

From Puppets to Star-Crossed Lovers: A Lithuanian Debut

Thursday, April 16, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, conductor · Emanuel Ax, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	WEINBERG 1919–1996 <i>"Burattino and the Golden Key": Orchestral Suite No. 4, op. 55d</i>	20'
2	WILLIAMS b. 1932 <i>Concerto for Piano and Orchestra</i>	22'
3	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>"Romeo and Juliet," op. 64: Excerpts</i>	50'
TOTAL MUSIC		92'

Mieczysław Weinberg

20 minutes

1919–1996

"Burattino and the Golden Key": Orchestral Suite No. 4, op. 55d

THE COMPOSER

Mieczysław Weinberg was born in Warsaw in 1919 to a family of Polish-Jewish musicians who worked in the Yiddish theatre. His life was shattered in September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland: Weinberg fled east on foot toward Soviet territory, while his parents and sister remained behind. They were murdered at the Trawniki concentration camp. He never saw them again.

After years in Minsk and Tashkent, Weinberg settled in Moscow in October 1943 and met Shostakovich, the start of one of the most remarkable friendships in twentieth-century music. The two played each other their new works, and Weinberg was Shostakovich's partner in the four-hand play-throughs of his new orchestral scores. When Weinberg was arrested by Stalin's secret police in February 1953 and held at the Lubyanka, Shostakovich wrote to the secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria on his behalf and offered to take in Weinberg's young daughter should the worst happen. Stalin's death a few weeks later led to Weinberg's release that April.

Despite a catalogue of staggering scale (more than twenty symphonies, seventeen string quartets, seven operas, concertos, ballets, songs and a large body of film music), Weinberg remained largely unknown in the West for

decades. Only since the 1990s has his music begun to take its rightful place in the international repertoire, with major orchestras, including the Berliner Philharmoniker, championing his cause.

ABOUT THE WORK

In 1954-1955, Weinberg composed a children's ballet based on Alexei Tolstoy's *The Golden Key*, a Russian retelling of Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio story in which the wooden puppet Burattino discovers a magical key that opens the door to a hidden world. Weinberg revised the ballet in 1961, and in 1964 he arranged its music into four orchestral concert suites, designated Op. 55a through Op. 55d. The Fourth Suite, heard tonight, brings together some of the most charming and theatrical numbers from the score.

The music conjures a world of marionettes, mischief, and wonder. Weinberg's orchestral imagination is dazzling: woodwinds chatter and squeak like wooden dolls coming to life; the percussion clatters with the wit of a circus pit band; sudden lyrical interludes reveal the puppet's tender side. The influence of Shostakovich is audible in the same biting wit and the same ironic juxtapositions of the grotesque and the tender, but Weinberg's voice is entirely his own: warmer, gentler, with a melodic generosity rooted in Eastern European folk and Yiddish song.

Listen for the nimble dance episodes, the mocking music associated with the villainous Karabas-Barabas (a sinister puppet-master), and the radiant lyrical pages that hint at the world beyond the magic door. This is music with the surface of a children's tale and the soul of a survivor: playful, but never naive.

John Williams

b. 1932

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra

THE COMPOSER

John Williams is, by almost any measure, the most influential composer of orchestral music in the past half-century. Born in Queens in 1932 to a jazz percussionist father, he took piano lessons in New York with the legendary Rosina Lhévinne of Juilliard and at first planned a career as a concert pianist before turning to composition. Five Academy Awards (for *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, and *Schindler's List*), more than two dozen Grammy Awards, and an honorary knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 2022 only begin to suggest his impact.

Less widely known is Williams's parallel career as a composer of concert music. Across more than five decades he has produced a symphony and a long line of concertos, for flute, violin, cello, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, trumpet,

22 minutes

tuba and more, many written for celebrated soloists of our time. From 1980 until 1993 he served as conductor of the Boston Pops, and he remains its laureate conductor today.

ABOUT THE WORK

This Piano Concerto has an unusually charming origin story. Williams had mentioned to only a few associates that he was interested in writing for piano and orchestra when Emanuel Ax, tonight's soloist, called him with an offer: "*If you write it, I will play it!*" Williams began the score in 2022, and the concerto was given its world premiere on 26 July 2025 at Tanglewood, with Ax as soloist and Andris Nelsons conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The composer was 93 years old.

The concerto is cast in three movements following the traditional fast-slow-fast pattern, but its musical character is anything but conventional. Williams has said that the three movements were inspired by the very different pianistic personalities of three jazz giants: Art Tatum's dazzling virtuosity in the opening *Introduction: Colloquy*; Bill Evans's introspective lyricism in the central *Listening*; and Oscar Peterson's exuberant drive in the closing *Finale, presto*. He is careful to add that the music is not a portrait of these artists, only a way of remembering them. The orchestral writing is, unsurprisingly, sumptuous, but the piano writing is the heart of the piece: by turns sparkling, tender, and propulsive, exploiting the full sonority of the instrument.

What to listen for tonight: the dialogue between piano and orchestra in the opening movement, in which the soloist seems to be improvising answers to questions posed by the orchestra; the long-breathed, almost vocal melodic lines of the slow movement, which opens with a viola solo and where Williams reveals himself as one of the great melodists of our era; and the relentless rhythmic energy of the finale, launched by the timpani, with its echoes of bebop and swing.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

"Romeo and Juliet," op. 64: Excerpts

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 in Sontsivka, then part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine), and was admitted to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904, several years younger than most of his classmates. By his teens he was already a fearsome pianist and an enfant terrible of Russian modernism, scandalising audiences with the percussive dissonance of his early works.

50 minutes

In 1918, Prokofiev left Russia with official Soviet permission and spent nearly two decades in the West, first in the United States, then mostly in Paris, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, and concertos that earned him a place among the leading modernists of his generation. After several years of shuttling between Paris and Moscow, he settled permanently in the Soviet Union in 1936. The remaining years of his life were marked by official denunciation in 1948, deteriorating health, and personal tragedy. He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. Soviet newspapers, consumed by the dictator's death, barely noted his passing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Romeo and Juliet grew out of negotiations with the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad in 1934, and Prokofiev wrote most of the score in 1935, after a contract had been signed with Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre. But the road to the stage was tortuous. Neither theatre staged it at first, and Prokofiev's original ending, in which the lovers survive (because, as he later explained, "living people can dance, the dying cannot"), provoked controversy and was eventually replaced by Shakespeare's tragic conclusion. The full ballet finally received its world premiere on 30 December 1938 not in Russia but at the Mahen Theatre in Brno, Czechoslovakia. The Soviet premiere followed at the Kirov on 11 January 1940, with the legendary Galina Ulanova as Juliet, a performance that immediately entered the history of dance.

Aware that the full ballet was unlikely to enter the international repertoire quickly, Prokofiev extracted three orchestral suites (two in 1936, a third in 1946) and a set of piano pieces from the score. Conductors today often assemble their own selections from these suites and from the complete ballet, and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla's evening combines ten numbers into a single dramatic arc that follows the tragedy from its first violent confrontation to its devastating conclusion.

The most famous moment in the score, *The Montagues and the Capulets*, is one of the most instantly recognisable passages in twentieth-century music. It opens with colossal dissonant chords representing the Prince of Verona's furious decree against further bloodshed. Then comes the *Dance of the Knights*: that pounding, menacing tread of low strings and brass, music so iconic that television and advertising have borrowed it again and again. Listen for the delicate middle section, where Juliet dances with Paris.

Throughout, listen for Prokofiev's gift for character: the quicksilver music that paints *Juliet as a Young Girl*, a teenager surprised by her own emotions; the breathless lyricism of the *Balcony Scene*, in which a single soaring melody for the strings carries the weight of all first

love; and the shattering orchestral grief that closes the work, as Prokofiev gives Shakespeare's most heartbreaking final scene a sound world of unbearable tenderness.

MIRGA GRAŽINYTĖ-TYLA, CONDUCTOR

Lithuanian conductor Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, born in Vilnius in 1986, makes her Berliner Philharmoniker debut with these concerts, a moment many in the music world have been waiting for since her rise began over a decade ago. The daughter of a choral conductor father and a pianist-singer mother, she initially trained in painting and French at the M. K. Čiurlionis School of Art in Vilnius before deciding, at age eleven, that music was her calling. She subsequently studied in Graz, Leipzig, and Zurich.

Her career trajectory has been extraordinary. After winning the Salzburg Young Conductors Award in 2012 and serving as a Dudamel Fellow with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, she was appointed Music Director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in 2016, the first female conductor ever to hold that historic post. In 2019 she became the first female conductor in the history of Deutsche Grammophon to sign an exclusive recording contract; her debut album for the label, devoted to the music of Mieczysław Weinberg, won the Gramophone Recording of the Year award in 2020. Weinberg's music is one of the central artistic threads of her career, and she is widely regarded as one of the leading champions of his rediscovery, which makes her programming choice for tonight's debut especially meaningful. A small curiosity: her surname "Tyla," which she added herself, is the Lithuanian word for stillness, calm and silence.

EMANUEL AX, PIANO

Emanuel Ax, born in Lviv in 1949 to Polish-Jewish parents who had survived the Nazi concentration camps, has been one of the most beloved pianists in the world for half a century. The family emigrated to Winnipeg before settling in New York in 1961, where Ax studied piano with Mieczysław Munz at Juilliard and earned a degree in French from Columbia. His international career took off when he won the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Master Competition in Tel Aviv in 1974, followed by the Avery Fisher Prize in 1979.

A multiple Grammy Award winner, Ax is celebrated equally for his solo recitals, his chamber music partnerships (most famously with cellist Yo-Yo Ma, with whom he won Grammys for recordings of Brahms and Beethoven) and his concerto performances with the world's leading orchestras. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and holds honorary doctorates from Yale and

Columbia. Tonight's performance carries a particular personal significance: it was Ax himself who told John Williams, then in his nineties, "If you write it, I will play it!" The Piano Concerto on tonight's programme exists, quite literally, because Emanuel Ax asked for it.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Lina and Serge: The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev**
Simon Morrison, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2013

The story of Prokofiev's first wife and of the family's move to the Soviet Union, the years in which Prokofiev wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.

ACCESSIBLE **John Williams: A Composer's Life**
Tim Greiving, Oxford University Press 2025

A biography of John Williams, useful background for a concert work by a composer best known for his film scores.

DEEPER **The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years**
Simon Morrison, Oxford University Press 2010

A scholarly history of Prokofiev's Soviet years, including the troubled path of *Romeo and Juliet* from a score the Bolshoi set aside to its Kirov premiere in 1940.

SOURCES

1. Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla makes her debut with Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet", Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/56418>
2. Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla makes her debut with Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet", Digital Concert Hall. <https://digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/56418>
3. The Golden Key, Op. 55: Suite No. 4, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/737/the-golden-key-op-55-suite-no-4>
4. List of compositions by Mieczysław Weinberg, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Mieczysław_Weinberg
5. Mieczysław Weinberg, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mieczysław_Weinberg
6. Programme Note: Concerto for piano and orchestra, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/john-williams-concerto-for-piano-and-orchestra/>
7. Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/john-williams-concerto-for-piano-and-orchestra>
8. John Williams, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Williams
9. *Romeo and Juliet* (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_and_Juliet_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_and_Juliet_(Prokofiev))
10. About Prokofiev's *Romeo & Juliet*, Pacific Symphony. <https://pacificsymphony.org/blog/2023/01/26/about-prokofieffs-romeo-juliet/>
11. Sergei Prokofiev, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergei_Prokofiev
12. Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirga_Gražinytė-Tyla
13. Portrait: Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/stories/portrait-mirga-grazinyte-tyla/>
14. Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla wins Recording of the Year at Gramophone Classical Music Awards 2020, Deutsche Grammophon. <https://www.deutschegrammophon.com/en/artists/mirga-grazinyte-tyla/news/mirga-grazinyte-tyla-wins-recording-of-the-year-at-gramophone-classical-music-awards-2020-260430>

Sergei Prokofiev · "Romeo and Juliet," op. 64: Excerpts

15. Emanuel Ax, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emanuel_Ax
16. Lina and Serge: The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780547391311>
17. John Williams: A Composer's Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780197620885>
18. The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199753482>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-04-16-grazinyte-tyla>

Version 3, 30 September 2026