 'modern' piece on this programme, and is a fantastic contrast to Sadko. What are the key musical challenges for the orchestra in this work?

MB: When you look at the score of the parts for the Prokofiev Concerto it is easy to see where the challenges are! Not only are many of the parts technically very demanding, but Prokofiev is hugely detailed in the way he marks up the score. These are things that you'd never see in Rimsky-Korsakov or Tchaikovsky and portraying all of these details is absolutely critical to bringing this piece to life.

TPS: Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 is a regular feature on concert programmes with its big themes, full-blooded textures and bombastic rhythms. Do you have a favourite moment in the symphony?

MB: This symphony will always have a special place in my heart as it's the first I ever conducted as a rather fresh 19 year old at university - and since then it is probably the piece I have performed most often. As for a favourite moment, it's hard not to say the wonderful elegiac horn solo which begins the second movement, but actually if I have to choose just one, I'll have to say that it's when the Allegro explodes with the strings in the finale. It is just visceral musical excitement!