

Questions and Answers: From America to the New World

Thursday, January 22, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Lahav Shani, conductor · Daishin Kashimoto, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	IVES 1874–1954 <i>"The Unanswered Question"</i>	6'
2	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1 in A minor, Op. 77</i>	37'
3	DVORAK 1841–1904 <i>Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "From the New World"</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		85'

Charles Ives

1874–1954

"The Unanswered Question"

THE COMPOSER

Charles Edward Ives was born on October 20, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut, into a musical household that would shape his revolutionary approach to composition. His father, George Ives, was a bandleader who encouraged his son to explore unconventional sounds, such as bitonal and polytonal harmonies, that anticipated the musical experiments of the twentieth century by decades.

Young Charles was a prodigy; at fourteen he was already working as a church organist. At Yale he studied composition with Horatio Parker, while also captaining the baseball team and playing varsity football. After graduation in 1898, Ives made a fateful decision: rather than struggle for recognition in the conservative musical establishment of his day, he would earn his living in insurance, composing in his free time. The firm he co-founded, Ives & Myrick, became extraordinarily successful, pioneering the concept of estate planning. Ives considered his business career a valuable human experience that enriched his music.

Working in obscurity, Ives developed a musical language that anticipated nearly every innovation of twentieth-century music: atonality, polyrhythm, spatial music, aleatory techniques. His works were largely unknown until late

6 minutes

in his life. His Third Symphony finally received its premiere in 1946, decades after it was written, and the following year it won the Pulitzer Prize. Ives remains America's most original composer, a visionary who charted new paths that others would follow long after.

ABOUT THE WORK

“The Unanswered Question,” composed around 1908, is one of the most remarkable works in the orchestral repertoire: a six-minute meditation on existence that anticipates developments in music that would not become widespread for another half century.

In his working papers Ives subtitled it “a Cosmic Landscape.” The piece unfolds as a kind of philosophical drama in three layers. Strings, ideally placed offstage, play a series of slow, ethereal chords in G major throughout the work, representing what Ives called “The Silence of the Druids”: the timeless, impassive background of existence. Against this backdrop, a solo trumpet poses “The Perennial Question of Existence,” a five-note phrase that recurs seven times, always the same, always unanswered.

In response to the trumpet's question, a quartet of flutes (the “Fighting Answerers”) attempts to provide an answer. At first, their responses are tentative and tonal. But with each attempt, they grow more agitated, more dissonant, more chaotic, until they finally give up in frustration. The trumpet poses its question one last time. The strings continue their serene progression, indifferent. The question remains unanswered.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The three independent layers of sound, each in its own tempo. Notice how the flutes' responses become increasingly frantic and dissonant with each attempt, while the trumpet's question and the strings' “silence” remain unchanged.

Dmitri Shostakovich

1906–1975

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1 in A minor, Op. 77

THE COMPOSER

Dmitri Shostakovich was born on September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg (then still the Russian capital) into a cultured family. His father was an engineer, and it was his mother who gave him his first piano lessons. The young Dmitri showed exceptional talent, entering the Petrograd Conservatory at thirteen and graduating at nineteen with his First Symphony, whose triumphant premiere in 1926 soon brought him international fame.

37 minutes

Shostakovich's life thereafter became inseparable from the tortured history of the Soviet Union. His 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was initially a sensation, but in 1936 a devastating Pravda editorial, widely taken to reflect Stalin's own displeasure, condemned it as "muddle instead of music." Shostakovich lived for years in fear of arrest, at one point waiting at night on the landing outside his flat so that his family would not be disturbed if the knock came.

Yet under this shadow, Shostakovich composed a stream of masterpieces. His fifteen symphonies and fifteen string quartets constitute one of the twentieth century's greatest artistic achievements: music that bears witness to its era's terrors while transcending them through its humanity and craft. He died in Moscow on August 9, 1975.

ABOUT THE WORK

The First Violin Concerto was composed during one of the darkest periods of Shostakovich's life. He began it in 1947 with the great violinist David Oistrakh in mind as the dedicatee.

But in February 1948, while he was still at work on it, cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov launched a brutal attack on "formalist" composers, naming Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and others as enemies of the Soviet people. Shostakovich lost his teaching position, and much of his music disappeared from concert programmes.

The finished concerto remained in a drawer for seven years, unpublished and unperformed. Only after Stalin's death in 1953 and the subsequent "thaw" was the premiere finally possible. On October 29, 1955, Oistrakh performed it with the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yevgeny Mravinsky to overwhelming acclaim.

The concerto is cast in four movements, unusual for the form:

I. Nocturne (Moderato): A brooding, introspective opening in which Oistrakh heard "a suppression of feelings." The violin's long-breathed melody unfolds over dark orchestral colors.

II. Scherzo (Allegro): A sardonic, almost grotesque movement filled with bitter humor. Here Shostakovich works in his famous musical signature, the DSCH motif (D-E ♭ -C-B in German notation).

III. Passacaglia (Andante): The emotional heart of the concerto, a massive set of variations over a repeated bass line. The movement builds to a shattering climax before subsiding into an extended cadenza that serves as a transition to the finale.

IV. Burlesque (Allegro con brio): A fierce, virtuosic finale that bursts in straight after the cadenza.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The darkness of the opening Nocturne, which sets the tone for this deeply personal work. In the Scherzo, listen for the DSCH motif (the notes spelling out Shostakovich's initials in German). The Passacaglia's grinding bass line and the extended cadenza that follows are among the most demanding passages in the violin repertoire. The finale's relentless energy drives to a conclusion that is triumphant yet somehow hollow, a characteristic Shostakovich ambiguity.

Antonin Dvorak

1841–1904

42 minutes

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "From the New World"

THE COMPOSER

Antonin Dvorak was born on September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, a small village north of Prague in Bohemia. The eldest of fourteen children, he was expected to follow his father into the butcher's trade, but his unmistakable musical talent led him on a different path. After studying at the Prague Organ School, Dvorak spent years playing viola in theatre orchestras while composing in his spare time, often in conditions of considerable hardship.

His breakthrough came when Johannes Brahms, serving on a jury for a composition prize, recognized Dvorak's exceptional gifts and recommended him to his own publisher, Simrock. The resulting Slavonic Dances (1878) were an immediate international success. Following in the footsteps of Bedrich Smetana, Dvorak went on to achieve worldwide fame as a Czech composer. His time as director of the National Conservatory in New York (1892-1895) produced some of his most beloved works, including the "New World" Symphony and the Cello Concerto.

ABOUT THE WORK

The "New World" Symphony is one of the most popular works in the entire orchestral repertoire. Dvorak began composing it in late 1892, shortly after arriving in New York, and completed it in May 1893. The premiere, on December 16, 1893, at Carnegie Hall under Anton Seidl, was a sensation; the audience erupted in applause after each movement.

The symphony's subtitle, "From the New World," has inspired endless debate about its musical sources. Did Dvorak use actual African American spirituals or Native American melodies? The composer himself was clear: "I have not actually used any of the melodies. I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music." He had studied these traditions closely, and the African American student Harry Burleigh sang spirituals to him.

Yet the symphony is equally Bohemian. Homesickness pervades the work, especially the famous slow movement, whose cor anglais melody William Arms Fisher later set to words as "Goin' Home." The symphony synthesizes Old World and New, nostalgia and discovery.

I. Adagio, Allegro molto: A slow introduction builds tension before the explosive main theme, with its syncopated rhythms suggesting African American influence. A lyrical second theme provides contrast.

II. Largo: The most famous movement, featuring the haunting cor anglais melody that has become synonymous with American longing. Like the scherzo, it is often linked to Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha."

III. Scherzo (Molto vivace): Dvorak wrote that this movement was "suggested by the scene at the feast in Hiawatha where the Indians dance." Its rhythmic energy is irresistible, with a gentler trio section offering respite.

IV. Allegro con fuoco: A magnificent finale that recalls themes from all the previous movements. The symphony builds to a triumphant yet bittersweet conclusion.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The syncopated rhythms of the first movement's main theme, which suggest the influence of spirituals. In the Largo, the unforgettable cor anglais solo: try to hear it fresh, despite its familiarity. The scherzo's "Indian" rhythms and the finale's integration of themes from all four movements make for a deeply satisfying conclusion. Astronaut Neil Armstrong carried a recording of this symphony to the Moon in 1969.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Dvořák's Prophecy: And the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music**

Joseph Horowitz, W. W. Norton 2021

Joseph Horowitz follows the idea Dvořák launched in New York, that American concert music should draw on African American and Native American sources, and what became of it after the "New World" Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **Charles Ives: A Life with Music**

Jan Swafford, W. W. Norton 1998

A lively biography of Charles Ives, the insurance executive who wrote *The Unanswered Question* in 1906 and composed far ahead of his time in private.

DEEPER **New Worlds of Dvořák**

Michael B. Beckerman, W. W. Norton 2003

A scholarly study of Dvořák's American years, with close readings of the "New World" Symphony and its links to Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.

SOURCES

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3. *The Unanswered Question*, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unanswered_Question
4. Charles Ives, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Ives
5. Violin Concerto No. 1 (Shostakovich), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._1_\(Shostakovich\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._1_(Shostakovich))
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8. Antonín Dvořák, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonín_Dvořák
9. *Dvořák's Prophecy: And the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music*, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393881240>
10. *Charles Ives: A Life with Music*, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393317190>
11. *New Worlds of Dvořák*, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393047066>



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