

A Frenchman in New York and a Lost Viennese Genius

Thursday, February 12, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Paavo Järvi, conductor · Lang Lang, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	RAVEL 1875–1937 <i>Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G major</i>	22'
2	ROTT 1858–1884 <i>Symphony No. 1 in E major</i>	55'
TOTAL MUSIC		77'

Maurice Ravel

22 minutes

1875–1937

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in G major

THE COMPOSER

Maurice Ravel was born on March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, a small town in the French Basque Country near the Spanish border. His mother was Basque and his father a Swiss-born engineer and inventor, a heritage that would profoundly shape his musical identity. From an early age, Ravel showed exceptional musical talent and entered the Paris Conservatoire at fourteen, where he studied with Gabriel Fauré and absorbed the harmonic innovations of his time.

Often paired with Claude Debussy under the “Impressionist” label, Ravel himself rejected this categorization. Where Debussy was spontaneous and atmospheric, Ravel was a meticulous craftsman, obsessed with formal perfection and clarity. This perfectionism produced some of the most beloved works in the orchestral repertoire: the hypnotic *Boléro*, the shimmering *Daphnis et Chloé*, and the virtuosic *Gaspard de la nuit*.

By the late 1920s, Ravel was France’s most celebrated living composer, yet he remained restless, constantly seeking new sounds and influences. A triumphant four-month tour of North America in 1928 brought him face to face with jazz, which impressed him deeply. These experiences would flow directly into his final orchestral works.

ABOUT THE WORK

Ravel began work on his Piano Concerto in G major in 1929, though he had toyed with the idea of a concerto on Basque themes as early as 1906. He worked on it alongside a second concerto, the dramatic Left Hand Concerto commissioned by the one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein, and completed the G major in 1931.

He had intended to premiere the work himself, but poor health forced him to entrust the solo part to the pianist Marguerite Long, to whom he dedicated the score. The premiere took place at the Salle Pleyel in Paris on January 14, 1932, with Ravel conducting. It was an immediate triumph, and composer and soloist went on to take it on tour across Europe.

Ravel named Mozart and Saint-Saëns as his models; his only wish, he said, was to write “a genuine concerto, that is, a brilliant work, clearly highlighting the soloist’s virtuosity, without seeking to show profundity.” Yet beneath its sparkling surface lies remarkable sophistication: Basque folk melodies, Spanish colors, and jazz idioms are woven together with classical clarity.

What to listen for tonight:

- **First movement (Allegrement):** A whip-crack launches us into a kaleidoscope of themes: a jaunty Basque-flavored tune on piccolo, Spanish inflections, and unmistakable jazz colors with blue notes in clarinet and trumpet. Listen for the unusual sequence of cadenzas: first harp, then woodwinds, finally the piano.
- **Second movement (Adagio assai):** The concerto’s emotional heart. The piano enters alone with an endless, hypnotic melody spanning 34 bars, inspired by the slow movement of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet. When the English horn takes up the theme, the piano floats ethereal embellishments around it. This movement is often called one of the most beautiful in all piano literature.
- **Third movement (Presto):** A breathless finale that returns to the first movement’s high spirits. Jazz rhythms propel the music forward in a virtuosic race between soloist and orchestra. In a characteristic Ravelian touch, the movement snaps shut as abruptly as it began.

Hans Rott

1858–1884

Symphony No. 1 in E major

THE COMPOSER

Hans Rott's story is one of music history's great tragedies. Born in Vienna on August 1, 1858, he was the son of the actor Carl Mathias Rott, who died in 1876 after a stage accident. Rott entered the Vienna Conservatory in 1874, where he studied organ with Anton Bruckner and became a close friend of Gustav Mahler, who was two years his junior; for a time the two even shared lodgings.

Bruckner recognized extraordinary talent in his young student and spoke of him in glowing terms. But Vienna's musical establishment, dominated by the conservative faction around Johannes Brahms, was hostile to Bruckner and his circle. When Rott showed his completed symphony to Brahms in 1880, hoping to secure support, Brahms allegedly told him that he had no talent; by one account he found in the score "so much that is trivial or nonsensical alongside such beauty."

The rejection shattered Rott. Later in 1880, during a train journey, he suffered a complete mental breakdown, allegedly threatening a fellow passenger with a revolver and claiming that Brahms had filled the train with dynamite. He was committed to a psychiatric hospital in 1881 and never recovered. He died of tuberculosis on June 25, 1884, aged just twenty-five. Bruckner and Mahler attended his funeral.

Mahler never forgot his friend. "He is so closely related to what is most essential in me," he said, "that he and I seem like two fruits of the same tree." He called Rott "the founder of the new symphony, as I understand it," and echoes of Rott's scherzo can be heard in the second movement of Mahler's own First Symphony.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Symphony in E major, composed between 1878 and 1880, was Rott's most ambitious undertaking and the work that cost him everything. He submitted the first movement to the Conservatory's composition competition shortly after turning twenty, but it won no prize; he then completed the remaining movements, pouring into them all his hopes and despair.

The symphony lay forgotten for over a century until the score resurfaced in the Austrian National Library in the late 1980s. Its world premiere came only in 1989, when Gerhard Samuel conducted the Cincinnati Philharmonia Orchestra, 105 years after Rott's death.

What makes this symphony so remarkable is how clearly it anticipates Mahler's musical world, composed before Mahler had written a single symphony of his own. The third movement bears a remarkable

resemblance to the second movement of Mahler's First Symphony, written eight years later. Yet the symphony is no mere historical curiosity; it speaks with its own distinctive voice, combining Bruckner's grand scale, Wagner's dramatic intensity, and Brahms's craft into something genuinely new.

What to listen for tonight:

- **First movement:** The movement grows from an expansive, hymn-like theme, 28 bars long. Listen for how it returns in later movements, binding the symphony together.
- **Second movement (Adagio):** A profound slow movement that closes with a noble, chorale-like hymn.
- **Third movement (Scherzo):** The movement most famously connected to Mahler. Listen for the ghostly waltz and the way Rott constantly delays the expected return of the opening music, building irresistible forward momentum.
- **Fourth movement:** Rott's most original conception. Slow sections frame a busy, contrapuntal central passage, the work of a trained organist. Listen for a broad theme that many listeners compare to the finale of Brahms's First Symphony (the very composer who rejected him). The cyclic theme from the first movement gradually infiltrates the closing pages, one of Rott's most ingenious inventions, as the work settles into a Wagnerian, resigned peace.

Tonight's artists

Lang Lang *piano*

Lang Lang, born in Shenyang, China, in 1982, is one of the most widely known classical musicians in the world. He began piano lessons at the age of three, studied at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and in 1997 moved to the United States to study with Gary Graffman at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. His breakthrough came in 1999 at the Ravinia Festival, when, still a teenager, he stepped in at the last moment for the ailing André Watts to play Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a performance that made him famous almost overnight. He has since appeared with the world's leading orchestras, including the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, and recorded widely for Deutsche Grammophon and Sony Classical. A committed advocate of music education, he launched the Lang Lang International Music Foundation in 2008 to bring music to children, and in 2013 was designated a United Nations Messenger of Peace with a special focus on global education.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Ravel**

Roger Nichols, Yale University Press 2013

A modern, readable biography of Ravel that follows his 1928 American tour and the jazz-tinged Piano Concerto in G major that came out of those years.

ACCESSIBLE **Maurice Ravel: A Life**

Benjamin Ivry, Welcome Rain Publishers 2000

A brief, personal portrait of Ravel the man, from his Basque roots to the late years that produced the G major Concerto.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Ravel**

Deborah Mawer (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2000

Essays on Ravel's style, sources and influences, including the jazz and blues elements heard in the G major Concerto.

SOURCES

1. Paavo Järvi and Lang Lang with Ravel's Piano Concerto, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/56391/>
2. Paavo Järvi and Lang Lang, Digital Concert Hall. <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/56391>
3. Piano Concerto in G (Ravel), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_in_G_\(Ravel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_in_G_(Ravel))

4. Maurice Ravel, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_Ravel
5. Programme Note Symphony No. 1 in E major, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/hans-rott-symphony-no-1-in-e-major>
6. Hans Rott, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Rott
7. Ravel, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300187762>
8. Maurice Ravel: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781566491525>
9. The Cambridge Companion to Ravel, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521648561>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-02-12-jarvi>

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