

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

Lahav Shani and Martha Argerich: Debussy, Prokofiev and Pictures at an Exhibition

Thursday, February 25, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Lahav Shani, conductor · Martha Argerich, piano

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune</i>	10'
2	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26</i>	28'
3	MUSSORGSKY 1839–1881 <i>Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestration Ravel)</i>	33'
	TOTAL MUSIC	71'

Claude Debussy

1862–1918

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

10 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Claude Debussy was 32 when the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun) was first played, at a concert of the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris on 22 December 1894. The Swiss conductor Gustave Doret was in charge. By one report the horns were appalling and the rest of the orchestra not much better, but the audience insisted on hearing the piece again on the spot. It was Debussy's first real public success, and it has never left the repertoire.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece begins with a flute, alone and unaccompanied, sliding lazily down and back up again. The phrase does not settle in any key, and when it stops nothing answers it for a moment but a sweep of the harp and a soft call from the horns. That opening sets the terms. The flute melody returns again and again, each time over different harmony, so that the same tune seems to be seen in changing light.

Notice what is missing from the orchestra: there are no trumpets, no trombones and no drums. The colour comes from the woodwinds, with a third flute and a cor anglais, from four horns, two harps and strings. In the middle of the piece comes a broad, warm melody in D-flat major, the one moment of full-throated lyricism, and the closest the music comes to a climax.

Then the flute theme comes back, slower each time. At the very end listen for the tiny bell-like notes of the antique cymbals, two small tuned discs, as the faun's melody is heard a last time and the music dissolves.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26

28 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Sergei Prokofiev wrote five piano concertos, and the Third is the one that pianists and audiences have taken most to heart. He completed it in the summer of 1921 on the coast of France, but it was assembled from ideas he had been storing for years. The theme of the slow movement dates from 1913, and he had returned to the sketches in 1916 and 1917, around the time of

his “Classical” Symphony. Like that symphony, the concerto combines clear, almost eighteenth-century outlines with harmony and rhythm that could only belong to the twentieth.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Andante, Allegro. A solo clarinet opens the concerto with a quiet, long-breathed lyrical melody. The strings break into a run, the tempo jumps, and the piano bursts in with a bright, hammering theme. A second idea is spikier and more sardonic. Midway the clarinet melody comes back, now sung out by the whole orchestra, before the scurrying resumes and carries the movement to its finish.

II. Tema con variazioni. The woodwinds present a theme with the gait of an old court dance, a little prim and a little wistful. Five variations follow, and they travel a long way from it. The piano begins the first with a long trill and a run up the keyboard; the second gallops; later ones are by turns stormy and dreamlike. At the end the orchestra plays the theme as it was, while the piano, in Prokofiev’s words, adds “delicate chordal embroidery”.

III. Allegro ma non troppo. Prokofiev described the finale as an argument between piano and orchestra. Bassoons and plucked strings propose a dry little theme; the piano interrupts and will not agree on the key. In the middle the tempo slackens and the woodwinds introduce

a broad, slow melody, to which the piano at first replies with sarcasm. The tune then swells into the most openly romantic passage of the concerto. The opening theme returns for a long, accelerating coda that is among the most demanding stretches of piano writing in the repertoire, and the argument is settled in a blaze of C major.

Modest Mussorgsky

1839–1881

Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestration Ravel)

33 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

In August 1873 the Russian architect and painter Viktor Hartmann died suddenly at the age of 39. He had been a close friend of Modest Mussorgsky, and the loss hit the composer hard. Early the following year the critic Vladimir Stasov helped to organise a memorial exhibition of more than 400 of Hartmann's works at the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg: not grand oil paintings for the most part, but architectural drawings, stage and costume designs, travel sketches and designs for household objects. Mussorgsky went, and in June 1874 he wrote, very quickly, a set of piano pieces in which he pictures himself walking through the show.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Promenade. A solo trumpet, answered by the brass choir. The tune keeps changing its metre, like someone walking at an uneven pace.

Gnomus. A design for a toy or nutcracker in the shape of a gnome with crooked legs: lurching, stop-start music.

The Old Castle. A troubadour sings before a medieval castle. Ravel gives the song to an alto saxophone, over a bass note that never moves.

Tuilleries. Children squabbling in the Paris gardens, in quick woodwind chatter.

Bydło. A Polish ox-cart on huge wheels. In Ravel's version the heavy, trudging melody begins quietly, swells as the cart passes and fades into the distance.

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks. A costume design for a ballet in which children danced in eggshells. High woodwinds peck and cluck.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuÿle. Two portraits, one of a rich man and one of a poor man. The first voice is weighty and self-assured, the second high, stammering and pleading, and then the two are heard together.

Limoges, the Market. Market women quarrelling at top speed. The music runs straight into the next picture.

Catacombs. Hartmann drew himself examining the Paris catacombs by lantern light. Stark brass chords are followed by “With the Dead in a Dead Language”, in which the Promenade theme returns, hushed, over shivering strings.

The Hut on Fowl’s Legs. A clock in the form of the hut of the witch Baba Yaga. Mussorgsky adds her flight in a mortar, in ferocious, driving music.

The Great Gate of Kiev. Hartmann’s design for a city gate in the old Russian style, with a cupola shaped like a helmet. A broad hymn alternates with quiet chant-like passages, the Promenade is heard once more among the sounds of bells, and the main theme returns, slower and grander each time, to close the work.

Tonight's artists

Martha Argerich *piano*

Prokofiev's Third Concerto has been one of Martha Argerich's calling cards for most of her career. She recorded it in 1967 with Claudio Abbado for Deutsche Grammophon, on what the label still calls her famous Ravel and Prokofiev concertos disc, and again thirty years later with Charles Dutoit, a recording that won a Grammy Award. The piece suits her: it needs steel fingers and split-second reflexes, but also a sense of mischief, and the ability to turn in a moment from percussive attack to a singing line.

Martha Argerich was born in Buenos Aires in 1941 and gave her first concert there at the age of eight. In 1955 her family moved to Europe, where she studied with Friedrich Gulda and later with Stefan Askenase. At sixteen she won both the Geneva International Music Competition and the Busoni Competition in Bolzano, and in 1965 she won the International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, the victory that made her name around the world. She is regarded as one of the great pianists of her time, known for the speed, fire and spontaneity of her playing, above all in Chopin, Schumann, Ravel, Liszt and Prokofiev. Since the 1980s she has largely given up solo recitals in favour of concertos and chamber music, saying that she feels lonely alone on stage, and she has worked for decades with partners such as Nelson Freire, Gidon Kremer and Mischa Maisky. She founded a music festival in Beppu, in Japan, and has long supported younger musicians.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-02-25-shani>

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