

Looking Back to Move Forward: Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven

Thursday, May 7, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Kirill Petrenko, conductor · Gautier Capuçon, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>"Pulcinella," Suite (1949 revised version)</i>	22'
2	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra in A major, op. 33</i>	19'
3	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 36</i>	33'
TOTAL MUSIC		74'

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

"Pulcinella," Suite (1949 revised version)

22 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his “neoclassical” period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

Pulcinella is the work that launched Stravinsky's neoclassical phase, and it began with a suggestion from Diaghilev. In 1919, the impresario presented Stravinsky with a stack of musical manuscripts he had unearthed in libraries in Naples and London: pieces attributed (largely incorrectly, as it turned out) to the Italian Baroque composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. Diaghilev wanted Stravinsky to arrange them into a ballet score on the commedia dell'arte character of Pulcinella.

Stravinsky was sceptical at first, but once he started studying the manuscripts, he was hooked. The result was something far more interesting than a simple arrangement: Stravinsky kept the original melodies and basslines almost intact, but reharmonised them, re-orchestrated them with strikingly modern instrumental colour, and laced them through with rhythmic dislocations and “wrong-note” cadences entirely his own. The ballet premiered at the Paris Opéra on 15 May 1920, with sets and costumes by Pablo Picasso and choreography by Léonide Massine. Stravinsky later extracted a purely instrumental concert suite, premiered by Pierre Monteux and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in December 1922; the version performed tonight is his final 1949 revision.

Listen for the *Vivo*, a moment of pure musical comedy. Listen too for the *Serenata*, where a Baroque melody is suddenly punctured by Stravinsky's cool, archly modern harmonies. The whole work is a sustained act of loving mischief: Stravinsky later called it “my discovery of the past, the epiphany through which the whole of my late work became possible.”

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

19 minutes

Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra in A major, op. 33

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia's first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphonies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

The *Rococo Variations* are unique in Tchaikovsky's output: a heartfelt act of homage to the eighteenth-century music of Mozart, the composer Tchaikovsky revered above all others. He composed the work in late 1876 and early 1877, dedicating it to Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, a German cellist and his colleague at the Moscow Conservatory. Despite the title, the theme is not actually drawn from the Rococo era; it is Tchaikovsky's own original melody, written deliberately in an eighteenth-century style.

The result is one of the most graceful and elegant works in the cello repertoire. After a brief orchestral introduction, the cellist presents the theme with utmost simplicity, followed by seven variations of progressively increasing virtuosity. The orchestral writing is exquisitely transparent (small woodwind ensembles, gentle horn calls, light string accompaniment), keeping the focus firmly on the soloist.

There is a lingering controversy attached to this score. Fitzenhagen, the dedicatee, took it upon himself to "improve" Tchaikovsky's piece: he reordered the variations to make them more virtuosically effective, eliminated one of them entirely, and rewrote portions of the cello part. This Fitzenhagen-edited version was the only one performed for over half a century until Tchaikovsky's original was finally heard again in Moscow in 1941. Most cellists today still perform the familiar Fitzenhagen edition. Tchaikovsky was upset by the changes, but in the end he let them stand.

Listen for the seductive lyrical lines of the Andante variations, which display the cello's singing tone at its most beautiful, and for the playful conversation between cello and woodwinds throughout. The closing variation is a brilliant *coda* of dazzling virtuosic display, and unmistakably Tchaikovsky beneath the eighteenth-century costume.

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 36

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Symphony No. 2 was composed during that same desperate summer of 1802, the same months in which Beethoven contemplated ending his life. What is astonishing about the work is its character: it is the most exuberantly cheerful, optimistic, and witty of all his symphonies. Almost nothing in it betrays the personal crisis of its creator. Beethoven seems to have used composition itself as a way out of despair, channelling his dark mood into a work of radiant affirmation.

The symphony was premiered in Vienna on 5 April 1803, with Beethoven himself conducting, in a marathon concert that also included the premieres of his Piano Concerto No. 3 and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. Some critics were baffled by the symphony's wild contrasts. The Viennese *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* infamously described it as “a hideously wounded, writhing dragon that refuses to die.” Audiences eventually came around.

The first movement opens with a slow introduction of unprecedented length and ambition for its era: Beethoven was already pushing the formal boundaries of Haydn and Mozart. The Larghetto second movement is one of the most serenely beautiful things Beethoven ever wrote: a long-breathed melodic line of almost vocal warmth. In the third movement a rustic Scherzo replaces the traditional Minuet, and the Finale erupts with a comic, almost rude main theme of irrepressible energy.

What to listen for tonight: the daring length and harmonic boldness of the slow introduction; the singing operatic lines of the Larghetto, where Beethoven seems to be writing for an imaginary tenor; the sudden, witty silences of the Scherzo; and the volcanic high spirits of the Finale, with its “hiccupping” first phrase.

KIRILL PETRENKO, CONDUCTOR

Kirill Petrenko, born in Omsk, Siberia, in 1972, is the Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Berliner Philharmoniker, a position he has held since August 2019. The son of a violinist father and a musicologist mother, he emigrated with his family to Vorarlberg, Austria, in 1990, where he studied at the Vorarlberg Conservatory before continuing in Vienna. After serving as General Music Director of the Komische Oper Berlin and then of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, he was elected by the Berliner Philharmoniker themselves in 2015 to succeed Sir Simon Rattle.

Petrenko is famously reticent: he rarely talks to the press and prefers to let his work speak for itself. Critics regularly describe him as one of the most musically penetrating conductors of his generation, equally at home in Wagner opera, Mahler symphonies, and twentieth-century repertoire. Tonight’s programme is characteristic of his interests: a witty neoclassical work, an elegant Romantic concertante piece, and a Beethoven symphony less often heard than its more famous siblings.

GAUTIER CAPUÇON, CELLO

French cellist Gautier Capuçon, born in Chambéry in 1981, is one of the most charismatic musicians of his generation, a player whose generous tone and instinctive musicality have made him a regular guest with virtually every major orchestra in the world. He began the cello as a small child (his older brother is the violinist Renaud Capuçon) and trained at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris before completing his studies in Vienna with the legendary Heinrich Schiff.

A teenage member of the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester under conductors such as Claudio Abbado and Pierre Boulez, Capuçon was named “New Talent of the Year” by Victoires de la Musique in 2001 and has never looked back. He records exclusively for Erato/Warner Classics and plays a 1701 Matteo Goffriller cello on loan. Beyond the concert stage, Capuçon is deeply committed to music education, and in 2022 he set up his own foundation to support young musicians at the start of their careers. A small curiosity: in addition to first prize in

cello, he also won first prize in piano at his hometown conservatory in Chambéry, a reminder that his musical horizons extend well beyond his primary instrument.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

Swafford's life of Beethoven covers 1802, when he finished the Second Symphony in the same Heiligenstadt summer and autumn in which he wrote his despairing testament about his deafness.

ACCESSIBLE **Igor Stravinsky**

Jonathan Cross, Reaktion Books 2015

A short biography in Reaktion's Critical Lives series that explains Stravinsky's turn to neoclassicism, which began with Pulcinella.

DEEPER **Beethoven: The Music and the Life**

Lewis Lockwood, W. W. Norton 2005

A scholarly study that moves through Beethoven's works in the order he wrote them, with a clear discussion of the early symphonies.

SOURCES

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8. Symphony No. 2 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Beethoven))
9. Beethoven's Symphony No. 2: a sunny work peppered with brutal sforzandos, BBC Music Magazine. <https://classical-music.com/features/works/guide-beethovens-symphony-no-2>
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14. Heiligenstadt Testament, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heiligenstadt_Testament
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Ludwig van Beethoven · Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 36

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21. Beethoven: The Music and the Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393326383>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-05-07-petrenko>

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