

Nosedà: Stravinsky, Chopin and Borodin's Second

Thursday, February 12, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Gianandrea Nosedà, conductor · Seong-Jin Cho, piano

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>Divertimento from The Fairy's Kiss (rev. 1949)</i>	20'
2	CHOPIN 1810–1849 <i>Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21</i>	30'
3	BORODIN 1833–1887 <i>Symphony No. 2 in B minor</i>	30'
	TOTAL MUSIC	80'

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

Divertimento from The Fairy's Kiss (rev. 1949)

20 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his “neoclassical” period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Divertimento is a concert suite that Stravinsky drew from his 1928 ballet *The Fairy's Kiss* (*Le Baiser de la fée*), a work that is, in effect, a loving homage to Tchaikovsky. Commissioned by the dancer Ida Rubinstein to mark the thirty-fifth anniversary of Tchaikovsky's death, the ballet took as its starting point a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, 'The Ice Maiden,' in which a fairy marks a baby boy with her kiss and later, on his wedding day, claims him for her own. Stravinsky saw in this an allegory of Tchaikovsky himself, touched in the cradle by the muse and claimed by an early death, and built the whole score out of Tchaikovsky's own music, taking lesser-known piano pieces and songs and weaving, orchestrating and transforming them into something unmistakably his own.

The result is one of the warmest and most approachable of Stravinsky's neoclassical scores. Rather than the granitic modernism of *The Rite of Spring*, here we find elegance, lyricism and affectionate wit: Tchaikovsky's melodies, refracted through Stravinsky's cooler, more angular sensibility, with crisp rhythms, transparent textures and sly harmonic sidesteps. In 1934 Stravinsky extracted the Divertimento, a four-movement orchestral suite of the ballet's most appealing music (*Sinfonia*; *Danses suisses*; *Scherzo*; *Pas de deux*), and he revised it in 1949. It distils the ballet's charm into a compact concert work that makes a graceful, sparkling opening to the programme.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the unusual double identity of this music: Tchaikovsky's tunes heard through Stravinsky's ears. The melodies have a Romantic, lyrical warmth that is pure Tchaikovsky, but they are dressed in Stravinsky's clean, pointed orchestration, with sudden rhythmic kinks, dry wind sonorities and a slightly detached, ironic poise. The game of the piece is hearing where one composer ends and the other begins.

Follow the four movements: the opening *Sinfonia*, with its broad lyrical sweep; the lively, folk-flavoured 'Swiss Dances' (the ballet has an Alpine setting), full of perky tunes and dancing rhythms; the glittering, fairy-light *Scherzo*; and the great *Pas de deux*, the emotional heart of the suite, where a long, tender melody unfolds with real warmth before the music builds to a brilliant, energetic close. Throughout, listen for Stravinsky's superb craftsmanship: the clarity of his textures, the precision of his rhythms, and the affection beneath the elegant surface.

Frédéric Chopin

1810–1849

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21

THE COMPOSER

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849) was the supreme poet of the piano, a composer who, almost uniquely among the greats, devoted nearly his entire output to a single instrument. Born near Warsaw to a French father and Polish mother, he was a child prodigy who left Poland in 1830, shortly before the failed November Uprising against Russian rule, and settled in Paris, never to return; the loss of his homeland coloured his music with a deep, nostalgic melancholy and inspired the nationalist fire of his polonaises and mazurkas. In Paris he moved in the most brilliant artistic circles, formed a famous and turbulent relationship with the writer George Sand, and became a much sought-after piano teacher. His music (the nocturnes, ballades, scherzos, études, preludes, waltzes and dances) combines exquisite melodic beauty, harmonic daring and an unrivalled understanding of the piano's expressive and colouristic possibilities. Frail and in poor health for much of his life, he died in Paris at just thirty-nine. His two early piano concertos, both written in Warsaw, are the best known of his handful of works for piano and orchestra.

ABOUT THE WORK

Chopin's Second Piano Concerto is, confusingly, the first he wrote, composed in 1829–30 when he was not yet twenty, still living in Warsaw and on the brink of leaving Poland forever. It was published after the E minor concerto and so took the later number, but this F minor work came first, and it bears all the freshness, ardour and slight formal naivety of a brilliant young composer pouring out his heart. It is also a deeply personal piece: the ravishing slow movement is reportedly inspired by Konstancja Gładkowska, a young singer at the Warsaw Conservatory with whom he was secretly, hopelessly in love. The whole concerto glows with that first-love tenderness.

Like its companion, the work is unashamedly a vehicle for the piano: the orchestra plays a supporting, accompanimental role while the soloist holds the spotlight throughout with writing of extraordinary delicacy, filigree decoration and singing lyricism. This is not the symphonic concerto of Beethoven or Brahms, where soloist and orchestra contend as equals; it is closer to bel canto opera, the piano an eloquent singer spinning out long, ornamented melodic lines over a discreet accompaniment. Some have faulted Chopin's orchestration as plain, but that rather misses the point: the glory of the work is in the piano writing, which is some of the most poetic and idiomatic ever conceived.

It makes a beautiful centrepiece, the lyrical, intimate heart of the programme between Stravinsky's bright neoclassicism and Borodin's heroic Russian symphony.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement (Maestoso) opens with a substantial orchestral introduction before the piano enters; listen then for the way the soloist takes over completely, decorating two contrasting themes, one passionate and stormy, one tenderly lyrical, with cascades of filigree ornament, delicate runs and rubato (that flexible, expressive give-and-take of tempo Chopin made his own).

The slow movement (Larghetto) is the emotional core and one of Chopin's most beautiful inspirations, often heard as his musical love-letter to Konstancja. Listen for its serene, song-like main melody, and especially for the extraordinary central section: a dramatic, recitative-like passage where the piano seems almost to speak, like an operatic heroine in an impassioned scene, over tremulous, whispering strings. The finale is a sparkling rondo in the spirit of a Polish folk dance: listen for its lilt-ing mazurka-like rhythms, its playful elegance, and the brilliant, dancing piano writing, with a magical moment near the end where a horn call signals the brilliant final flourish. Throughout, follow the soloist's touch, colour and the singing quality of the line. This is music about the piano's power to sing.

Alexander Borodin

1833–1887

Symphony No. 2 in B minor

THE COMPOSER

Alexander Borodin (1833–1887) was one of the most remarkable figures in nineteenth-century music, a man who was a distinguished research chemist by profession and a great composer only in his spare time. The illegitimate son of a Georgian nobleman, he trained in medicine and chemistry, became a respected professor at the Medico-Surgical Academy in St Petersburg, and made genuine scientific discoveries (he also pioneered medical education for women in Russia). Music he pursued in his spare time, which is why his output is small and several works were left unfinished. Yet he was a central member of 'The Five' (or 'Mighty Handful'), the group of nationalist composers, with Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Cui, who sought to create a distinctively Russian art music. His masterpieces include the opera *Prince Igor* (with its famous *Polovtsian Dances*), the symphonic sketch *In the*

30 minutes

Steppes of Central Asia, two superb string quartets and his Second Symphony. His music is marked by broad, heroic melody, rich orchestral colour and an epic, often ‘oriental’ Russian flavour. He died suddenly at fifty-three, with Prince Igor still unfinished; it was completed by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov.

ABOUT THE WORK

Borodin’s Second Symphony is his orchestral masterpiece: a broad, heroic, intensely Russian work that the critic Vladimir Stasov nicknamed the ‘Bogatyr’ or ‘Heroic’ Symphony, after the bogatyr, the legendary warrior-knights of Russian epic. According to Stasov, Borodin meant the first movement to evoke a gathering of these ancient heroes, and the music has exactly that quality: massive, granite-hewn, full of primal strength. It was written in the years when his great opera Prince Igor lay set aside, and the two works share a sound-world of epic grandeur and broad-shouldered melody.

The symphony had a famously protracted birth. Borodin, a full-time chemist, could only compose in snatched moments, and the work occupied him on and off from 1869 to 1876. He even lost the full score in 1876 and had to reorchestrate parts of it while ill in bed. The premiere in 1877 was only a moderate success, partly because of its heavy brass writing; a revised version, premiered in 1879 under Rimsky-Korsakov, fared better and has remained a repertoire favourite. It is a tautly constructed, thrilling work, far shorter and more concentrated than most Romantic symphonies, that sends the all-orchestral programme out in a blaze of Russian colour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens with one of the most arresting gestures in the symphonic repertoire: a fierce, hammered unison theme in the low strings (craggy, modal, unmistakably the ‘heroes’ motif’) that dominates the whole movement with its raw power. Listen for how it alternates with a warmer, more lyrical second theme, and for the sheer muscular drive of the writing.

The scherzo is brilliant and headlong: listen for the dizzyingly fast repeated notes and the whirling energy, with a contrasting, more languid ‘oriental’ middle section full of Borodin’s characteristic exotic colour. The slow movement (Andante) is the symphony’s lyrical jewel: listen for the gentle harp arpeggios and the glorious horn solo that sings the main theme, one of the great Romantic melodies, broad, nostalgic and warmly Russian, often heard as a depiction of an ancient bard singing of heroic deeds. The finale bursts in without pause: a festive, dancing cel-

celebration built on vigorous folk-like rhythms and brilliant orchestral colour, driving to a triumphant close. Listen throughout for Borodin's gift for memorable melody and his rich, vivid orchestration: the sound of Russian musical nationalism at its most heroic and exuberant.

Tonight's artists

Seong-Jin Cho *piano*

Chopin's Second Concerto asks above all for poetry: a singing tone, the art of rubato, and the delicacy to spin its filigree decoration into long, breathing lines. Seong-Jin Cho, who first came to world attention by winning the 2015 International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, is one of the foremost Chopin interpreters of his generation, and brings to this early, love-struck concerto exactly the blend of refinement, lyricism and quiet brilliance it needs.

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 **Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times**

Alan Walker, Picador 2019

Alan Walker's biography of Chopin, which follows the young composer in Warsaw where he wrote the F minor Piano Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE **Igor Stravinsky**

Jonathan Cross, Reaktion Books 2015

A short, readable life of Stravinsky, useful for *The Fairy's Kiss*, his homage to Tchaikovsky.

DEEPER **Chopin: The Piano Concertos**

John Rink, Cambridge University Press 1998

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to Chopin's two piano concertos, their composition and performance history.

SOURCES

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5. Frédéric Chopin, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frédéric_Chopin
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8. Alexander Borodin, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Borodin
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10. Igor Stravinsky, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781780234946>
11. Chopin: The Piano Concertos, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521446600>



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