

Noseda's Prokofiev and Shostakovich, with Kavakos

Thursday, December 10, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Gianandrea Noseda, conductor · Leonidas Kavakos, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>The Love for Three Oranges, Suite, Op. 33bis</i>	16'
2	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Violin Concerto No. 2 in C-sharp minor, Op. 129</i>	33'
3	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Chout (The Tale of the Buffoon), Suite, Op. 21bis</i>	35'
TOTAL MUSIC		84'

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

The Love for Three Oranges, Suite, Op. 33bis

16 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 in Sontsivka, then part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine), and was admitted to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904, several years younger than most of his classmates. By his teens he was already a fearsome pianist and an enfant terrible of Russian modernism, scandalising audiences with the percussive dissonance of his early works.

In 1918, Prokofiev left Russia with official Soviet permission and spent nearly two decades in the West, first in the United States, then mostly in Paris, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, and concertos that earned him a place among the leading modernists of his generation. After several years of shuttling between Paris and Moscow, he settled permanently in the Soviet Union in 1936. The remaining years of his life were marked by official denunciation in 1948, deteriorating health, and personal tragedy. He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. Soviet newspapers, consumed by the dictator's death, barely noted his passing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges* is a gleeful absurdist comedy. Based on an eighteenth-century fairy-tale play by Carlo Gozzi, it tells of a hypochondriac prince cursed to fall in love with

three oranges, and is full of magicians, card games and theatrical self-mockery. Prokofiev wrote it for Chicago, where it premiered in 1921, and from its sparkling score he drew a concert suite of six movements that has long outshone the opera itself in popularity. It catches Prokofiev at his most witty, brilliant and acerbic, fresh from his early years as the enfant terrible of Russian music.

The suite's most famous number by far is the March, a quirky, strutting, sardonic little tune that became one of Prokofiev's signature pieces (for years it was the theme of the American radio drama *The FBI in Peace and War*). Around it the suite gathers other vivid episodes from the opera: eerie magic, grotesque comedy and brilliant orchestral colour. It makes a bright, characterful opening to Nosedá's Russian programme.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen above all for the famous March, which you may well recognise: a jaunty, slightly sinister tune with a clipped, marching rhythm and Prokofiev's trademark 'wrong-note' wit, brassy and irresistible. The Scherzo that follows is all glittering, scurrying activity, conjuring the opera's magic and mischief.

Across the suite's six short movements, listen for Prokofiev's brilliant, sardonic orchestration and his love of the grotesque and the comic: sudden contrasts, mock-pompous fanfares, eerie atmospheres for the opera's sorcerers, and splashes of bright colour. It is music of theatrical flair and sharp humour, a perfect curtain-raiser, and a reminder of why Prokofiev was considered the wittiest of the great twentieth-century Russians.

Dmitri Shostakovich

33 minutes

1906–1975

Violin Concerto No. 2 in C-sharp minor, Op. 129

THE COMPOSER

Dmitri Shostakovich was born on September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg (then still the Russian capital) into a cultured family. His father was an engineer, and it was his mother who gave him his first piano lessons. The young Dmitri showed exceptional talent, entering the Petrograd Conservatory at thirteen and graduating at nineteen with his First Symphony, whose triumphant premiere in 1926 soon brought him international fame.

Shostakovich's life thereafter became inseparable from the tortured history of the Soviet Union. His 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was initially a sensation, but in 1936 a devastating Pravda editorial, widely taken to reflect Stalin's own displeasure, condemned it as "muddle instead of mu-

sic.” Shostakovich lived for years in fear of arrest, at one point waiting at night on the landing outside his flat so that his family would not be disturbed if the knock came.

Yet under this shadow, Shostakovich composed a stream of masterpieces. His fifteen symphonies and fifteen string quartets constitute one of the twentieth century’s greatest artistic achievements: music that bears witness to its era’s terrors while transcending them through its humanity and craft. He died in Moscow on August 9, 1975.

ABOUT THE WORK

Shostakovich’s Second Violin Concerto is his last concerto: a late, autumnal, deeply introspective work, written in 1967 as a gift for the great violinist David Oistrakh, who had also premiered the First Concerto and to whom this one is dedicated. (Shostakovich intended it for Oistrakh’s 60th birthday, though he miscalculated and the violinist was turning 59.) Where the First Concerto is a vast, four-movement drama, the Second is more compact, shadowy and inward: the music of a composer in his sixties, in failing health, writing in a spare, often bleak late style shot through with private allusions.

It is a difficult, unshowy work that rewards close listening: prevalently quiet, melancholy and full of song, built around long, brooding melodic lines for the soloist rather than display. Even the key, C-sharp minor, is an awkward one for the violin. There are flashes of Shostakovich’s characteristic bitter humour and savage energy, but the overriding mood is one of introspection, loneliness and a kind of weary nobility. It is a connoisseur’s concerto, and a profound one, ideally suited to a soloist of Leonidas Kavakos’s depth and seriousness.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the prevailing mood of shadowy introspection. The first movement (Moderato) opens with a brooding, long-breathed melody for the soloist over dark orchestral colours. This is music of melancholy and unease rather than brilliance, though it builds to anguished climaxes and ends with a contrapuntal cadenza. Listen, too, for Shostakovich’s spare, sometimes desolate orchestration: solo woodwinds, low strings, ominous horn calls.

The slow movement (Adagio) is the concerto’s lyrical heart: a long, sorrowing, song-like meditation of great tenderness, the violin singing over hushed accompaniment. The finale brings more energy and some of Shostakovich’s grotesque, sardonic wit (driving rhythms, sharp accents, a sense of bitter dance) and

includes a further long cadenza. But even here the music keeps returning to shadow. Listen for the prominent horn writing and for the way the concerto ends not in triumph but in a kind of hard, ambiguous defiance. It is late Shostakovich at his most personal and searching.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

35 minutes

Chout (The Tale of the Buffoon), Suite, Op. 21bis

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Chout (a French rendering of the Russian word for 'buffoon' or 'jester') was Prokofiev's first ballet for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. He composed it in 1915 and extensively revised it for the 1921 Paris premiere, with designs by the avant-garde artist Mikhail Larionov. The story, drawn from Russian folk tales, is a grotesque, knock-about comedy: a clever buffoon outwits seven other buffoons (and a merchant along the way) through a series of increasingly absurd deceptions involving a 'magic' whip, a disguise as a woman and a faked death. From this riotous score Prokofiev drew a substantial twelve-movement orchestral suite.

The music is brash, brilliant and folk-flavoured, full of Prokofiev's youthful energy and love of the grotesque: stamping dances, garish orchestral colours, lyrical interludes and sardonic humour. It is less subtle than his later ballets but enormously vivid and entertaining, a riot of orchestral invention. As the substantial closing work of Nosedá's programme, it sends the audience off with Prokofiev at his most exuberant and theatrical.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is a sequence of twelve vivid scenes, so enjoy the colour and contrast. Listen for the brash, stamping dance rhythms and the folk-tune flavour that runs through the score: Prokofiev drawing on Russian popular idioms but twisting them with his characteristic harmonic ‘wrong notes’ and grotesque humour. There are wild, raucous numbers (the buffoons’ antics, market scenes) set against gentler, more lyrical interludes (such as the dance of the buffoons’ daughters).

Listen, too, for Prokofiev’s brilliant and sometimes deliberately crude orchestration: blaring brass, scurrying woodwinds, percussion adding to the knockabout energy. The mood is comic, even cartoonish, full of theatrical flair and physical exuberance. You don’t need to follow the convoluted plot; simply enjoy the riot of invention and the sheer rhythmic vitality of young Prokofiev writing for the most glamorous ballet company in the world.

Tonight’s artists

Leonidas Kavakos *violin*

Shostakovich’s Second Violin Concerto is a soloist’s challenge of a particular kind: not a vehicle for display but a profound, introspective, prevaillingly quiet work that rewards depth, concentration and a beautiful sustained tone over flash. Leonidas Kavakos, renowned for the aristocratic seriousness and refinement of his playing, is an ideal interpreter: a violinist who can sustain the concerto’s long, brooding lines and convey its shadowy inwardness, finding the music’s weary nobility rather than merely its (considerable) difficulties.

Leonidas Kavakos, born in Athens in 1967, is one of the most revered violinists in the world. He swept the major competitions early, winning the Sibelius, Paganini and Naumburg prizes, and made his name with a sensational recording of the original version of the Sibelius Concerto, long withheld from performance, which won Gramophone’s Concerto of the Year. Trained in Greece and with Josef Gingold in the United States, he is admired for the depth, integrity and aristocratic poise of his playing, a sound of great refinement and inner intensity rather than mere flash. He performs and records widely with the world’s leading orchestras, is increasingly active as a conductor, and plays the 1734 ‘Willemotte’ Stradivarius.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

A full, readable life of Prokofiev covering his years with Diaghilev and in America, when he wrote Chout and The Love for Three Oranges.

ACCESSIBLE **Shostakovich: A Life Remembered**

Elizabeth Wilson, Princeton University Press 2006

Shostakovich's life told through the memories of people who knew him, a vivid way into the late years of the Second Violin Concerto, written for David Oistrakh.

DEEPER **Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1915-1923: Behind the Mask**

Sergey Prokofiev, Cornell University Press 2008

Prokofiev's own diary for exactly the years of Chout and The Love for Three Oranges, in English translation, for readers who want the composer in his own words.

SOURCES

1. Prokofiev and Shostakovich, 10 Dec 26, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/prokofiev-and-shostakovich-10-dec-26/>
2. The Love for Three Oranges, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Love_for_Three_Oranges
3. Violin Concerto No. 2 (Shostakovich), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._2_\(Shostakovich\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_No._2_(Shostakovich))
4. Chout, Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chout>
5. Chout Suite, Op.21bis (Prokofiev, Sergey), IMSLP. [https://imslp.org/wiki/Chout_Suite,_Op.21bis_\(Prokofiev,_Sergey\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Chout_Suite,_Op.21bis_(Prokofiev,_Sergey))
6. Gianandrea Noseda, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gianandrea_Noseda
7. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
8. Shostakovich: A Life Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780691128863>
9. Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1915-1923: Behind the Mask, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780801447020>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-12-10-noseda>

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