

Gustavo Dudamel and Mitsuko Uchida: Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto and Bruckner's 'Romantic' Symphony

Thursday, April 22, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Gustavo Dudamel, conductor · Mitsuko Uchida, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19</i>	30'
2	BRUCKNER 1824–1896 <i>Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major, WAB 104 ('Romantic')</i>	68'
TOTAL MUSIC		98'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19

30 minutes

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 numbering is misleading. The concerto in B-flat is the earliest of Beethoven's five mature piano concertos, older than the one in C major that we call No. 1. The C major concerto simply reached the printer first. The B-flat was published in 1801 as Op. 19, and so has been "No. 2" ever since.

Its origins go back to Bonn, where Beethoven began it in his late teens, in the late 1780s or around 1790, before he moved to Vienna. He kept it by him for more than a decade and used it as his own calling card, revising it again and again as his playing and his ambitions changed. It is probably the concerto he played at the Burgtheater on 29 March 1795, the concert that marked his public debut in Vienna, where until then he had been heard only in aristocratic salons. He took it to Prague in 1798 and touched it up once more before publication. At some point he also replaced the finale. The movement he discarded survives separately, as the Rondo in B-flat, WoO 6.

What he ended up with is a concerto in the manner of Mozart, whose piano concertos were the model for any young pianist-composer in Vienna in the 1790s. The orchestra is the smallest Beethoven used in a concerto: one flute, pairs of oboes, bassoons and horns, and strings. There are no clarinets, no trumpets and no drums, so the piece has nothing of the military brilliance of the C major concerto or the “Emperor”.

Inside that polite frame the young Beethoven is already recognisable. The first movement keeps slipping into unexpected keys, the slow movement has a depth of feeling beyond anything its origins would lead one to expect, and the finale is built on a rhythmic joke. The Boston Symphony Orchestra’s note on the work puts it well: the first movement never quite leaves the Bonn apprenticeship behind, while the other two already sound Viennese.

In these concerts the concerto is the first half of an evening that ends with Bruckner’s Fourth Symphony, two works in neighbouring keys and on utterly different scales.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Allegro con brio. The orchestra opens with a brisk fanfare figure and answers it at once with a soft, curling phrase in the violins: two ideas, one public and one private, that the movement keeps setting against each other. Listen for the moment early in the orchestral introduction when the music drops without warning into a remote key. The piano, when it comes in, does not repeat the opening but begins with a new thought of its own.

Adagio. The heart of the concerto, in E-flat major. The melody is broad and hymn-like, the piano decorates it with ever finer figuration, and the mood is that of a nocturne. Just before the

end the orchestra falls silent and the piano is left alone with a few halting single notes, like a singer's recitative, which Beethoven marks to be played "with great expression".

Rondo: Molto allegro. A romp in six-eight time. The joke in the main theme is that the accents fall in the wrong place, on the weak beats of the bar, so that the tune seems to hiccup. A central episode in the minor pushes the syncopation harder still. Shortly before the end the piano tries the theme in the wrong key and with the accents straightened out, before the orchestra puts things right.

Anton Bruckner

68 minutes

1824–1896

Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major, WAB 104 ('Romantic')

THE COMPOSER

Anton Bruckner was among the most unlikely of great composers. Born in 1824 in the small Austrian village of Ansfelden, the son of a schoolteacher, he seemed destined for provincial obscurity. After his father's death, the thirteen-year-old Bruckner became a choirboy at the monastery of St. Florian, where he would eventually serve as organist. He trained as a schoolteacher, since the family was too poor for a musical career, and for years divided his time between teaching and organ playing in small towns.

Bruckner was a late bloomer. He did not begin serious composition studies until his thirties, spending some six years studying harmony and counterpoint with the Viennese theorist Simon Sechter, much of it by correspondence. He completed the course in 1861, at thirty-seven, with such mastery that one examiner, Johann Herbeck, remarked: "If I knew one tenth of what he knows, I'd be happy." Soon afterwards his next teacher, Otto Kitzler, introduced him to the music of Wagner, which Bruckner studied intensively from 1863 onwards.

In 1868 Bruckner moved to Vienna, where he would spend the rest of his life teaching at the Conservatory and, later, the University. But Vienna was hostile territory. The city's musical life was dominated by the critic Eduard Hanslick, a champion of Brahms who despised Wagner, and Bruckner, by aligning himself with Wagner, made a powerful enemy. His symphonies were mocked, rejected by orchestras, or subjected to humiliating premieres. The Vienna Philharmonic rehearsed his Third Symphony in 1874 and declined to perform it; when it was finally premiered in 1877, with Bruckner himself conducting, most of the audience walked out.

Recognition came late. Bruckner was sixty when his Seventh Symphony, premiered in Leipzig in 1884, brought him the first genuine triumph of his career. He died in 1896, aged seventy-two, leaving his Ninth Symphony unfinished. He was buried, as he had wished, beneath the organ at St. Florian.

ABOUT THE WORK

Bruckner was fifty-six before a symphony of his was a real success in Vienna, and the work that did it was the Fourth. Hans Richter conducted the Vienna Philharmonic in the first performance on 20 February 1881. It was the first premiere of a Bruckner symphony that the composer did not conduct himself.

The symphony he heard that day was not the one he had first written. Bruckner began the Fourth late in 1873 and finished a first version in November 1874. In 1878 he went back to the score, tightened the first two movements and replaced the scherzo with a completely new one, the "Hunt" scherzo we know. He also wrote a new finale, called *Volksfest* (popular festival), then set that aside too and in 1880 composed the finale that stands today. This second version, of 1878 and 1880, is the one the Berliner Philharmoniker have announced for these concerts, and it is the form in which most conductors now play the symphony. A further revision in the late 1880s, in which Bruckner's pupils had a hand and whose authority has long been argued over, was the version first printed.

"Romantic" is Bruckner's own title, and a descriptive title was an unusual thing for him to offer. He meant it in the sense of the Romantic poets and of Wagner's *Lohengrin*: forests, castles, the Middle Ages. To friends he described a scene for the opening: a medieval town at day-break, morning calls sounding from the towers, the gates opening, knights riding out on proud horses into the forest, with its murmurs and its birdsong. In letters he summed up the slow movement as song, prayer and serenade, and the scherzo as a hunt, with a trio in which the huntsmen stop to eat while a barrel organ plays. About the finale he was vaguer, and the pictures should not be pressed too hard. They are an afterthought to music that works perfectly well as a symphony.

These performances are an occasion of another kind. According to the orchestra, they are the first time Gustavo Dudamel has conducted Bruckner with the Berliner Philharmoniker.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Bewegt, nicht zu schnell. The strings shimmer almost inaudibly, and a solo horn calls out a falling and rising fifth. It is among the most famous openings in the symphonic repertoire, and the horn call returns as a signpost throughout the work. The main theme proper arrives with Bruckner's favourite

rhythm, two notes followed by a triplet. The second group, begun by the violas, is the music Bruckner associated with bird-song in the forest.

II. Andante quasi allegretto. A slow march in C minor, more a night procession than a funeral. The cellos sing the main theme over a walking accompaniment. Later the violas have a long, wandering melody to themselves, accompanied only by plucked strings. The movement builds to a single great climax and then dies away over quiet drum taps.

III. Scherzo: Bewegt. The hunt. Horns start it softly, as if from far off, in the two-plus-three rhythm of the first movement, and the brass pile in until the whole orchestra is at full cry. The trio is a gentle country dance for woodwind, the huntsmen's rest.

IV. Finale: Bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell. The mood darkens. Over a throbbing bass, a falling figure in the minor gathers into a massive unison theme for the full orchestra, and the hunting rhythm of the scherzo breaks in. The movement proceeds in great blocks, separated by silences, as so often in Bruckner. The coda begins in near darkness, with slow string figures over a long crescendo, and at the summit the horn call from the very opening of the symphony comes back in the full brass.

Tonight's artists

Mitsuko Uchida *piano*

Mitsuko Uchida is the soloist in the earliest of Beethoven's piano concertos, a work the Berliner Philharmoniker's introduction to these concerts describes as one of irresistible charm and youthful vitality.

Mitsuko Uchida, born in Atami, Japan, in 1948, is among the most revered pianists of her generation, celebrated above all as one of the supreme interpreters of the Viennese classics. She moved to Vienna as a child when her father was posted there as a diplomat, and studied at the city's Academy of Music, absorbing the tradition at its source. International recognition came through major competitions, including a prize at the 1970 Chopin Competition in Warsaw, but it was her profound affinity for Mozart, Schubert, and Beethoven that defined her career. Her recordings of Mozart's piano sonatas and concertos, among them concertos directed from the keyboard, are landmarks of the discography, as are her searching accounts of Schubert's late sonatas. Equally devoted to Schoenberg and Berg, she brings the same clarity and seriousness to twentieth-century music. Named a Dame of the British Empire in 2009, Uchida is admired for a playing of rare refinement, intellectual rigour, and luminous tone.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

Swafford is especially good on the young Beethoven's first years in Vienna, when he made his name as a pianist with this concerto and was still measuring himself against Mozart.

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner**

Derek Watson, Oxford University Press 1996

A compact life and works in the Master Musicians series, with a clear chapter on each symphony and a patient explanation of why works such as the Fourth exist in several versions.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Bruckner**

John Williamson (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2004

Essays by leading Bruckner scholars on the symphonies, the problem of the versions and editions, and the composer's reception: the background to the choice of the 1878/80 score of the Fourth.

SOURCES

1. Gustavo Dudamel and Mitsuko Uchida, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/57147/>
2. Piano Concerto No. 2 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._2_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._2_(Beethoven))
3. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat, Opus 19, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/beethoven-piano-concerto-no-2>
4. Symphony No. 4 (Bruckner), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Bruckner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Bruckner))
5. Bruckner: Symphony No. 4, Romantic, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/symphony-no-4-romantic>
6. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
7. Bruckner, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780198166177>
8. The Cambridge Companion to Bruckner, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521008785>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-04-22-dudamel>

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