

Nosedá: Debussy, Berg's Violin Concerto and Rachmaninoff's First

Thursday, February 26, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Gianandrea Nosedá, conductor · Patricia Kopatchinskaja, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>Nuages and Fêtes from Three Nocturnes</i>	14'
2	BERG 1885–1935 <i>Violin Concerto</i>	26'
3	RACHMANINOFF 1873–1943 <i>Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13</i>	47'
TOTAL MUSIC		87'

Claude Debussy

1862–1918

Nuages and Fêtes from Three Nocturnes

THE COMPOSER

Claude Debussy, born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1862 to a family of modest means, entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten and spent the next decade exasperating his professors with chords that broke every rule. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884, endured (resentfully) the obligatory residence at the Villa Medici in Rome, and then set about quietly dismantling the foundations of nineteenth-century music. With the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), and *La Mer* (1905), he created a new musical language, built on colour, atmosphere, and suggestion rather than Germanic development, that made him the single most influential composer of the early twentieth century. Critics called the style 'impressionism,' borrowing the term from painting; Debussy himself detested the label, insisting he was striving for precision, not haze. He died in Paris in March 1918, while the city was under German bombardment in the final year of the First World War.

ABOUT THE WORK

Debussy's *Three Nocturnes* (1899) are among the founding masterpieces of musical Impressionism: atmospheric orchestral tone-poems that capture light, air and movement rather than telling a story. De-

14 minutes

Debussy was at pains to explain that the title ‘Nocturnes’ was not meant in the manner of Chopin’s piano pieces but in a broader, more decorative sense, borrowing the word from painting: he was thinking of the painter Whistler’s misty, tonal ‘nocturnes.’ Each of the three pieces is a study in a particular play of light and colour. Tonight we hear the first two; the third, ‘Sirènes,’ is omitted because it requires a wordless female chorus, and the first pair is very often performed on its own.

‘Nuages’ (‘Clouds’) is one of Debussy’s most exquisite creations, a slow, hushed evocation of, in his words, ‘the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds.’ Over gently rocking woodwind chords, a solo cor anglais intones a haunting, fragmentary melody that drifts and recurs, while muted strings shift in subtle gradations of grey. It is music of stillness and infinite subtlety. ‘Fêtes’ (‘Festivals’) could hardly be more different: a brilliant, exhilarating burst of energy and light, evoking ‘the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light.’ Its famous central episode is a fantastical procession: a distant band approaching, conjured by muted trumpets and harps in a hypnotic march that swells and then recedes into the night. Together the two make a perfect, contrasting pair, and a ravishing opening to the concert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

In ‘Nuages,’ listen for the very opening, quiet rocking chords in clarinets and bassoons that set up a sense of slow, aimless drift, and then for the plaintive solo cor anglais (English horn) melody that becomes the piece’s recurring emotional centre. Notice how Debussy avoids strong cadences and clear rhythm, so the music seems to float free of time, all muted colour and half-light; listen, too, for a magical moment when flute and harp trace a delicate, pentatonic shape like a sudden gleam through the greyiness.

In ‘Fêtes,’ the change is electric: listen for the scurrying, dancing rhythms and brilliant orchestral flashes that open the piece in a whirl of festivity. Then listen for the celebrated central procession: far-off muted trumpets and pizzicato strings building a strange, exciting march that grows louder as if approaching, reaches a blazing climax, and then fades away into the distance. Throughout both pieces, savour Debussy’s revolutionary orchestration: the emphasis on colour and atmosphere over melody and development, the subtle washes of sound, and the sheer sensuous beauty that changed the course of music.

Alban Berg

1885–1935

Violin Concerto

THE COMPOSER

Alban Berg was born on February 9, 1885, into a comfortable Viennese family, though his father's death when Berg was fifteen brought financial difficulties. Largely self-taught until his early twenties, Berg began studying with Arnold Schoenberg in 1904, remaining his devoted pupil for six years. Together with Schoenberg and Anton Webern, Berg formed the core of what became known as the Second Viennese School, pioneering the radical twelve-tone technique that would reshape twentieth-century music.

Yet Berg was never content with pure abstraction. His music blends the rigorous architecture of serialism with a warmth and emotional intensity inherited from the Romantic tradition, particularly from Gustav Mahler. His opera *Wozzeck* (1925) brought him international fame, while the unfinished *Lulu* occupied his final years. Berg was a man of aristocratic bearing and generous spirit, deeply loyal to his friends and passionately devoted to his art. He died tragically on Christmas Eve 1935, from blood poisoning caused by an insect sting.

ABOUT THE WORK

Alban Berg's Violin Concerto is one of the most moving and beautiful works of the twentieth century, a piece that bridges, as few others do, the worlds of Schoenberg's twelve-tone modernism and late-Romantic emotion. Berg, a pupil of Schoenberg and a member of the Second Viennese School, wrote it in 1935 on a commission from the American violinist Louis Krasner. He was working on it when tragedy struck: Manon Gropius, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Alma Mahler (Gustav Mahler's widow) and the architect Walter Gropius, died of polio. Berg, devastated, set aside his opera *Lulu* and poured his grief into the concerto, dedicating it 'to the memory of an angel', meaning Manon. In a further, terrible irony, the concerto became Berg's own requiem: he died suddenly that December, before he ever heard it performed. It is, in effect, a double memorial.

The concerto is built on a twelve-tone row, but Berg chose one so cunningly constructed that it sounds tonal and consonant, full of major and minor triads, and ending in a rising sequence of whole tones. This lets the music speak with a warmth and lyricism rare in serial works. It falls into two parts. The first evokes the living girl: a gentle, dancing portrait that includes a folk tune from Carinthia, where Berg had first met Manon. The second part depicts her suffering, death and transfiguration: a violent catastrophe followed by extraordinary consolation, for at its heart Berg quotes a Bach chorale, 'Es ist genug' ('It is enough'), whose opening notes happen to coincide with the end of

his tone row. The work ends in radiant, heartbreaking peace. It is a profound and accessible masterpiece, and an ideal vehicle for a searching, expressive soloist like Patricia Kopatchinskaja.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The concerto plays continuously but falls into two large parts. Listen at the very opening for the soloist's quiet, rising arpeggios over open strings, Berg's tone row laid out so that it sounds gentle and tonal, not harsh. In the first part, listen for the tender, dancing 'portrait' of the girl, and especially for the lilting Carinthian folk song that floats in like a memory, a touch of innocent, rustic charm.

The second part begins with violence: listen for the shattering orchestral outburst and the agitated, anguished solo writing that depict suffering and death. Then comes the work's miraculous turn: the entry of Bach's chorale 'Es ist genug,' first played by clarinets in Bach's own harmonisation, then taken up and varied by the soloist. Listen for the way this old Lutheran hymn of acceptance ('It is enough, Lord') brings consolation out of grief. The concerto rises to a final transfiguration: listen for the violin ascending, higher and higher, into serene stillness as the music dissolves into radiant calm, the angel's soul at peace. It is one of the most affecting endings in all music.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

47 minutes

1873–1943

Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13

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

Rachmaninoff's First Symphony has one of the most dramatic and painful backstories in all music: the work whose catastrophic premiere nearly destroyed its young composer. Rachmaninoff wrote it in 1895, aged just twenty-two, brimming with ambition and confidence; he produced a bold, dark, fiercely original symphony, prefacing the score with the biblical epigraph 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.' But its 1897 St Petersburg premiere was a disaster. The conductor, Alexander Glazunov, by several accounts under-rehearsed and possibly drunk, gave a shambolic performance, butchering the score. Rachmaninoff, listening in torment, fled the hall before the end. The reviews were savage (César Cui notoriously compared it to a depiction of the plagues of Egypt), and the failure plunged Rachmaninoff into a depression so severe that he composed almost nothing for three years, recovering only with the help of hypnotherapy, after which he wrote the beloved Second Piano Concerto.

Rachmaninoff withdrew the symphony and never let it be played again in his lifetime; he believed the score lost. But after his death the surviving orchestral parts were used to reconstruct the score, and the symphony was triumphantly revived in Moscow in 1945. Posterity's verdict has completely reversed that of 1897. Far from a failure, it is now recognised as a powerful, darkly Romantic and strikingly original work: taut, intense, saturated with the brooding Russian melancholy and the chant-like melodies (including, characteristically, echoes of the *Dies irae*) that would mark all his music. It makes a thrilling, weighty conclusion to the programme.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen from the very first bars for the symphony's germinal idea: a terse, brooding motto, a short figure with the contour of chant and a kinship with the *Dies irae*, that pervades all four movements, binding the whole work together with a dark, obsessive intensity. The first movement grows from it into music of stormy power and surging Romantic sweep.

The second movement is a fleet, shadowy scherzo: listen for its nervous, scurrying energy and the way the motto theme keeps stealing back. The slow movement (*Larghetto*) offers respite: listen for the tender melodies and the warmer, more lyrical mood, though shadows are never far away. The finale bursts in with a blazing fanfare and a festive, march-like energy; listen for the brilliant orchestration, the recurrence of the motto theme, and the way the music drives through tumultuous cli-

maxes to a dark, fateful close. Throughout, listen for how much of the mature Rachmaninoff is already here: the sweeping melodies, the chant-derived themes, the obsession with the *Dies irae*, and the deep vein of Russian melancholy, all in a bold symphonic work whose unjust early failure cost music dear.

Tonight's artists

Patricia Kopatchinskaja *violin*

Berg's Violin Concerto is less a display piece than a profound emotional journey, from a tender portrait of a lost girl, through anguish, to radiant consolation, and it demands a soloist of searching expressivity and fearless commitment. Patricia Kopatchinskaja is exactly such an artist; in this Artist Portrait concert she brings her intense, soul-baring musicianship to one of the repertoire's most moving works.

Patricia Kopatchinskaja, born in Chişinău (then Soviet Moldova) in 1977 into a family of folk musicians, is one of the most individual and electrifying violinists before the public. Her family emigrated to Vienna when she was a child, and she trained there and in Bern. Famous for her fearless, theatrical, intensely physical music-making (she often performs barefoot), she is a passionate champion of new music and an unconventional interpreter of the classics, winning a Grammy in 2018. Her folk-music roots and her wild, characterful energy make her an especially compelling interpreter of Bartók, whose own music is steeped in the folk traditions of Eastern Europe.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Debussy: A Painter in Sound**

Stephen Walsh, Vintage 2019

Stephen Walsh's life of Debussy centres on the music, including the *Nocturnes*.

ACCESSIBLE **Rachmaninoff**

Michael Scott, The History Press 2011

A readable life of Rachmaninoff, with the story of the First Symphony's failed premiere in 1897 and the crisis that followed.

DEEPER **Berg: Violin Concerto**

Anthony Pople, Cambridge University Press 1991

A Cambridge Music Handbook on Berg's Violin Concerto, dedicated 'to the memory of an angel', covering its composition, structure and use of a Bach chorale.

SOURCES

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9. Rachmaninoff, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780752472423>
10. Berg: Violin Concerto, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521399760>



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