

Klaus Mäkelä and Yunchan Lim: Larcher, Rachmaninoff's Fourth Piano Concerto and Sibelius's Seventh

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

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor · Yunchan Lim, piano

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	LARCHER b. 1963 <i>New work (German premiere)</i>	
2	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40</i>	
3	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105</i>	22'
	TOTAL MUSIC	22'

Thomas Larcher

b. 1963

New work (German premiere)

THE COMPOSER

Thomas Larcher, born in Innsbruck in 1963, is an Austrian composer and pianist. He studied piano and composition in Vienna and first made his name as a pianist, particularly in contemporary music, before composition took over. He also founded the Klangspuren festival in Schwaz, in his native Tyrol. His early works centre on the piano and on chamber music, including a series of string quartets; from the early 2000s he turned to the orchestra, first in concertos for viola, piano, violin and cello and then in large scores such as *Red and Green*, the Symphony No. 2 'Kenotaph', which the Vienna Philharmonic first performed under Semyon Bychkov in 2016, and the Symphony No. 3 'A Line Above the Sky'. His opera *The Hunting Gun*, after Yasushi Inoue, was first staged at the Bregenz Festival in 2018. Larcher's music is openly tonal and connected to tradition while using a wide range of unusual instrumental sounds, and he has spoken of wanting above all to reach listeners. His works are published by Schott.

ABOUT THE WORK

The concert opens with a piece that, at the time of writing, has no announced title. The Berliner Philharmoniker list it simply as a new work by Thomas Larcher, commissioned jointly by the Berliner Philharmoniker Foundation, the Orchestre de Paris, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Concertgebouw Orchestra, and these Berlin performances are its German premiere. The world premiere is announced for a few weeks earlier: the Orchestre de Paris and Klaus Mäkelä have a new work by Larcher, marked as a first performance, on their programme at the Philharmonie de Paris on 7 and 8 April 2027. Mäkelä conducts in both cities.

No description, scoring or duration had been published when this guide was written, so what follows is about the composer, not the piece.

Larcher lives in Schwaz in the Tyrolean Inn valley, at the foot of the mountains, and the orchestra's portrait of him describes a composer who has to be out of doors, on foot or on his bicycle, whenever the sun shines, and who works in the evening, sorting through the sounds he has gathered. He describes himself as a "hunter and gatherer" who takes ideas from musicians, instrument makers and sound engineers, and he composes with pencil and paper, by trial and error, without a ground plan drawn up in advance.

He has no quarrel with tonality. People tell him, he says, that there is an interesting play with apparent tonality in his music. His answer: "No, I'm sorry, that is not a simulation. That is tonal music." He is equally direct about his aims: "I completely discarded the imperative of disturbance that contemporary art is supposed to trigger. That's not my criterion. I want to reach people, I want my music to be heard."

He has a history with this orchestra. As a pianist he played chamber music with its members, and during a period as a fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin he often sat in on its rehearsals; the German premiere of his Piano Concerto also went to the Philharmoniker.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

With nothing yet published about the piece itself, the best guide is Larcher's other orchestral music. His publisher describes a style that combines contemplative harmonies with extended playing techniques, experimental and responsive to tradition at once, and the Berlin portrait speaks of a clearly tonal language and a shimmering sound world often inspired by experiences of nature. Expect recognisable harmony and a clear sense of direc-

tion, coloured by sounds that orchestral instruments are not usually asked to make. Larcher says he wants each player to feel that their part is woven into the whole and could not simply be written differently, so it is worth listening to how individual voices emerge from the texture and return to it.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

1873–1943

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op. 40

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism, a composer of sweeping, melancholy lyricism and a piano virtuoso of legendary gifts. His early career was nearly derailed by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, which plunged him into a years-long depression; he recovered, with the help of therapy, to write the hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and went on to create the works for which he is loved: the piano concertos, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, the symphonies, the songs and the great piano pieces. After the Russian Revolution he left his homeland forever, settling eventually in the United States and supporting himself largely as a touring concert pianist, composing far less but with undiminished mastery. His music's combination of long-breathed melody, rich harmony and deep, nostalgic emotion has made it among the most beloved of all.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Fourth is probably the least known of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos and the one that gave him the most trouble. He left Russia with his family at the end of 1917 and never returned. To support them he remade himself as a touring pianist, and for the best part of a decade he composed almost nothing. Only in 1926 did he feel able to take time away from the concert platform and finish a new concerto, parts of which he had been carrying in sketches for years.

He was uneasy about it from the start. The score was long, and he joked to his friend the composer Nikolai Medtner, to whom the concerto is dedicated, that it would have to be performed like Wagner's *Ring*, over several evenings. Medtner replied that it was not length that made music boring, but boredom that made it seem long. Rachmaninoff cut it anyway.

He gave the first performance himself in Philadelphia on 18 March 1927, with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski. His *Three Russian Songs* for chorus and orchestra were new on the same programme and were liked. The concerto was not. The reviews were

the harshest he had received since the failure of his First Symphony thirty years earlier: critics found the piece shapeless and old-fashioned, and one called it “long-winded, tiresome, unimportant”.

Rachmaninoff cut the score again before publishing it in 1928, and when that version fared no better he put the work aside. He came back to it in 1941, revised the orchestration, simplified some of the piano writing, shortened all three movements and recast the finale. He introduced this third version in Philadelphia that autumn with Eugene Ormandy conducting, and the two of them recorded it. It was the last music he worked on, and it is the version usually played today. Opinions still differ about whether the revisions improved the piece or weakened it; the original 1926 score has since been published and recorded as well.

What disconcerted listeners in 1927 was partly that the concerto was not the Second or the Third over again. The textures are leaner, the themes shorter and more sharply cut, the harmony more astringent. Rachmaninoff had been living in New York, he enjoyed jazz and admired the Paul Whiteman orchestra, and commentators have long heard something of that in the harmonies, especially in the slow movement.

Yunchan Lim plays the concerto in his first appearances with the Berliner Philharmoniker. The orchestra’s announcement notes that he has already won over audiences with this work.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Allegro vivace. There is no preamble: the movement launches straight into its energetic opening. Compared with the earlier concertos the ideas pass by quickly and are less plainly sign-posted, which is what early critics took for shapelessness.

Largo. The heart of the concerto, in C major. The piano begins alone, in a melancholy, inward mood, and goes on to rich, poignant chords, the harmonies in which listeners hear an echo of jazz. The strings provide a soft bed of sound for the piano’s sparse chords.

Allegro vivace. The finale breaks in with sudden force and gives the soloist an early flourish. This is the movement Rachmaninoff rewrote most thoroughly in 1941. It is restless and brilliant, the piano hardly pausing, and the tonality travels from G minor to a close in G major. The ending is brief.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105

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's last symphony lasts a little over twenty minutes and is in a single movement. Nothing quite like it had been written before, and he himself was not sure at first what to call it. When he conducted the first performance in Stockholm on 24 March 1924, three weeks after finishing the score, it was billed as a *Fantasia sinfonica*. Only afterwards did he decide that it was a symphony, and it was published the following year as Symphony No. 7 "in one movement".

The idea had been growing for about ten years. Its oldest material goes back to the sketchbooks for the Fifth Symphony, around 1914. In 1918 he described a seventh symphony of "joy of life and vitality with appassionato sections", in three movements, the last a "Hellenic rondo". Sketches from the early 1920s show a work in several movements, and it was apparently only in 1923 that the separate movements fused into one.

The last stage was hard. Sibelius was in his late fifties, his hands shook, and he was drinking heavily, partly, he said, to steady his hand when he wrote. The symphony shows no sign of it. It is among the most tightly controlled things he composed.

What makes it a symphony and not a fantasy is that it does the work of a whole symphony without stopping. There is slow music, scherzo-like music and a broad close, but they are not laid end to end. One grows out of another through gradual changes of speed, so that the listener often cannot say when the tempo changed. Everything of im-

portance is in C major or C minor. Klaus Mäkelä, quoted in the Berliner Philharmoniker's announcement, describes the piece as "held together by a single great breath".

Sibelius lived for more than thirty years after the Seventh but completed no further symphony. He worked for a long time on an Eighth and is believed to have burned it. Mäkelä places it here at the end of the evening, after a concerto that had its own first performance three years later.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening. A soft sound from the timpani, then a slow scale rising through the strings, which arrives not where the ear expects but on a dark, remote chord. A quiet woodwind figure follows. Much of what comes later grows from these few bars.

The hymn. Soon the violas and cellos begin a broad, hymn-like melody, which builds slowly to the first climax.

The trombone theme. At the top of that climb the trombone enters with a noble, sustained theme. It is the landmark of the symphony and is heard three times in all. Sibelius told his son-in-law that the trombones here are handled like the instruments of antiquity.

Scherzo and return. The pace quickens by degrees into light, darting music for strings and woodwind. Beneath a swirling, darker texture the trombone theme comes back, now sounding like a voice from above the storm. A second, more relaxed fast section follows, the one sometimes linked with the "Hellenic rondo" of his early plan.

The ending. The rising scale returns and lifts the music to the trombone theme for the last time, in full splendour. Then the energy drains away into a grave passage for strings, and the symphony ends on a long-delayed resolution: the note B, held in the strings, rises to C only at the very last moment.

Tonight's artists

Yunchan Lim *piano*

Yunchan Lim makes his debut with the Berliner Philharmoniker in these concerts, in Rachmaninoff's Fourth Piano Concerto, a work with which, the orchestra notes, he has already won over audiences.

Yunchan Lim, born in South Korea in 2004, became an international sensation in 2022 when, at the age of eighteen, he became the youngest ever winner of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. The triumph, crowned by a now-legendary performance of Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto, was watched by millions online and announced a major new talent. Since then he has appeared with leading orchestras and in major recital halls around the world, and his debut studio album of Chopin's Études won a Gramophone Award. Admired for a maturity, seriousness and depth of musicianship well beyond his years, as well as for formidable technical command, he is widely regarded as one of the most exciting pianists to have emerged in a generation. This concert marks his debut with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Sibelius**

Andrew Barnett, Yale University Press 2010

A full life and works that follows the Seventh Symphony from its first sketches beside the Fifth to the Stockholm premiere, and on into the long silence of the unfinished Eighth.

ACCESSIBLE **Rachmaninoff**

Geoffrey Norris, Oxford University Press 2000

Norris's compact life and works covers the exile years clearly and gives a critical account of the Fourth Concerto and its revisions, about which he holds firm views.

DEEPER **Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor**

Barrie Martyn, Routledge 2016

The most detailed study in English of Rachmaninoff's three careers; it treats the three versions of the Fourth Concerto at length, along with his own recording of it.

SOURCES

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2. On hunting and gathering: Thomas Larcher in portrait, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/stories/portrait-thomas-larcher/>
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9. Symphony No. 7 (Sibelius), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_\(Sibelius\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_(Sibelius))
10. Seventh symphony op. 105 (1924), Jean Sibelius (Finnish Club of Helsinki). https://www.sibelius.klubi.fi/english/musiikki/ork_sinf_07.htm
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-05-20-makela>

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