

Bihlmaier: Bernstein, Liebermann and Dvořák's New World

Thursday, March 26, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Anja Bihlmaier, conductor · Gareth Davies, flute

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BERNSTEIN 1918–1990 <i>Symphonic Dances from West Side Story</i>	22'
2	LIEBERMANN b. 1961 <i>Flute Concerto No. 2, Op. 142 (UK premiere)</i>	20'
3	DVORAK 1841–1904 <i>Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "From the New World"</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		84'

Leonard Bernstein

22 minutes

1918–1990

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

THE COMPOSER

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990) was the most charismatic American musician of the twentieth century, a phenomenon who refused to choose between his many gifts. He was a great conductor (music director of the New York Philharmonic, and a legendary Mahlerian), a brilliant pianist, a beloved music educator whose televised Young People's Concerts taught a generation, and a composer who moved effortlessly between the concert hall and Broadway. His concert works include three symphonies, the Chichester Psalms and the theatre-piece Mass; on Broadway he created On the Town, Wonderful Town, Candide and, above all, West Side Story. What unites them is an irrepressible energy, a love of jazz and Latin rhythm, a gift for soaring melody, and a very American blend of sophistication and exuberance. Few musicians have ever communicated such sheer joy in music-making.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Symphonic Dances from West Side Story are Leonard Bernstein's own concert distillation of the music from his greatest theatrical triumph, the 1957 Broadway musical that retold Romeo and Juliet as a tale of rival gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, on the streets of New York's Upper West Side. The show was a landmark, fusing Broadway,

jazz, Latin-American dance and symphonic sophistication into something wholly new. In 1960 Bernstein (with the help of his colleagues Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal, who assisted with the orchestration) drew nine of its dance and dramatic numbers into a continuous twenty-odd-minute orchestral suite, which was premiered by the New York Philharmonic under Lukas Foss in February 1961.

Crucially, the Symphonic Dances do not follow the order of the show; Bernstein rearranged the numbers for purely musical reasons, to create a satisfying symphonic sequence with its own arc. The result is one of the most exhilarating and beloved of all American orchestral works, a brilliant showcase for a virtuoso orchestra that runs the gamut from the swaggering, syncopated energy of the streets to heart-on-sleeve lyricism and shattering tragedy. It bursts with Bernstein's irresistible rhythmic drive (those famous off-beat accents and Latin grooves), his gift for melody, and his dazzling ear for orchestral colour, including a big role for jazz-inflected percussion. It makes a spectacular, high-energy opening to the concert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The suite moves through nine linked sections; listen for the journey from menace to ecstasy to grief. It opens with the **Prologue**, the snapping, finger-clicking tension of the two gangs sizing each other up. Then comes the soaring melody of '**Somewhere**', the lovers' dream of a place of peace and one of Bernstein's most beautiful tunes. The skittering **Scherzo** leads to the famous **Mambo**: listen for the explosive Latin energy, the blazing brass and the players' shouted cries of 'Mambo!', a guaranteed showstopper.

The flirtatious **Cha-Cha** brings the tune of 'Maria' in a delicate dance; the **Meeting Scene** captures the lovers' first encounter; and the cool, sinister '**Cool**' **Fugue** shows Bernstein's contrapuntal mastery applied to jazz, all coiled, snapping tension. The violent **Rumble** depicts the deadly gang fight that kills both gang leaders, building to a horrifying climax. Then the **Finale** returns to 'Somewhere,' now an aching elegy, as the music fades on a quiet, unresolved chord of grief and hope. Listen throughout for the syncopated rhythms, the brilliant percussion and the way Bernstein blends Broadway, jazz and symphonic writing into a seamless, thrilling whole.

Lowell Liebermann

b. 1961

Flute Concerto No. 2, Op. 142 (UK premiere)

THE COMPOSER

Lowell Liebermann (born in New York in 1961) is one of the most widely performed American composers of his generation, known for music that is richly lyrical, expertly crafted and unapologetically communicative, accessible without being simplistic. He began composing as a child and had finished his first piano concerto by fifteen; he trained at the Juilliard School, where he studied composition with David Diamond and Vincent Persichetti. His large and varied output spans operas (including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Miss Lonelyhearts*), symphonies, concertos and a great deal of chamber and solo music, but he is especially beloved by flautists: his works for flute, above all the *Sonata for Flute and Piano*, have become modern staples of the instrument's repertoire. His music combines romantic warmth, harmonic richness and brilliant instrumental writing with a strong sense of structure and drama.

ABOUT THE WORK

This concert brings the UK premiere of Lowell Liebermann's *Second Flute Concerto*, a recent addition to the repertoire of one of today's most flute-friendly composers. Liebermann's earlier flute works, the *Sonata* of 1987 and the *First Flute Concerto*, have become beloved cornerstones of the instrument's modern repertoire, so a second concerto from him was eagerly awaited by flautists everywhere. The work was first performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 2023 and is dedicated to the Icelandic flautist Stefán Ragnar Höskuldsson, whose admiration for the *Sonata* first brought him to the composer; this LSO performance, with the orchestra's own principal flute Gareth Davies, gives it its first British outing.

The *Second Concerto* is cast in three movements. Liebermann writes in a richly lyrical, tonal idiom (warm, romantic and beautifully made) that gives the soloist both singing melody and brilliant virtuosity, set against a colourful, supportive orchestra. For an audience, a UK premiere of this kind offers the pleasure of discovery without the forbidding edge sometimes associated with new music: this is contemporary writing that wears its craft lightly and aims, unashamedly, to move and delight. It sits attractively between the Bernstein and the Dvořák as the programme's point of fresh discovery, and a showcase for one of the LSO's own principal players.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the flute itself, in all its guises: Liebermann is a master of the instrument, and the concerto explores its full range, from long, expressive, singing melodies to quicksilver, dazzling passagework. Follow the soloist (Gareth Davies, the LSO's own principal flute) as the solo line weaves above and through the orchestra.

The first movement opens with the flute low and ominous, in the darker part of its range, and gradually draws the orchestra into more energetic music; listen for the balance between lyrical poise and rhythmic energy. The second movement is slower and dreamier, an 'aria' for the flute with answering phrases from the orchestra that lets the soloist sing at its most expressive. The finale is energetic and playful, with flute and orchestra vying with each other in brilliant exchanges. Throughout, listen for Liebermann's warm, romantic harmonic language and his idiomatic, grateful writing for the flute, and enjoy the rare treat of hearing a brand-new concerto by a living composer who genuinely loves and understands the instrument, brought to British audiences for the first time.

Antonin Dvorak

42 minutes

1841–1904

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "From the New World"

THE COMPOSER

Antonin Dvorak was born on September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, a small village north of Prague in Bohemia. The eldest of fourteen children, he was expected to follow his father into the butcher's trade, but his unmistakable musical talent led him on a different path. After studying at the Prague Organ School, Dvorak spent years playing viola in theatre orchestras while composing in his spare time, often in conditions of considerable hardship.

His breakthrough came when Johannes Brahms, serving on a jury for a composition prize, recognized Dvorak's exceptional gifts and recommended him to his own publisher, Simrock. The resulting Slavonic Dances (1878) were an immediate international success. Following in the footsteps of Bedrich Smetana, Dvorak went on to achieve worldwide fame as a Czech composer. His time as director of the National Conservatory in New York (1892-1895) produced some of his most beloved works, including the "New World" Symphony and the Cello Concerto.

ABOUT THE WORK

Dvořák's Ninth Symphony, 'From the New World,' is one of the most popular and beloved symphonies ever written, and a fascinating meeting of the Old World and the New. In 1892 Dvořák, already famous across Europe, was lured to New York to become director of the National Conservatory of Music of America, with a mission to help Americans find their own national musical voice. He believed that voice could be built on the music of Black Americans and Native Americans, and during his American years he immersed himself in spirituals (a Black student at the Conservatory, Harry T. Burleigh, sang them to him) and in the idea of Native American melody. The 'New World' Symphony, written in 1893, is the great fruit of that engagement: not a collection of borrowed tunes, but original music written in a spirit Dvořák absorbed from these American sources and fused with his own deeply Czech sensibility, so that homesickness for Bohemia and the wide horizons of America mingle throughout.

The symphony was an immediate sensation at its New York premiere in December 1893 and has never lost its hold on audiences. It is the perfect blend of memorable melody, rich orchestration, dramatic power and warm humanity, with at least one tune (the great cor anglais melody of the slow movement) that has become genuinely universal. It makes a glorious, life-affirming conclusion to the concert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens with a brooding slow introduction before launching into a vigorous Allegro; listen for the striding main theme on the horns (built on a 'gapped' pentatonic scale that gives it a folk-like, 'New World' flavour) and the lyrical secondary themes, one of which strongly recalls the spiritual 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.'

The famous slow movement (Largo) opens with solemn brass chords, then gives the immortal main melody to the cor anglais (English horn), a tune of such nostalgic beauty that it was later adapted as the song 'Goin' Home' and is often mistaken for a genuine spiritual. Listen for its profound stillness and homesickness. The Scherzo is a vigorous, dancing movement: listen for the pounding rhythms and the contrasting, gentler trio sections, with rustic Bohemian charm. The Finale bursts in with a blazing, march-like main theme on horns and trumpets; listen for the way Dvořák, with masterly skill, brings back themes from all three previous movements, weaving them together and

building to a tremendous, triumphant climax, before the very last chord dies away with a surprising, magical softness. Listen throughout for Dvořák's matchless melodic gift and the unmistakable mixture of American openness and Czech warmth.

Tonight's artists

Gareth Davies *flute*

The UK premiere of Liebermann's Second Flute Concerto is given by the LSO's own Principal Flute, Gareth Davies, a player stepping out from the section he has led since 2000 to take the solo spotlight. Liebermann's richly lyrical, virtuosic writing for the flute is ideally suited to an artist of Davies's experience and musicianship, and there is a special pleasure in hearing a beloved orchestral principal introduce a major new concerto to British audiences with his own colleagues.

Gareth Davies has been Principal Flute of the London Symphony Orchestra since 2000, one of the most prominent orchestral flautists in Britain. He has also served as Chair of the orchestra and is a professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Beyond his playing he is a noted broadcaster and writer: he has written and presented programmes for Classic FM and BBC Radio 3, and his book *The Show Must Go On* was named a book of the year by the Financial Times. He brings to Liebermann's concerto the artistry and authority of one of the LSO's longest-serving and best-loved principals, performing as soloist with his own orchestra.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Dvořák in America**

Joseph Horowitz, Cricket Books 2003

A short, readable account of Dvořák's American years, when he wrote the New World Symphony, and of the questions about American music it raised.

ACCESSIBLE **Leonard Bernstein**

Humphrey Burton, Faber & Faber 2018

Humphrey Burton, who filmed Bernstein for many years, tells the life of the composer of West Side Story, whose Symphonic Dances open the concert.

DEEPER **New Worlds of Dvořák**

Michael B. Beckerman, W. W. Norton 2003

A scholar's investigation of Dvořák in America, with close readings of the New World Symphony and the sources and stories behind it.

SOURCES

1. Bernstein, Liebermann and Dvořák, 26 Mar 2026, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/bernstein-liebermann-and-dvorak-26-mar-26>
2. Symphonic Dances from West Side Story, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphonic_Dances_from_West_Side_Story
3. West Side Story, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Side_Story
4. First Encounters: Liebermann's Flute Concerto No 2, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/first-encounters-liebermanns-flute-concerto-no-2/>
5. Lowell Liebermann Flute Concerto No 2: Gareth Davies, Howarth of London. <https://www.howarthlondon.com/events/lowell-liebermann-flute-concerto-no-2-gareth-davies>
6. Lowell Liebermann, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lowell_Liebermann
7. Symphony No. 9 (Dvořák), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_\(Dvořák\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._9_(Dvořák))
8. Symphony No.9, Op.95 (Dvořák, Antonín), IMSLP. [https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_No.9,_Op.95_\(Dvořák,_Antonín\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_No.9,_Op.95_(Dvořák,_Antonín))
9. Anja Bihlmaier, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anja_Bihlmaier
10. Gareth Davies, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/bio/gareth-davies/>
11. Dvořák in America, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780812626810>
12. Leonard Bernstein, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571337934>
13. New Worlds of Dvořák, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393047066>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-03-26-bihlmaier>

Version 3, 30 September 2026