

Lahav Shani and Lisa Batiashvili at the Salzburg Easter Festival: Debussy, Sibelius and Pictures at an Exhibition

Friday, March 26, 2027 · 19:00 · Großes Festspielhaus

Lahav Shani, conductor · Lisa Batiashvili, violin

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune</i>	10'
2	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47</i>	34'
3	MUSSORGSKY 1839–1881 <i>Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestration Ravel)</i>	33'
	TOTAL MUSIC	77'

Claude Debussy

1862–1918

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

THE COMPOSER

Claude Debussy, born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1862 to a family of modest means, entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten and spent the next decade exasperating his professors with chords that broke every rule. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884, endured (resentfully) the obligatory residence at the Villa Medici in Rome, and then set about quietly dismantling the foundations of nineteenth-century music. With the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), and *La Mer* (1905), he created a new musical language, built on colour, atmosphere, and suggestion rather than Germanic development, that made him the single most influential composer of the early twentieth century. Critics called the style 'impressionism,' borrowing the term from painting; Debussy himself detested the label, insisting he was striving for precision, not haze. He died in Paris in March 1918, while the city was under German bombardment in the final year of the First World War.

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.

The starting point was a poem. Stéphane Mallarmé's *L'après-midi d'un faune*, first printed in 1876, is the monologue of a faun, half man and half goat, who plays his pipes in the heat of the afternoon and recalls his pursuit of nymphs, never sure whether it happened or whether he dreamed it. Debussy knew Mallarmé and began work in 1892, at first with a larger plan: the piece was announced as a "Prélude, Interludes et Paraphrase finale", perhaps to go with a reading or staging of the poem. Only the prelude was completed, in October 1894.

Debussy was careful not to claim too much. His own note calls the music "a very free illustration" of the poem, a succession of scenes through which the faun's desires and dreams pass in the heat of the afternoon, until he gives up the pursuit and falls asleep. Mallarmé had been uneasy about anyone setting music beside his verse. After the concert he wrote to the composer that the piece presented no dissonance with his text and went further than it "into nostalgia and into light".

Its later reputation is larger still. Pierre Boulez dated the beginning of modern music from this score, saying that the flute of the faun brought new breath to the art of music. In 1912 Vaslav Nijinsky choreographed it and danced the faun for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris, in a production that caused a scandal.

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.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

34 minutes

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

THE COMPOSER

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) is Finland's greatest composer and one of the supreme symphonists of the twentieth century. His music, above all the seven symphonies and tone poems such as *Finlandia* and *Tapiola*, became inseparable from Finland's emerging national identity during its struggle against Russian domination, and he was revered as a national hero in his own lifetime. His style evolved from late-Romantic richness toward an increasingly concentrated, organic and original conception of symphonic form, in which themes seem to grow and fuse like living things, shot through with the cold light and vast spaces of the Nordic landscape. Famously, after completing the Seventh Symphony, the incidental music to *The Tempest* and the tone poem *Tapiola* in the mid-1920s, he fell almost completely silent for the last thirty years of his life: the 'silence of Järvenpää'.

ABOUT THE WORK

Sibelius wanted, as a young man, to be a violinist. He gave up the ambition, but when he came to write his only concerto it was for the instrument he knew from the inside. The idea was with him from 1899. By the autumn of 1903 the work was far enough advanced for him to promise the dedication to Willy Burmester, a celebrated virtuoso who had once led the orchestra in Helsinki and who offered to give the first performance in Berlin. His wife Aino described him that winter playing the themes on his violin day and night, with so many ideas that he was almost dizzy.

Then Sibelius, short of money, decided to bring the premiere forward and hold it in Helsinki. Burmester could not come. The solo part went to Victor Nováček, a teacher at the Helsinki conservatory, who had little time to learn an extremely difficult piece that the composer had barely finished. The first performance, on 8 February 1904 with Sibelius conducting, was not a success. The critic Karl Flodin, normally a supporter, wrote that the composer had given in to conventional virtuosity.

Sibelius withdrew the concerto and rewrote it. He shortened the first movement, removed a second cadenza and a good deal of display, and tightened the finale. The new version was introduced in Berlin on 19 October 1905, with Karel Halíř as soloist and Richard Strauss conducting. Burmester, passed over a second time, was so offended that he never played the work. It is the 1905 version that became established, though slowly: the concerto's worldwide popularity dates from the 1930s, when Jascha Heifetz recorded it. The original score stayed in the family's keeping and was first recorded only in 1991.

What sets the piece apart from most virtuoso concertos is its seriousness of construction. The orchestra has real material of its own, dark in colour, and the solo cadenza in the first movement is not an interruption but the place where the themes are developed. The scholar and critic Donald Tovey wrote that he had not met 'a more original, a more masterly, and a more exhilarating work'.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro moderato. There is no orchestral introduction. Over a soft, pulsing cushion of strings the soloist enters at once with a long, wandering melody that seems to come out of the far distance. A second theme arrives dark and low on the violin's G string. Where a development section would normally stand, the orchestra falls silent and the soloist plays a long cadenza built on the opening theme, full of double stops, trills and runs. When the themes return they are darker in colour, and the movement ends with the main theme's dramatic material at full strength.

II. Adagio di molto. A short phrase from clarinets and oboes leads in the violin's broad, heartfelt melody, played over plucked strings. It asks for restraint and simplicity more than brilliance. The orchestra turns stormy in the middle of the movement, and the violin answers with plaintive double stops before the opening melody returns and the music sinks to a serene close.

III. Allegro, ma non tanto. Four bars of drumming rhythm from timpani and low strings set the pace, and the violin leaps in on its lowest string with a dance theme of fierce energy. Tovey called this movement 'a polonaise for polar bears', a joke that has stuck to it ever since. A second theme, with something of the waltz about it, is given first to the orchestra. The solo part grows steadily harder, with passages in thirds, arpeggios,

octaves and high harmonics, and the major key is won only in the final bars, where the violin's line climbs upward and the orchestra seals the ending with it.

Modest Mussorgsky

1839–1881

33 minutes

Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestration Ravel)

THE COMPOSER

Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881) was the most radical and original of the group of Russian nationalist composers known as ‘The Five.’ A largely self-taught composer who earned his living as a civil servant, he sought a raw, truthful musical language rooted in Russian speech, folk song and history, impatient with the polish of the Western European tradition. His masterpiece is the opera Boris Godunov, a towering drama of guilt and power; alongside it stand songs of startling realism and the piano suite Pictures at an Exhibition. His career was cut short by alcoholism (he died at forty-two), and he left much of his work unfinished or in rough form, later ‘corrected’ and orchestrated by friends such as Rimsky-Korsakov. Yet it is precisely his rough-hewn boldness, his harmonic daring and his unflinching directness that made him a profound influence on later composers, from Debussy and Ravel to the twentieth century.

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.

Ten of the pieces describe pictures. Between them comes a recurring “Promenade”, the music of the visitor moving from one exhibit to the next, which changes mood according to what he has just seen. The cycle is dedicated to Stasov, whose descriptions are now the main record of what the pictures showed, since many of them are lost.

The work was not printed until 1886, five years after his death, in an edition by his friend Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. For decades it remained little known. The version that made it famous is the one heard in these concerts. Maurice Ravel orchestrated the cycle in 1922 for the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who introduced it in Paris that

October and kept exclusive rights to it for some years. Ravel was not the first to orchestrate the *Pictures* and was far from the last, but his version is the one that has lasted. He left out one of the Promenades, the one before “Limoges”; otherwise he follows Mussorgsky closely.

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.

Tuileries. 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 Schmuyle. 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

Lisa Batiashvili *violin*

Lisa Batiashvili and the Sibelius concerto go back a long way: in 1995, at sixteen, she took second prize at the International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition in Helsinki, and in 2018 the Sibelius Academy gave her an honorary doctorate. She has recorded the work twice, first with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra under Sakari Oramo and later for Deutsche Grammophon with the Staatskapelle Berlin under Daniel Barenboim. She knows both her partners well, having been the Berliner Philharmoniker's Artist in Residence in the 2023–24 season and having toured with Lahav Shani and the Munich Philharmonic. In this second of the Easter Festival's two orchestral concerts she takes the place Martha Argerich has in the first, so the Debussy and the Mussorgsky stay as they were and the concerto between them changes from Prokofiev's bright C major to Sibelius's dark D minor.

Lisa Batiashvili was born in 1979 in Tbilisi, Georgia, to a violinist father, who gave her first lessons when she was four, and a pianist mother. The family moved to Germany in 1991. She studied in Hamburg with Mark Lubotsky, a pupil of David Oistrakh, and later with Ana Chumachenco. In 1995, aged sixteen, she took second prize at the International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition in Helsinki, and from 1999 to 2001 she was among the first BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists. Alongside the central concerto repertoire she has given first performances of new works, including Magnus Lindberg's Violin Concerto, which is dedicated to her. She has held residencies with the New York Philharmonic and, in the 2023–24 season, the Berliner Philharmoniker. She records for Deutsche Grammophon, and plays a Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin made in 1739. In 2021 she set up the Lisa Batiashvili Foundation to support young musicians from Georgia.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Debussy: A Painter in Sound**

Stephen Walsh, Vintage 2019

Walsh writes about the music as much as the life, and his pages on the *Faune* and the Mallarmé circle around it are a good short way into the piece that opens the concert.

ACCESSIBLE **Sibelius**

Andrew Barnett, Yale University Press 2010

A full life and works that follows the Violin Concerto from the first version of 1904 to the revision of 1905, by a writer closely involved with the recordings of both.

DEEPER **Musorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition**

Michael Russ, Cambridge University Press 1992

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the work that fills the second half: Hartmann and his pictures, Mussorgsky's piano original, and the orchestrations, Ravel's among them.

SOURCES

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3. Programme Change for the 2027 Orchestral Concert, Osterfestspiele Salzburg. <https://osterfestspiele.at/en/programme-change-orchestral-concert-2027>
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5. Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/prelude-to-the-afternoon-of-a-faun>
6. Violin Concerto (Sibelius), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Sibelius\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Sibelius))
7. Violin concerto, Jean Sibelius (Finnish Club of Helsinki). https://www.sibelius.klubi.fi/english/musiikki/ork_viulukonsertto.htm
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10. Deep listen: Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, ABC Classic. <https://www.abc.net.au/classic/features/deep-listen:-mussorgskys-pictures-at-an-exhibition/10002460>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-03-26-shani>

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