

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

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 ("Emperor")</i>	38'
3	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Symphony No. 5 in D minor, op. 47</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		91'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Coriolan Overture in C minor, op. 62

8 minutes

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.

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

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

38 minutes

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.

Dmitri Shostakovich

1906–1975

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, op. 47

45 minutes

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.

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 Víkingisdóttir, 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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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