

Heroes and Tyrants: From Beethoven to Shostakovich

Thursday, May 28, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Semyon Bychkov, conductor · Víkingur Ólafsson, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Coriolan Overture in C minor, op. 62</i>	8'
2	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 5 in E flat major, op. 73</i> ("Emperor")	38'
3	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Symphony No. 5 in D minor, op. 47</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		91'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

8 minutes

Coriolan Overture in C minor, op. 62

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 overture was composed not for Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, as is sometimes assumed, but for a now largely forgotten verse tragedy on the same subject by the Viennese playwright Heinrich Joseph von Collin, published in 1804. The story, drawn from Plutarch, concerns Gaius Marcius Coriolanus, the proud Roman general who is banished

from Rome, allies himself with the enemy and marches on his own city. His mother's pleas persuade him to spare it, and in Collin's version, unable to turn back or go home, he kills himself.

The overture is one of the most concentrated dramatic statements Beethoven ever wrote. The opening, three crashing chords each prepared by a long unison note and followed by silence, is one of the most arresting beginnings in all music: Coriolanus's iron will, struck out in pure musical defiance. The first theme that follows is jagged, agitated, restless. The contrasting second theme, in E-flat major, is gentler, often heard as the voice of his mother pleading for mercy. The two ideas struggle throughout the overture, and at the end Coriolanus's defiance crumbles: the main theme breaks into fragments over soft pizzicato strings and the music dissolves to nothing, the hero's pulse stilled. It is one of the most devastating endings in the orchestral repertoire.

Listen for those three opening chords, and then listen to how quietly the same C-minor world fades away at the very end.

Ludwig van Beethoven

38 minutes

1770–1827

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 5 in E flat major, op. 73 ("Emperor")

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven composed his Fifth Piano Concerto in 1809, in Vienna, as Napoleon's army was bombarding the city. During the worst of it he took refuge in his brother's cellar with pillows pressed against his ears, to protect what hearing he had left from the cannon fire. It would be the last piano concerto Beethoven completed. By the time of its premiere his hearing had deteriorated so far that he could no longer perform as soloist, ending one of the most brilliant pianistic careers of the era.

The nickname “Emperor” was not Beethoven’s, and its origin is uncertain; it took hold in the English-speaking world and has stuck because it captures something genuine about the work’s grand, public, almost ceremonial character. There is no reference to any emperor in Beethoven’s score. Indeed, given the composer’s disillusionment with Napoleon (he had struck Napoleon’s name from the *Eroica* Symphony when Napoleon declared himself emperor), it is a name he might well have rejected.

The premiere took place in Leipzig on 28 November 1811, with Friedrich Schneider as soloist; the Vienna premiere followed in February 1812 with Beethoven’s pupil Carl Czerny. It has long since become one of the most beloved concertos in the repertoire.

The first movement opens with a dramatic gesture without precedent: the orchestra plays a single chord, and the soloist responds at once with a dazzling, almost improvisatory flourish. This happens three times before the orchestra finally settles into the actual main theme. It is one of the boldest openings in concerto literature, immediately establishing the soloist as an equal partner of the orchestra rather than a polite latecomer. The second movement is a slow Adagio of profound serenity, in the unexpected key of B major, and its quiet, hymn-like main theme is one of the most beautiful melodies Beethoven ever wrote. Without a pause, the soloist quietly outlines the rhythm of the finale’s main theme, and the music suddenly explodes into a Rondo of irresistible, exuberant energy.

What to listen for tonight: the unprecedented soloist-orchestra dialogue of the opening; the long-breathed, almost vocal lyricism of the slow movement; and the witty timpani-and-piano duet that closes the finale, where Beethoven slows the music to a near halt before the final triumphant outburst, a moment of pure compositional cheek.

Dmitri Shostakovich

1906–1975

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, op. 47

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.

45 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 Fifth Symphony was Shostakovich's response. Composed in 1937, the year of the Great Purge, when Stalin's terror reached its peak, it was premiered in Leningrad on 21 November of that year by the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yevgeny Mravinsky. It was Shostakovich's calculated act of public repentance, and the press greeted it, with the composer's own public endorsement, as "a Soviet artist's creative response to just criticism." It was an immediate and overwhelming success: the premiere audience gave the work an ovation said to have lasted well over half an hour. Shostakovich's career was saved.

But what kind of work, exactly, did Shostakovich produce? On the surface, the Fifth Symphony fulfils every Stalinist demand: it follows the heroic, accessible D-minor-to-D-major arc beloved of Soviet ideology; it returns to clear classical forms; its triumphant finale apparently celebrates the victorious construction of socialism. Yet listeners and critics, both inside the Soviet Union and outside it, have always sensed something deeply ambiguous beneath the official triumph.

In 1979, four years after Shostakovich's death, the controversial memoir *Testimony*, published by the Russian musicologist Solomon Volkov, presented the symphony's finale not as celebration but as bitter parody. It quotes Shostakovich as saying: "What exultation could there be? It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing.'" The authenticity of *Testimony* remains disputed by scholars, but the doubleness of meaning that it articulates is now part of how almost every conductor approaches the work.

The first movement opens with a bleak, jagged motif in the low strings: pure tragedy. The slow, march-like main theme that follows builds to an almost unbearable climax of crushed despair before subsiding to a desolate close for solo violin and celesta. The second

movement is a sardonic, even savage scherzo with a heavy peasant tread. The third movement Largo is the symphony's emotional core. Scored without any brass, it is a long, mournful elegy that many have heard as a private requiem for the victims of Stalin's terror, and members of the premiere audience are said to have wept during it. The Finale begins with a thunderous brass theme, outwardly triumphant, but builds, through ever-increasing tempo and ever-louder timpani strokes, to a coda where the strings are forced to repeat the same note again and again while the orchestra hammers out its supposed celebration. It is, depending on how you hear it, the sound of triumph or the sound of being beaten into submission to celebrate.

What to listen for tonight: the desolate violin and celesta close of the first movement; the solitary, heart-stopping flute solo in the Largo; and the relentless, almost frightening repeated A's of the strings in the closing pages of the finale, perhaps the most ambiguous "triumph" in twentieth-century music.

SEMYON BYCHKOV, CONDUCTOR

Russian-born conductor Semyon Bychkov, born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in 1952, is Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Czech Philharmonic, a position he will hold until the end of the 2027–28 season. From 2028 he will be Music Director of the Paris Opera. He studied at the Leningrad Conservatory with the legendary teacher Ilya Musin, and although he won the Rachmaninov Conducting Competition there in 1973, the Soviet authorities denied him the prize-winning concert with the Leningrad Philharmonic. In the mid-1970s he emigrated to the United States and rebuilt his career from the bottom up, rising through music directorships at the Grand Rapids and Buffalo orchestras to international prominence.

Bychkov was Music Director of the Orchestre de Paris from 1989 to 1998, and chief conductor of the WDR Symphony Orchestra in Cologne and of the Semperoper in Dresden. The International Opera Awards named him Conductor of the Year in 2015. He has returned to Shostakovich throughout his career, and the Fifth Symphony has a special biographical resonance for him: he is a musician shaped by the same Soviet system that nearly crushed its composer.

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON, PIANO

Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson, born in Reykjavík in 1984, is one of the most distinctive voices in classical music today. The son of the piano teacher Svana Víkingsdóttir, he began the piano with his mother before studying with Erla Stefánsdóttir and Peter Máté in Iceland, then took bachelor's and master's degrees at Juilliard with Jerome

Lowenthal and Robert McDonald. *The New York Times* memorably called him “Iceland’s Glenn Gould”, and he has recorded exclusively for Deutsche Grammophon since 2016.

In 2025, Ólafsson won the Grammy Award for Best Classical Instrumental Solo for his recording of Bach’s Goldberg Variations, a work he took on a world tour, performing it 88 times. His earlier albums of Philip Glass, Bach, Debussy and Rameau, Mozart and his contemporaries, and the collection *From Afar* have made him one of the most admired pianists of his generation, prized for the clarity of his sound and for his unconventional but always musical programme construction. A small curiosity: Ólafsson has presented his own classical music series on Icelandic national television and made programmes for BBC radio.

Tonight’s artists

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*

Víkingur Ólafsson, born in Reykjavík in 1984, is one of the most sought-after pianists of his generation. He had his first lessons from his mother, a piano teacher, and studied at the Juilliard School in New York before returning to Iceland, where he founded his own record label, Dirrindí, and the Reykjavík Midsummer Music festival. Since signing with Deutsche Grammophon he has released a series of thoughtfully conceived albums (Philip Glass, Johann Sebastian Bach, Debussy and Rameau, Mozart and his contemporaries) which have won him a wide international following. His recording of Bach’s Goldberg Variations, which he performed around the world throughout the 2023/24 season, won the Grammy Award for Best Classical Instrumental Solo in 2025. Admired for the clarity, rhythmic precision and imaginative programming of his playing, he joins the Berliner Philharmoniker this season.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Shostakovich: A Life Remembered**

Elizabeth Wilson, Princeton University Press 2006

Shostakovich's life told through the memories of those who knew him, including the 1937 premiere of the Fifth Symphony after the Pravda attack of 1936.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Alex Ross's chapter on music in Stalin's Russia sets the Fifth Symphony in the terror of 1936 and 1937 and discusses how audiences heard its ending.

DEEPER **Shostakovich: A Life**

Laurel E. Fay, Oxford University Press 2005

Laurel Fay's biography, built on Russian documents, is a careful guide to the facts around the Fifth Symphony and its reception.

SOURCES

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2. Semyon Bychkov and Víkingur Ólafsson, Berliner Philharmoniker Digital Concert Hall. <https://digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/56432>
3. Ludwig van Beethoven: Coriolan Overture in C minor, op. 62 (programme note by Anna Vogt), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/ludwig-van-beethoven-coriolan-overture-in-c-minor-op-62/>
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15. Víkingur Ólafsson, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V%C3%ADkingur_%C3%93lafsson
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18. Shostakovich: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195182514>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-05-28-bychkov>

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