

Elim Chan and Seong-Jin Cho: Gubaidulina, Prokofiev and Lutosławski

Thursday, June 10, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Elim Chan, conductor · Seong-Jin Cho, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	GUBAIDULINA 1931–2025 <i>Fairytale Poem</i>	9'
2	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16</i>	30'
3	LUTOSŁAWSKI 1913–1994 <i>Concerto for Orchestra</i>	28'
TOTAL MUSIC		67'

Sofia Gubaidulina

9 minutes

1931–2025

Fairytale Poem

THE COMPOSER

Sofia Gubaidulina (1931–2025) was one of the most important and individual composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Born in the Tatar Republic of the Soviet Union and trained in Kazan and Moscow, she belonged, with Schnittke and Denisov, to the generation of Soviet composers whose adventurous, spiritually-charged music was viewed with suspicion by the authorities, and for years her work met with official disapproval. A deeply religious artist, she understood composition as something close to a sacred act, and her music is marked by an intense concern with symbolism, with the expressive weight of individual sounds, and with the structuring of time, often built on stark oppositions of dissonance and consonance, tension and release. After settling in Germany in 1992 she gained the international recognition long denied her at home, and she remained widely performed until her death in 2025.

ABOUT THE WORK

Fairytale Poem began as music for the radio. In 1971 Sofia Gubaidulina wrote the score for a children's radio programme based on "The Little Piece of Chalk", a story by the Czech writer Miloš Macourek. She later said that she liked the tale so much, and found it so symbolic of an artist's fate, that she came to have a very personal relationship with the piece. It has had a second life in the concert hall as a short work for orchestra.

The story, as the composer retold it, goes like this. A little piece of chalk, the kind used for writing on a blackboard, dreams of drawing marvellous castles, beautiful gardens with pavilions, and the sea. Instead it is made to write dull words, numbers and geometric figures, day after day. The children in the classroom grow bigger; the chalk grows smaller. It begins to despair of ever drawing the sun or the sea. At last it is too small to be of use and is thrown away. It finds itself in complete darkness and believes it has died. But the darkness is only the inside of a boy's pocket. The boy takes the chalk out into the daylight and starts to draw on the pavement: castles, gardens with pavilions, the sea and the sun. The chalk is so happy that it does not notice it is wearing away to nothing as it draws.

Gubaidulina, whose early music had been censured by the Soviet cultural authorities, heard in it a story about an artist. The orchestra's introduction to the concert calls the piece a humorous fairy tale, and it is that too: light on its feet, brief and full of character.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

You can follow the tale without a text. Listen for how the music is built from small, distinct instrumental voices that come forward one at a time, more like characters in a story than themes in a symphony.

One writer on the piece points to a jazzy fugue for plucked strings, begun by the double bass, among the adventures along the way, and to the ending, where after a last bloom of orchestral colour the music dissolves into silence. That close matches the end of the story, in which the chalk disappears into its own drawing.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 in Sontsivka, then part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine), and was admitted to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904, several years younger than most of his classmates. By his teens he was already a fearsome pianist and an enfant terrible of Russian modernism, scandalising audiences with the percussive dissonance of his early works.

In 1918, Prokofiev left Russia with official Soviet permission and spent nearly two decades in the West, first in the United States, then mostly in Paris, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, and concertos that earned him a place among the leading modernists of his generation. After several years of shuttling between Paris and Moscow, he settled permanently in the Soviet Union in 1936. The remaining years of his life were marked by official denunciation in 1948, deteriorating health, and personal tragedy. He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. Soviet newspapers, consumed by the dictator's death, barely noted his passing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Prokofiev was a student at the St Petersburg Conservatory, with a reputation as its enfant terrible, when he wrote his Second Piano Concerto in 1912 and 1913. While he was working on it, in April 1913, his close friend and fellow student Maximilian Schmidthof killed himself, having sent Prokofiev a farewell letter. The concerto is dedicated to his memory.

Prokofiev played the solo part himself at the first performance, on 5 September 1913 at Pavlovsk, a resort town outside St Petersburg. The accounts agree that the audience was divided and loud about it. A newspaper critic described listeners murmuring, leaving their seats and hissing, while a smaller party of progressives declared the piece a work of genius. Prokofiev noted the mixture of applause and boos in his diary and professed himself pleased that the music had provoked such strong feelings.

What that audience heard is lost. The orchestral score, which had not been published, was destroyed in a fire after the Russian Revolution. In 1923, with a Third Concerto already to his name, Prokofiev reconstructed the work. He remarked that it was so completely rewritten that it might almost be counted as his Fourth. He introduced the new version in Paris on 8 May 1924, with Serge Koussevitzky conducting.

Compared with the short, sharp First Concerto, the Second is darker and built on a much grander scale, in four movements instead of the usual three. It is also harder. It is regarded as one of the most technically formidable concertos in the repertoire.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Andantino. Allegretto. The concerto opens quietly. After a couple of bars from the orchestra the piano begins a long, melancholy theme in G minor, like the start of a tale. The centre of gravity comes later: an enormous cadenza for the soloist alone, which takes up much of the second half of the movement and carries it to its climax.

Scherzo: Vivace. Two and a half minutes of perpetual motion. The pianist's two hands race along in unison without a single rest, while the orchestra chases after them.

Intermezzo: Allegro moderato. Where a slow movement might be expected, Prokofiev writes a heavy-footed, grotesque march. One annotator compares its tread to the lumbering of some immense prehistoric beast.

Finale: Allegro tempestoso. The marking says it: a storm of leaping chords and octaves across the whole keyboard. A quieter, contrasting episode brings a brief respite before the pursuit resumes and drives to the end.

Witold Lutosławski

28 minutes

1913–1994

Concerto for Orchestra

THE COMPOSER

Witold Lutosławski, born in Warsaw in 1913, was the leading Polish composer of the twentieth century after Szymanowski and one of the most admired symphonists of his age. His youth was shadowed by catastrophe. His father was executed by the Bolsheviks in Moscow in 1918, and in the destruction of Warsaw in 1944 most of his music was lost; of the many arrangements he and Andrzej Panufnik had played as a piano duo in the city's cafés, only his two-piano Variations on a Theme by Paganini survived. In the post-war years he worked under the constraints of Stalinist cultural policy, drawing on folk material in works such as the Concerto for Orchestra (1954) while privately developing a far more radical language. The thaw of the late 1950s liberated him: the Funeral Music for Bartók and, above all, the *Jeux vénitiens* of 1961 introduced his personal brand of controlled chance, or 'aleatoricism': passages in which players are given fixed material but coordinate freely rather than in strict time, producing shimmering, unpredictable textures

while the composer retains command of harmony and form. From this came his mature style, built on intricately layered chromatic harmony and the so-called 'chain' technique of overlapping musical strands. An elegant, fastidious craftsman and a distinguished conductor of his own music, Lutosławski won major international honours, among them the Grawemeyer Award, and remained, to the end, a model of artistic integrity. He died in Warsaw in 1994, his Fourth Symphony among his last completed works.

ABOUT THE WORK

In 1950 Witold Rowicki, director of the Warsaw Philharmonic, an orchestra then re-establishing itself after the war, asked Witold Lutosławski for a piece with which the orchestra could show what it could do. Lutosławski took four years over it. The Concerto for Orchestra was finished in 1954, is dedicated to Rowicki, and was first performed under him in Warsaw on 26 November of that year.

The times shaped the piece. From 1949 Polish composers were under official pressure to write music founded on folk material, and more experimental paths were closed. Lutosławski, though, had been working with Polish folk tunes for years, largely in what he called functional music: pieces for radio, theatre and schools, by which he earned his living. In an interview he recalled that this work had given him a style of his own, simple folk melodies combined with non-tonal counterpoint and colourful harmonies, and that one day he decided the style could serve for something more serious.

So the Concerto is full of folk melodies, taken from the nineteenth-century collections of the ethnographer Oskar Kolberg, but it does not sound like an arrangement of them. The tunes are raw material. Lutosławski gives them new harmonies, sets counterpoints against them and pours them into forms borrowed from the Baroque: an intrada, a passacaglia, a toccata, a chorale. As one programme note puts it, the music was national enough to be politically unassailable and yet modern and personal enough to go beyond what was officially wanted.

The title invites comparison with Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra of a decade earlier, and the two share the idea of treating sections of the orchestra as soloists. The piece lasts just under half an hour and calls for a large orchestra with piano, celesta and two harps.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Intrada. The movement opens over a steady, ominous drum-beat. Above it the low strings introduce a folk-like tune, which passes from section to section while the texture thickens. Having built upwards to a climax, the music then reverses its course and ends in a calm coda.

Capriccio notturno ed Arioso. An airy, virtuoso scherzo for strings and woodwind: night music of great lightness. In the middle the brass break in with a broad, dramatic theme, the Arioso. The scherzo then returns and fades out in low rumblings.

Passacaglia, Toccata e Corale. The finale is the longest movement and the weightiest. It begins with a brooding theme in the double basses that is repeated over and over while variations accumulate above it. A lively toccata follows, built on the same theme. At its centre a solemn chorale appears, and when the chorale returns at the end it crowns the whole work, before a final dash for the full orchestra.

Tonight's artists

Seong-Jin Cho *piano*

Seong-Jin Cho plays Prokofiev's Second Concerto on 10, 11 and 12 June. The orchestra calls the work ideal terrain for a pianist whose playing unites virtuosity with refinement, and both are needed here: the long first-movement cadenza and the unbroken sprint of the scherzo test stamina, while the opening theme asks for a quiet, storytelling touch. He appears with Elim Chan, who makes her debut with the Berliner Philharmoniker in these concerts.

Seong-Jin Cho, born in Seoul in 1994, is one of the most admired pianists of his generation. He took up the piano at six, gave his first recital at eleven, and won a string of competitions as a teenager before the victory that made his name internationally: first prize at the 2015 International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, the first South Korean ever to win it. Trained in Seoul and then at the Conservatoire de Paris with Michel Béroff, he has since appeared with the world's foremost orchestras and signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon, recording a wide repertoire from Mozart and Schubert to Chopin, Debussy and Ravel. Famed for the poise, refinement and quiet intensity of his playing, he served as Artist in Residence of the Berlin Philharmonic for the 2024–25 season.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

A readable one-volume life of Prokofiev that covers the conservatory years, the scandal of the Second Concerto at Pavlovsk and the re-working of the score in the 1920s.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Alex Ross's history of twentieth-century music is especially good on what it meant to compose under Soviet cultural policy, the background to all three works on this programme.

DEEPER **Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1915-1923: Behind the Mask**

Sergey Prokofiev, Cornell University Press 2008

Prokofiev's own diaries from the years of war, revolution and emigration, the period in which the concerto's first score was lost and he came to rewrite it.

SOURCES

1. Elim Chan and Seong-Jin Cho with Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/57178/>
2. Poema-Skazka ("Fairy-Tale Poem"), Sofia Gubaidulina, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/6775/poema-skazka-fairy-tale-poem>
3. Sofia Gubaidulina's "Fairytale Poem": The Dreams of a Piece of Chalk, The Listeners' Club. <https://thelistenersclub.com/2022/04/29/sofia-gubaidulinas-fairytale-poem-the-dreams-of-a-piece-of-chalk/>
4. List of compositions by Sofia Gubaidulina, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Sofia_Gubaidulina
5. Piano Concerto No. 2 (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._2_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._2_(Prokofiev))
6. Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16, Sergei Prokofiev, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/2746/piano-concerto-no-2>
7. Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 2, Utah Symphony. <https://utahsymphony.org/explore/2022/12/prokofiev-piano-concerto-no-2>
8. Concerto for Orchestra (Lutosławski), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concerto_for_Orchestra_\(Lutos%C5%82awski\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concerto_for_Orchestra_(Lutos%C5%82awski))
9. Concerto for Orchestra, Witold Lutosławski, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.laphil.com/works/concerto-for-orchestra-lutoslawski>
10. Lutosławski: Concerto for Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/concerto-for-orchestra-lutoslawski>
11. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
12. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
13. Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1915-1923: Behind the Mask, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780801447020>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-06-10-chan>

Version 1, 8 October 2026