

Tugan Sokhiev and Yefim Bronfman: Britten, Mozart's C minor Concerto and Shostakovich's 'The Year 1917'

Thursday, May 13, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Tugan Sokhiev, conductor · Yefim Bronfman, piano

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	BRITTEN 1913–1976 <i>Simple Symphony, Op. 4</i>	18'
2	MOZART 1756–1791 <i>Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor, K. 491</i>	30'
3	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Symphony No. 12 in D minor, Op. 112 ('The Year 1917')</i>	40'
	TOTAL MUSIC	88'

Benjamin Britten

1913–1976

Simple Symphony, Op. 4

THE COMPOSER

Benjamin Britten, born in Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast in 1913, was the most important English composer since Purcell and the figure who, more than any other, restored opera to the centre of British musical life. A precocious talent who studied at the Royal College of Music, he found his early voice in collaboration with the poet W. H. Auden, and a lifelong subject in the loss of innocence. A committed pacifist and conscientious objector, he spent the first years of the Second World War in the United States before returning home in 1942 and seeking recognition as a conscientious objector, which he won on appeal; his convictions run like a thread through his music, from the early settings to the War Requiem. His breakthrough came in 1945 with the opera *Peter Grimes*, whose outsider hero and surging sea interludes made Britten's name overnight and announced a new era for English opera. To stage his subsequent works he and Pears set up what became the English

18 minutes

Opera Group, and in 1948, with Pears and Eric Crozier, he founded the Aldeburgh Festival, which turned his small Suffolk town into one of the world's notable musical centres. His partnership with Pears, both personal and artistic and lasting nearly forty years, shaped a vast body of song, opera, and concert music written for that singular voice. In 1976 he became the first composer to be made a life peer, and he died at Aldeburgh that December.

ABOUT THE WORK

Britten was twenty and in his last year at the Royal College of Music when he went back to the music he had written as a boy. Between December 1933 and February 1934 he made a short symphony for strings out of it, and his note in the score says exactly where the material came from: the work is “entirely based on material from works which the composer wrote between the ages of 9 and 12”. He added that although the development of the themes was often new, “there are large stretches of the work which are taken bodily from the early pieces”.

There was plenty to choose from. Britten had composed constantly as a child, and by his early teens he had a drawer full of piano pieces, suites, sonatas and songs. For the *Simple Symphony* he took eight tunes written between 1923 and 1926, two for each of the four movements, and gave them the craft of a young professional. It is an affectionate piece, not a joke at his younger self's expense: he plainly still liked the tunes.

He conducted the first performance himself, in Norwich on 6 March 1934, with a local string orchestra made up largely of amateurs. The score can be played by a full string orchestra or by a string quartet, and it was meant to be within reach of young and amateur players. In this programme it serves as a bright curtain-raiser for the strings alone.

The dedication points back to the same years as the tunes. Audrey Alston was the viola teacher of Britten's boyhood, and the piece is inscribed to her.

The four movements carry alliterative titles that announce the tone of the whole thing: *Boisterous Bourrée*, *Playful Pizzicato*, *Sentimental Saraband* and *Frolicsome Finale*. The forms are the old ones a school-boy composer would have met in his piano lessons, a Baroque dance, a scherzo, a slow dance and a quick finale, and the whole symphony lasts under twenty minutes.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Each movement is built from two childhood tunes, so it helps to listen for a pair of contrasted ideas each time: a first theme that sets the character, and a second that answers it.

Boisterous Bourrée. A bourrée is a quick Baroque dance, and this one lives up to its adjective. The two themes come from a piano suite of 1925 and a song of 1923.

Playful Pizzicato. The title describes the sound: the strings are plucked, not bowed. The material comes from a piano scherzo and a song, both of 1924, and the movement's catchy main tune has made it the most popular part of the work.

Sentimental Saraband. The slow movement, named after the stately Baroque dance in triple time, and the place where the string orchestra is allowed to sing. One of its two sources is a waltz for piano that Britten wrote in 1923, at nine or ten.

Frolicsome Finale. A quick close, drawn from a piano sonata of 1926 and a song of 1925.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

30 minutes

1756–1791

Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor, K. 491

THE COMPOSER

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart needs little introduction. Born in Salzburg in 1756, he was a prodigy whose talents were cultivated and exhibited across Europe by his father Leopold. By the time he composed this concerto in 1779, the twenty-three-year-old Mozart was restless in provincial Salzburg, dreaming of Vienna and larger stages. Within two years he would make the move that defined his mature career.

Less well known is his sister Maria Anna, called “Nannerl,” five years his senior. She was an equally brilliant pianist as a child, and the siblings toured together as wonders of nature until Nannerl's touring career ended when she was about seventeen. Following the customs of the time, she stayed at home while Wolfgang continued traveling with their father. The brother and sister remained close, and this concerto was written for the two of them to play.

ABOUT THE WORK

Mozart completed this concerto on 24 March 1786 and is thought to have played it for the first time about two weeks later, most probably on 7 April, at the Burgtheater in Vienna. Almost nothing is known about the concert. He was at the time finishing *The Marriage of*

Figaro, which stands next to the concerto in the Köchel catalogue as K. 492, and it would be hard to find two works written side by side that are less alike.

Mozart wrote only two piano concertos in a minor key, No. 20 in D minor and this one. The C minor is the darker and the stranger of the two. It also calls for the largest orchestra of any of his concertos: flute, pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani and strings. Oboes and clarinets together were a luxury he hardly ever allowed himself in a concerto, and he uses them. Again and again the woodwind take over the argument as a group, and the piano converses with them as much as with the strings.

The manuscript, which is now in the Royal College of Music in London, shows a composer working fast and under pressure. Mozart's handwriting is usually tidy. Here there are crossings-out, second thoughts and passages squeezed in wherever there was room, and the solo part is in places only sketched: he was going to play it himself and did not need to write everything down.

The opening theme is one of the most remarkable he wrote. It begins quietly, in bare octaves, in a three-in-a-bar metre that is unusual for the first movement of a Mozart concerto, and within its first thirteen bars it touches all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Its wide, angular leaps colour everything that follows.

Later composers heard what was in it. Beethoven, who knew the concerto well, is reported to have said to his friend Cramer after hearing it: "Ah, we shall never be able to do anything like that!" His own Third Piano Concerto, also in C minor, likewise begins in unison, and Brahms was another admirer.

The soloist in these concerts is Yefim Bronfman, with Tugan Sokhiev conducting.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Allegro. The orchestra gives out the main theme softly and in unison. When the piano enters it does not take up that theme at all. It begins with a plaintive idea of its own, and throughout the movement the soloist approaches the main theme only indirectly, leaving its plain statement to the orchestra. Notice how often the woodwind play as a choir of their own. The piano's whirling passage-work continues into the coda.

Larghetto. The key turns to E-flat major and the piano alone plays a melody of extreme simplicity, which the orchestra repeats. Between its returns come two episodes led by the woodwind, the first in the minor, which the piano then decorates.

Allegretto. No cheerful rondo here, but a theme with variations, back in C minor. The theme has the tread of a march. Two variations offer relief, one in A-flat major that brings an abrupt change of mood and a later one in C major, but the minor returns each time. For the last variation Mozart changes the metre to a lilting six-eight, and the concerto ends, as it began, in the minor.

Dmitri Shostakovich

40 minutes

1906–1975

Symphony No. 12 in D minor, Op. 112 ('The Year 1917')

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.

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

Shostakovich's Twelfth Symphony is the one that his admirers have found hardest to defend. Written in 1961, subtitled "The Year 1917" and dedicated to the memory of Lenin, it tells the story of the October Revolution in four movements played without a break. Like the Eleventh Symphony before it, it is programme music, with a title for each part.

The titles set out the plot. *Revolutionary Petrograd* is the city in ferment. *Razliv* is named after Lenin's retreat in the countryside outside Petrograd. *Aurora* is the cruiser that fired towards the Winter Palace, and *The Dawn of Humanity* celebrates the Bolsheviks' victory. The writer Gerard McBurney has described the four movements as depicting these events in "graphic movietone imagery", and the comparison with film is apt for a composer who wrote a great deal of music for the cinema.

The first performance was given by the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yevgeny Mravinsky on 1 October 1961. The circumstances have coloured the symphony's reputation ever since. In 1960 Shostakovich had joined the Communist Party, a step that dismayed many of his friends, and a symphony about Lenin the following year looked to many like the price of membership. In the Soviet Union the piece was received respectfully, if with less warmth than the Eleventh. In the West it was received badly. When it reached Britain, at the Edinburgh Festival in September 1962, it was compared unfavourably with the Fourth Symphony, which had its first performance outside Russia a few days later.

The usual charges are that the music is crudely pictorial and that its triumph is hollow. McBurney, who lists them, also argues the other side: heard in a great performance, the Twelfth shows that even when Shostakovich appeared to compromise he remained capable of "tremendous feats of orchestral mastery and symphonic narrative", and he suggests that when the politics of the period have receded the music may be heard differently. The Berliner Philharmoniker's own description of the work speaks of heroic gestures, dramatic force and timpani that suggest cannon fire.

It is a compact piece by Shostakovich's standards, about forty minutes long, and unusually single-minded. Themes recur from movement to movement and are transformed at the end, so that the four parts can be heard as one large span.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Revolutionary Petrograd. The longest movement, about a third of the whole. A moderately paced introduction leads to a fast main section laid out on traditional symphonic lines and driven hard.

Razliv. The slow movement, an Adagio, and the most reflective part of the symphony. It follows the first movement without a pause.

Aurora. The shortest movement, only a few minutes long, which takes the place of a scherzo. This is where the percussion comes into its own: the timpani strokes stand for the ship's guns.

The Dawn of Humanity. Music heard earlier as a funeral march comes back transformed into a jubilant theme, and the symphony ends in a long celebration for the full orchestra. Whether it sounds triumphant or merely loud is the question each performance has to answer.

Tonight's artists

Yefim Bronfman *piano*

Yefim Bronfman is the soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24 on all three evenings. The orchestra's announcement points to his wide expressive range, which this concerto, with its passionate outbursts and its intimate moments, asks for.

Yefim Bronfman, born in Tashkent in 1958 into a family of musicians, is one of the most commanding pianists of our time. He emigrated to Israel as a teenager and made his international debut under Zubin Mehta, going on to a major career based in the United States. Renowned for the power, depth and effortless virtuosity of his playing, combined with great musical intelligence and warmth, he is a favourite partner of the world's leading orchestras and conductors. A Grammy Award winner (for the Bartók concertos with Esa-Pekka Salonen), he commands a vast repertoire, and his combination of titanic technique and natural musicianship makes him an ideal interpreter of the grandest concertos, including Beethoven's 'Emperor.'

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Mozart: The Reign of Love**

Jan Swafford, Harper Perennial 2021

Swafford's life of Mozart is at its best on the Vienna years of the great piano concertos, and it sets the C minor concerto beside Figaro, which Mozart was finishing at the same time.

ACCESSIBLE **Shostakovich: A Life Remembered**

Elizabeth Wilson, Princeton University Press 2006

Elizabeth Wilson lets Shostakovich's friends and colleagues tell his story in their own words, including the years around 1960 and 1961 when he joined the Party and wrote the Twelfth Symphony.

DEEPER **Shostakovich: A Life**

Laurel E. Fay, Oxford University Press 2005

The standard documentary biography, careful about what can and cannot be known; it traces Shostakovich's long-announced plans for a work about Lenin and the reception of the Twelfth at home and abroad.

SOURCES

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2. Simple Symphony, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_Symphony
3. Britten: Simple Symphony for String Orchestra, Op. 4, Utah Symphony. <https://utahsymphony.org/explore/2023/01/britten-simple-symphony-for-string-orchestra-op-4>
4. Simple Symphony (1933–1934), IRCAM. <https://ressources.ircam.fr/en/works/work/22676>
5. Piano Concerto No. 24 (Mozart), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._24_\(Mozart\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._24_(Mozart))
6. Piano Concerto No 24 in C minor, K491 (notes by Angela Hewitt), Hyperion Records. https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W14657_68049
7. Symphony No. 12 (Shostakovich), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._12_\(Shostakovich\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._12_(Shostakovich))
8. Symphony No. 12 in D Minor, 'The Year 1917' (programme note by Gerard McBurney), Wise Music Classical. <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/33058/Symphony-No-12-in-D-Minor-The-Year-1917--Dmitri-Shostakovich>
9. Mozart: The Reign of Love, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780062433619>
10. Shostakovich: A Life Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780691128863>
11. Shostakovich: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195182514>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-05-13-sokhiev>

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