

Peltokoski: Rautavaara's First Concerto and Wagner's Ring

Sunday, March 1, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Tarmo Peltokoski, conductor · Yuja Wang, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	RAUTAVAARA 1928–2016 <i>Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 45</i>	20'
2	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>The Ring: An Orchestral Adventure (arr. Henk de Vlieger)</i>	68'
TOTAL MUSIC		88'

Einojuhani Rautavaara

1928–2016

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 45

THE COMPOSER

Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928–2016) was the most important Finnish composer of the generation after Sibelius, a wide-ranging, individual voice whose music moved through many styles over a long career. Spotted early as a major talent (Sibelius himself recommended him for a scholarship to the Juilliard School in New York, where he worked with Vincent Persichetti, and he also took lessons at Tanglewood with Aaron Copland and Roger Sessions), Rautavaara passed through neo-classicism and strict twelve-tone serialism before arriving at the lush, mystical, freely tonal ‘neo-Romantic’ style for which he is best loved. He is especially celebrated for his luminous, atmospheric orchestral works, above all *Cantus Arcticus*, the ‘Concerto for Birds and Orchestra,’ which weaves recorded birdsong into the orchestra, and the *Seventh Symphony*, ‘Angel of Light.’ A deeply spiritual and poetic artist, fascinated by angels, mysticism and the natural world, he created some of the most immediately appealing serious music of the late twentieth century, rich in glowing harmony and soaring melody.

ABOUT THE WORK

Rautavaara’s *First Piano Concerto*, completed in 1969, is one of his most striking and exhilarating works, a piece that catches the composer at a fascinating turning point, as he moved away from the strict serialism of his earlier years toward the warmer, more sensuous and

20 minutes

freely tonal style of his maturity. The concerto fuses both worlds: it has the rigour and edge of modernism alongside surging, romantic sweep and glittering orchestral colour. It is also famous for one arresting, physical device: in places the pianist plays great tone-clusters not with the fingers but with the flat of the hand and the whole forearm, producing huge, resonant washes of sound. Far from a gimmick, this becomes a powerful expressive and colouristic tool, opening up a sonority somewhere between bell-peals and breaking waves.

The work is cast in three movements and lasts around twenty minutes. It is by turns grand, mysterious and brilliant, the piano set against an orchestra used with Rautavaara's characteristic flair for atmosphere and colour. Though less often played than his orchestral showpieces, it is a thrilling concerto, immediate, dramatic and full of imaginative sound, and a wonderful chance to hear a major modern Finnish voice. It pairs intriguingly with the Wagner that follows: both works conjure vast, elemental sound-worlds.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, above all, for the famous cluster-chords: passages where the soloist plays with forearms and the flat of the hand to create massive, shimmering blocks of sound, like waves of resonance washing over the orchestra. The first movement (marked 'Con grandezza', or 'with grandeur') opens in exactly this grand, sonorous vein; listen for the sense of scale and the dialogue between the piano's washes of sound and the orchestra.

In the central slow movement, listen for a more mysterious, atmospheric mood (Rautavaara's gift for glowing, mystical colour), with the piano weaving delicate or brooding textures over the orchestra. The finale brings brilliance and drive, the writing more motoric and virtuosic. Throughout, listen for the blend of modernist edge and romantic warmth that makes Rautavaara so distinctive: spiky, cluster-rich sonorities sitting alongside surging lyricism and rich harmony. And enjoy the sheer sound of the piece: its imaginative, often spectacular use of the piano and orchestra together, brought to life here by Yuja Wang's phenomenal technique and fearless musicianship.

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

The Ring: An Orchestral Adventure (arr. Henk de Vlieger)

THE COMPOSER

Richard Wagner transformed opera more radically than any composer before or since. Born in Leipzig in 1813, he grew up in a family steeped in theater and from an early age was drawn to the dramatic rather than the purely musical. Apart from a spell of lessons with the Leipzig cantor Theodor Weinlig, he was largely self-directed as a composer, absorbing Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller alongside Beethoven, developing a vision of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a “total work of art” synthesizing poetry, drama, music, and visual spectacle.

Wagner’s path was turbulent. An active participant in the 1849 Dresden uprising, he spent years in political exile, fleeing creditors and nursing turbulent love affairs. Yet his genius attracted patrons, most notably the eccentric King Ludwig II of Bavaria, whose financial support made possible Wagner’s ultimate achievement: the construction of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth, a theater designed specifically for his works. There, in 1876, his monumental four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* received its first complete performance.

Wagner’s musical innovations (the seamless orchestral flow, the system of *leitmotifs* or recurring themes associated with characters, objects, or ideas, and the extreme chromaticism that strained the boundaries of tonality) influenced virtually every composer who followed, from Strauss and Mahler to Schoenberg and beyond.

ABOUT THE WORK

Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (‘The Ring of the Nibelung’) is the most colossal achievement in all opera: a cycle of four music-dramas (*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*) that runs to some fifteen hours and took Wagner about a quarter of a century to compose. It tells a vast mythological saga of gods, giants, dwarves, dragons, heroes and river-maidens, all turning on a cursed ring of power forged from stolen Rhinegold, and building to the cataclysmic destruction of the gods’ fortress, Valhalla. Its music is among the most revolutionary and influential ever written, built from a web of recurring leitmotifs (short musical themes attached to characters, objects and ideas) and orchestrated with unprecedented richness and power.

Because so much of the Ring’s dramatic and emotional weight is carried by the orchestra, the cycle is a natural quarry for orchestral excerpts, and many conductors have assembled their own ‘Ring without words.’ This one, by the Dutch percussionist and composer Henk de Vlieger (created in 1991), is among the finest and most comprehens-

ive, a continuous, roughly hour-long symphonic synthesis that threads together the cycle's greatest orchestral passages, from the primordial murmur of the Rhine at the very opening, through the Ride of the Valkyries, the Magic Fire Music, Forest Murmurs and Siegfried's Rhine Journey, to Siegfried's Funeral March and the overwhelming Immolation that ends the world. De Vlieger arranges them so skilfully that the result plays almost as a single tone-poem, tracing the whole arc of the drama in purely orchestral terms. It is a thrilling, immersive way to experience the essence of the Ring in one sitting.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, right at the start, for one of the most famous openings in music: the deep, slowly stirring E-flat that emerges from silence and gradually builds into the rippling, surging music of the river Rhine, the primal source from which the whole cycle (and arguably the whole arrangement) grows. From there, follow the procession of great set-pieces and let the leitmotifs guide you: short, recognisable themes for the gold, the ring, the sword, the gods, the hero Siegfried, and so on, which recur and transform throughout.

Listen for the showstoppers everyone knows: the galloping, brass-blazing Ride of the Valkyries; the shimmering, flickering Magic Fire Music as Wotan surrounds the sleeping Brünnhilde with flame; the gentle, woodwind-rich Forest Murmurs; and the exhilarating sweep of Siegfried's Rhine Journey. Then listen for the tragic grandeur of the second half: the shattering, brass-laden Siegfried's Funeral March, and the vast, cathartic final scene, Brünnhilde's Immolation, in which the music gathers up the cycle's great themes and drives, through fire and flood, to a transcendent close as Valhalla burns and the ring returns to the Rhine. Even without voices, the orchestra tells the whole epic story; surrender to its tremendous sweep and colour.

Tonight's artists

Yuja Wang *piano*

Rautavaara's First Concerto demands both phenomenal technique and a fearless willingness to explore the piano's outer limits, not least its famous forearm-and-fist tone-clusters and its blend of modernist edge with surging romanticism. Yuja Wang, celebrated for her dazzling virtuosity, power and adventurous spirit, is an ideal champion for this thrilling and still under-played Finnish concerto, bringing it both brilliance and conviction.

Yuja Wang, born in Beijing in 1987, is one of the most dazzling and charismatic pianists in the world. Trained at the Central Conservatory in Beijing and the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, she had her breakthrough in 2007 when, aged twenty, she stepped in for Martha Argerich with the Boston Symphony, and she has been a star of the concert platform ever since. An exclusive Deutsche Grammophon artist and a Grammy winner, she is celebrated for a phenomenal, seemingly effortless technique, electrifying stage presence and fearless musicianship across a vast repertoire, with the great virtuoso Russian concertos among her specialities.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music**

Alex Ross, Picador 2021

Alex Ross traces how Wagner's music and ideas, the *Ring* above all, spread into literature, art and politics.

ACCESSIBLE **The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung**

Roger Scruton, Penguin Books 2017

Roger Scruton's guide to the story, characters and meaning of the *Ring*, a companion to the four operas distilled in this orchestral adventure.

DEEPER **I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring**

Deryck Cooke, Oxford University Press 1979

Deryck Cooke's close study of the meaning of the *Ring*, reading Wagner's text and its sources in depth.

SOURCES

1. Rautavaara and Wagner, 1 Mar 2026, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/rautavaara-and-wagner-1-mar-26/>

Richard Wagner ·The Ring: An Orchestral Adventure (arr. Henk de Vlieger)

2. Piano Concerto No. 1 (Rautavaara), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_\(Rautavaara\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_(Rautavaara))
3. Einojuhani Rautavaara, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einojuhani_Rautavaara
4. Der Ring des Nibelungen, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Ring_des_Nibelungen
5. Henk de Vlieger, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henk_de_Vlieger
6. Tarmo Peltokoski, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarmo_Peltokoski
7. Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781250800084>
8. The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780141980720>
9. I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780193153189>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/Iso-2026-03-01-peltokoski>

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