

Pappano: Britten, Bernstein's Age of Anxiety and the Pathétique

Sunday, May 10, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Antonio Pappano, conductor · Denis Kozhukhin, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BRITTEN 1913–1976 <i>Sinfonia da Requiem, Op. 20</i>	20'
2	BERNSTEIN 1918–1990 <i>Symphony No. 2 'The Age of Anxiety' for piano and orchestra</i>	30'
3	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, 'Pathétique'</i>	47'
TOTAL MUSIC		97'

Benjamin Britten

1913–1976

Sinfonia da Requiem, Op. 20

THE COMPOSER

Benjamin Britten, born in Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast in 1913, was the most important English composer since Purcell and the figure who, more than any other, restored opera to the centre of British musical life. A precocious talent who studied at the Royal College of Music, he found his early voice in collaboration with the poet W. H. Auden, and a lifelong subject in the loss of innocence. A committed pacifist and conscientious objector, he spent the first years of the Second World War in the United States before returning home in 1942 and seeking recognition as a conscientious objector, which he won on appeal; his convictions run like a thread through his music, from the early settings to the War Requiem. His breakthrough came in 1945 with the opera *Peter Grimes*, whose outsider hero and surging sea interludes made Britten's name overnight and announced a new era for English opera. To stage his subsequent works he and Pears set up what became the English Opera Group, and in 1948, with Pears and Eric Crozier, he founded the Aldeburgh Festival, which turned his small Suffolk town into one of the world's notable musical centres. His partnership with Pears, both personal and artist-

20 minutes

ic and lasting nearly forty years, shaped a vast body of song, opera, and concert music written for that singular voice. In 1976 he became the first composer to be made a life peer, and he died at Aldeburgh that December.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Sinfonia da Requiem is the work in which the young Benjamin Britten first found his full orchestral voice: a dark, powerful, intensely personal symphony written in 1940, when he was just twenty-six and living in self-imposed exile in America as war engulfed Europe. It carries a strange origin story: it was commissioned (through the British Council) by the Japanese government to help celebrate the 2,600th anniversary of the Japanese imperial dynasty. Britten, a lifelong and committed pacifist, responded with a work of mourning and protest, giving its three movements Latin titles drawn from the Catholic Mass for the Dead, a choice the Japanese authorities found unacceptable, both for its Christian liturgical references and its sombre, un-celebratory character. They rejected it; it received its triumphant premiere in New York in 1941 under John Barbirolli instead. Britten dedicated the score to the memory of his parents, who had both recently died, so the public statement of anti-war grief is bound up with private mourning.

Though relatively compact at around twenty minutes, the Sinfonia is symphonic in weight and ambition, its three movements played continuously. It is music of real emotional force (anguished, threatening and ultimately consoling) and a fascinating glimpse of Britten on the brink of his maturity, already a master of orchestral colour and dramatic pacing. It makes a gripping, weighty opening to a programme much concerned with anxiety, mortality and the search for peace.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The three movements run without a break. Listen first for the **Lacrymosa** ('weeping'), which Britten called 'a slow marching lament': it opens with a great hammer-blow on timpani and low strings, over which a grieving, swaying theme builds inexorably through wave after wave of intensity to a shattering climax: music of raw, oppressive sorrow.

This collapses into the **Dies irae** ('Day of Wrath'), which Britten described as 'a form of Dance of Death': listen for the frantic, flickering energy, the nervous fanfares and skittering rhythms, building to a violent, terrifying climax, a vision of war and destruction. Then, out of the chaos, comes the **Requiem aeternam** ('eternal rest'): listen for the magical transition as the music finds its way to calm, with a gentle, consoling melody

on flutes over rocking harps and strings, Britten's hard-won 'final resolution,' a benediction of peace after grief and terror. The whole work is a journey from lament through nightmare to consolation, and a remarkable achievement for so young a composer.

Leonard Bernstein

1918–1990

30 minutes

Symphony No. 2 'The Age of Anxiety' for piano and orchestra

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

Bernstein's Second Symphony, 'The Age of Anxiety,' is one of his most ambitious and personal concert works: a symphony that is really a hybrid, scored for solo piano and orchestra, so that the pianist functions almost as the composer's alter ego threading through the drama. It takes its title and structure from a long poem of the same name by W. H. Auden, published in 1947, which Bernstein adored, calling it 'one of the most shattering examples of pure virtuosity in the history of English poetry.' Auden's poem follows four lonely strangers who meet in a New York bar during wartime and, over a long night of drinking and conversation, search (through memory, fantasy and a kind of spiritual quest) for meaning and connection in an anxious, faithless modern age. Bernstein composed his musical response in 1948–49 and revised it in 1965; the composer himself was the pianist at the 1949 premiere under Koussevitzky.

The symphony follows Auden's six-part structure closely, divided into two halves played without a break. It is quintessential Bernstein: eclectic, dramatic and emotionally generous, fusing symphonic grandeur, jazz, a haunting central set of variations and an exuberant, controversial jazz-band episode. It is at once a virtuoso piano

showpiece, a symphonic drama and a deeply felt meditation on faith and loneliness in the modern world. It makes a perfect centrepiece for this anxious, searching programme.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The work is in two parts, each in three sections. Listen at the very start (**The Prologue**) for two lonely clarinets in a falling duet, and then for the **The Seven Ages** and **The Seven Stages**, two sets of variations in which the solo piano leads the orchestra through Auden's characters' reflections on life and their dreamlike quest. Listen for how the piano weaves continuously through the texture, by turns reflective, brilliant and searching.

In the second part, listen for **The Dirge**, a dark, anguished lament (using a brooding twelve-note theme) mourning the loss of a strong father-figure or 'Colossus' to lean on. Then comes the famous **The Masque**: a wild, exhilarating jazz scherzo for piano and percussion, full of bebop energy and brittle brilliance, a frantic party that masks despair. Finally, **The Epilogue**: listen for the moment the piano falls silent and then re-enters, and for the way the orchestra builds, against the odds, to a blazing, affirmative climax: Bernstein's hard-won statement of faith and hope emerging from anxiety. It is a thrilling vehicle for a soloist like Denis Kozhukhin, and one of the great American symphonies.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

47 minutes

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, 'Pathétique'

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia's first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphonies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died

in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, the 'Pathétique,' is his final masterpiece and one of the most emotionally devastating works in the entire orchestral repertoire, a symphony that seems to stare death in the face. He completed it in 1893 and conducted its premiere in St Petersburg on 28 October that year; just nine days later he was dead, at fifty-three, in circumstances still debated (the official cause was cholera). This terrible coincidence has forever coloured the way the symphony is heard: as a kind of musical suicide note or premonition of death. Tchaikovsky himself spoke of a secret programme behind the work that he would never reveal, saying he had wept while composing it. The title 'Pathétique' (better understood as 'passionate' or 'impassioned' than merely 'pathetic') was suggested by his brother Modest after the premiere.

Whatever its hidden meaning, the symphony is an astonishing emotional journey and a structural masterstroke. Most radically, Tchaikovsky overturns symphonic convention by ending not with a triumphant fast finale but with a slow, despairing Adagio that sinks into darkness and silence. It was a shocking and unprecedented conclusion that leaves audiences shattered. Between heart-stopping lyricism, a limping waltz, a blazing march and that final descent into the void, it is Tchaikovsky's most personal and shattering testament, and an overwhelming close to a programme steeped in grief, anxiety and the search for peace.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens in gloom, with a solo bassoon over dark low strings, before the main Allegro erupts with nervous, agitated energy. Listen for the famous, soaring second theme, one of Tchaikovsky's most ravishing melodies, and for the shattering central development, where a violent eruption (with a quotation of the Russian Orthodox requiem) tears the music apart before the great tune returns, transfigured and consoling.

The second movement is a wistful, bittersweet waltz, but in an off-balance five beats to a bar, so it never quite settles: a dance with a limp. The third movement is a brilliant, driving march-scherzo that builds to such a triumphant, blazing climax that audiences often (mistakenly) burst into applause, thinking the symphony has ended in victory. But then comes the devastating

finale: an Adagio lamentoso of utter despair. Listen for the wrenching, sobbing main theme (ingeniously split between the two violin sections), the brief surge of protest, the stroke of the tam-tam, and the way the music sinks, lower and lower, into the depths of the cellos and basses, fading to nothing, a heartbeat stopping. It is one of the most powerful endings in all music.

Tonight's artists

Denis Kozhukhin *piano*

Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety* casts the solo piano as the work's questing protagonist, the voice that threads through Auden's nocturnal drama, by turns reflective, virtuosic and searching, from the brooding variations to the wild jazz of the *Masque* and the final affirmation. Denis Kozhukhin, a Queen Elisabeth Competition winner celebrated for both his power and his finesse, brings the technical command and expressive range this symphonic showpiece demands, stepping in as soloist in this performance.

Denis Kozhukhin, born in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, in 1986 into a family of musicians, is one of the most admired pianists of his generation. He began studying with his mother as a small child, trained at the Reina Sofía School in Madrid with Dimitri Bashkirov, and continued his studies at the International Piano Academy Lake Como and with Kirill Gerstein in Stuttgart. He won third prize at the 2006 Leeds International Piano Competition and, in 2010, the first prize at the prestigious Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, the launchpad for a major international career. Admired for the intelligence, refinement and power of his playing across a wide repertoire, he steps in here for Beatrice Rana (who withdrew) as soloist in Bernstein's demanding *Age of Anxiety*.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century**

Paul Kildea, Allen Lane 2013

A lively modern biography of Britten that covers his American years, when he wrote the Sinfonia da Requiem heard tonight.

ACCESSIBLE **Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music**

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

A one-volume life of Tchaikovsky by a leading specialist, with an account of the Pathétique and the composer's death days after its premiere.

DEEPER **Tchaikovsky**

Roland John Wiley, Oxford University Press 2009

A scholarly life-and-works study that discusses the Sixth Symphony in the context of Tchaikovsky's whole output.

SOURCES

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3. Sinfonia da Requiem, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinfonia_da_Requiem
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8. Bernstein: Symphony No. 2 'The Age of Anxiety', Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Leonard-Bernstein-Symphony-No-2-The-Age-of-Anxiety/7138>
9. Symphony No. 6 (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._6_\(Tchaikovsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._6_(Tchaikovsky))
10. Symphony No. 6, Tchaikovsky Research. <https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Pathétique>
11. Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.6 'Pathétique', BBC Music Magazine (classical-music.com). <https://classical-music.com/features/works/tchaikovsky-pathetique-symphony>
12. Denis Kozhukhin, Queen Elisabeth Competition. <https://queenelisabethcompetition.be/en/laureates/denis-kozhukhin/22>
13. Denis Kozhukhin, Dallas Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.dallassymphony.org/people/denis-kozhukhin/>
14. Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781846142321>
15. Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571231959>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-05-10-pappano>

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