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Elim Chan Bewitches and Charms RSNO in Debut as Principal Guest Conductor

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 **United Kingdom** **Dukas, Chopin, and Rachmaninov:** Benjamin Grosvenor (pianist), Royal Scottish National Orchestra / Elim Chan (conductor), Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow, 3.11.2018. (GT)



Elim Chan (c) Willeke Machiels

Dukas – *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*

Chopin – Piano Concerto No.2 in F minor

Rachmaninov – *Symphonic Dances*

It was in June last year that Elim Chan was appointed as principal guest conductor of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra following a brilliant concert in February 2017 when she stood in for an indisposed Neeme Järvi. Unfortunately, I missed that concert, however listening to the aficionados sitting near me, the young Chinese conductor's debut is still fondly remembered here.

Certainly one was taken aback to see this diminutive girl come on stage – it is hard to believe she is 32 – and she looks similar to many of the young Chinese we see on our streets. She addressed the audience telling of her enthusiasm at taking on her new role and of her

excitement at tonight's programme enthusing about the alto saxophone in the Rachmaninov *Symphonic Dances*. And she didn't forget to tell everyone to go and buy tickets for next week's concert too!

It was clear from her downbeat for the opening of Dukas's popular orchestral piece that she is an excitingly talented musician, for she has the knack of being visually attractive to watch as well as crafting and caressing the music with her hands and all her body movements, sometimes thumping her right foot to emphasise a point, which might be distracting but Bernstein and a few celebrated conductors have had the same habit. Chan seems to feel and sense the music with all her fragile frame, almost dancing to the music. It was obvious that the orchestra were intently following her gestures. Chan brought out all the fantastically coloured nuances of the music, almost like visually seeing the music with our eyes and ears. She coaxed the woodwind, especially the oboe of Adrian Wilson to express all the beauty of the French score, and with the violas on the right, and with all the violins on the left, a more balanced orchestral picture emerged. Chan is really a natural conductor, amazingly she first studied to be a Doctor of Medicine and now instead of curing the ill, through her superb stick control she can give us a more beautiful world by her music-making.

Normally, Benjamin Grosvenor would solely have caught the attention of the audience however, on this occasion, it was the *conductor* and their *collaboration*. The English pianist produced a masterly performance of Chopin's Second Piano Concerto, constructing pearly clear piano chords, and despite the weak orchestration, there was no gap in the enjoyment with Chan giving the soloist maximum opportunity for expression; bringing all the romanticism and ornamentation of the music out resplendently. Grosvenor has a beautiful manner at the keyboard, his fingers touching the chords almost feather-like and immaculate – bringing all the magic out of the slow movement (*Larghetto*). There was visible eye contact between the soloist and conductor throughout, noticeably Chan dispensed with her baton in this concerto. The brilliant mazurka dance was marvellously enacted in the brisk and dazzling finale with the soloist allowed to express his brilliance in full measure.

The RSNO have performed Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* regularly ever since Alexander Gibson began programming it in the '60s, and under Järvi, and Lazarev, along with other Russian orchestral works, it has become a favourite among Scottish audiences. The wonderful strings of the orchestra play this music as well as any Russian orchestra, and the oboe, flute and clarinet playing can rank among the best playing of the great European orchestras, but this evening, our attention was on how Chan brought out the most rich and vivid playing; invoking comparisons with other eminent conductors here. She seems to have been familiar with this music for years and it is really worthwhile just to watch her. She is a masterly conductor, she conducts with her hands, her arms, moving almost balletically on the rostrum, with her eyes and facial expression in harmony with Rachmaninov's music; all the time charming her musicians to give of their best. She has her musicians at the tip of her baton, and quite delightful she shapes the great powerful Slavic phrases emphasising all the late romanticism and nostalgia and, particularly the *Dies irae* which reappears throughout so many of the composer's works, and finally the glorious *Alleluia* from Rachmaninov's *Vespers*, his masterly choral work. The final bars from the diminutive Chan's baton were met by a roar of applause, a sign that in Glasgow, when 'wee folk' perform great feats they are inexorably celebrated like heroes.

With a Halloween children's' party elsewhere in the building, it seemed that on the rostrum that it was really Elim Chan who was bewitching and charming the musicians and listeners in

the hall. The RSNO board played a masterstroke when they appointed Chan as the new Principal Guest Conductor. China has produced several world-class musicians in recent times, notably pianists and singers, though few conductors but now through her developing repertoire – and working with other musicians – Elim Chan surely will become one of the world's outstanding conductors in coming years.