

Yuja Wang's Bartók, with Mussorgsky and Swan Lake

Thursday, December 17, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Gustavo Gimeno, conductor · Yuja Wang, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	MUSSORGSKY 1839–1881 <i>Night on the Bare Mountain</i>	12'
2	BARTÓK 1881–1945 <i>Piano Concerto No. 1, Sz. 83</i>	24'
3	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Swan Lake, Suite (compiled by Gustavo Gimeno)</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		78'

Modest Mussorgsky

1839–1881

Night on the Bare Mountain

THE COMPOSER

Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881) was the most radical and original of the group of Russian nationalist composers known as ‘The Five.’ A largely self-taught composer who earned his living as a civil servant, he sought a raw, truthful musical language rooted in Russian speech, folk song and history, impatient with the polish of the Western European tradition. His masterpiece is the opera Boris Godunov, a towering drama of guilt and power; alongside it stand songs of startling realism and the piano suite Pictures at an Exhibition. His career was cut short by alcoholism (he died at forty-two), and he left much of his work unfinished or in rough form, later ‘corrected’ and orchestrated by friends such as Rimsky-Korsakov. Yet it is precisely his rough-hewn boldness, his harmonic daring and his unflinching directness that made him a profound influence on later composers, from Debussy and Ravel to the twentieth century.

ABOUT THE WORK

Night on the Bare Mountain (also known as Night on Bald Mountain) is Mussorgsky’s wild, demonic depiction of a witches’ sabbath: a riotous gathering of spirits and dark forces on a mountain top on St John’s Eve. He completed the first version on that very night, 23 June

12 minutes

1867, making it one of the earliest tone poems by any Russian composer: raw, original and full of his characteristic harmonic daring. His mentor Balakirev refused to perform it, and Mussorgsky never heard it played. The work reached the public only after his death, in the brilliant, polished orchestral arrangement Rimsky-Korsakov published in 1886, the version that made it a repertoire favourite and that countless listeners know from Disney's *Fantasia*. Rimsky based his ending on a later reworking Mussorgsky made for his opera *Sorochintsy Fair*, adding the famous church bell and peaceful dawn.

Tonight the LSO plays Mussorgsky's original 1867 score instead: rawer in its harmonies, eerier in its textures, and without the consoling daybreak. It is a thrilling showpiece, a little over ten minutes of headlong orchestral excitement, sinister and exhilarating, and it makes a high-octane opening to the evening.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

From the first bars, listen for the rushing, swirling strings and shrieking woodwinds that conjure the gathering of witches and demons: music of headlong, malevolent energy. Listen for the stamping dance rhythms, the blaring brass summoning the dark spirits, and the sense of a wild, accelerating frenzy as the sabbath reaches its height.

If you know the familiar Rimsky-Korsakov version, listen for what is different. The harmonies are harsher and stranger, the orchestration less smoothed over, and there is no distant bell and no serene dawn melody to banish the spirits. Mussorgsky's original stays with the sabbath to the end. Hearing it this way is a chance to meet one of the most vivid pictures in all Russian orchestral music as its composer first imagined it.

Béla Bartók

1881–1945

Piano Concerto No. 1, Sz. 83

THE COMPOSER

Béla Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, then in the Kingdom of Hungary (today Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), and grew up to become one of the towering figures of twentieth-century music, and one of its great explorers. Trained as a pianist and composer at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, he was a formidable virtuoso who might have made his career at the keyboard alone. Instead, in the first decade of the century, he turned to the villages of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, later reaching as far as Algeria, recording peasant songs on wax cylinders and laying, with his friend

24 minutes

Zoltán Kodály, the foundations of modern ethnomusicology. That fieldwork was not antiquarianism: the irregular metres, modal scales, and percussive vitality of the music he gathered passed directly into his own language, giving it a flinty rhythmic drive and an earthy modernity unlike anything in the Austro-German tradition he otherwise revered. Bartók loathed fascism: after 1933 he refused to give concerts in Nazi Germany and broke with his publisher there. As Hungary slid toward alliance with Hitler, he emigrated to the United States in 1940, settling in New York. The American years were hard, with failing health, financial anxiety and a sense of exile, yet they produced the radiant Concerto for Orchestra (1943) and the Third Piano Concerto heard tonight. He died of complications of leukaemia in New York on 26 September 1945, his Third Piano Concerto all but finished on his desk.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the mid-1920s Béla Bartók was busier as a touring pianist than as a composer, and for almost three years he wrote very little. He broke that silence in 1926 with several piano works, the largest of which is the First Piano Concerto, composed between August and November that year. He wrote it to play himself, and he was the soloist at the first performance on 1 July 1927 in Frankfurt, at the festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting. The critics were outraged, and the concerto has kept a reputation as one of the hardest in the repertoire for soloist and orchestra to hold together.

Two influences meet in the score. A few years earlier Bartók had met the American composer Henry Cowell and heard his piano pieces built from tone clusters, handfuls of adjacent notes struck together. Bartók asked whether he might borrow the idea, Cowell agreed, and the First Concerto is where Bartók uses it most boldly. The other influence is Stravinsky, whose music Bartók had been studying: the concerto's driving, irregular rhythms, with frequent changes of metre, owe something to that example. Under these influences sits Bartók's own method. His publisher, Universal Edition, points out that the themes of all three movements grow from one small melodic core, and that short, folk-like modal lines are set against hard chromatic clusters, following a rule Bartók held at the time: the simpler the melody, the more unusual the accompaniment should be.

Above all, the piano is treated as a percussion instrument. The soloist hammers single notes and chords, and the orchestra's drums answer. Bartók wrote into the score that the percussion, timpani included, must be placed directly next to the piano, behind it, so that soloist and drummers work as one group. Some printed scores left this instruction out; recent printings restore it.

Tonight the concerto stands between two Russian works. The LSO announced on 12 October 2026 that, for artistic reasons, it replaces Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto, which was originally planned for these concerts. It keeps the evening's taste for rhythm and orchestral colour, but its sound is harder and more percussive than anything else on the programme.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro moderato. The concerto starts in the dark: soft, low rumbling from timpani, piano and low brass. Out of it comes the idea that drives the whole movement, a single note hammered again and again by the piano. Octaves and syncopated orchestral chords build the Allegro from there. Listen for the piano and the drums trading short figures, as if finishing each other's sentences, and for the cross-rhythms near the end, where the piano breaks loose before a final orchestral chord.

II. Andante. The strings do not play at all in this movement. The piano has only woodwinds, brass and percussion for company, and the colour is bare and nocturnal. It begins as a quiet conversation between piano and percussion. The winds come in one by one and climb, in a harsh march rhythm over a repeated figure in the piano, to a very dissonant climax, before the opening mood returns.

III. Allegro molto. The finale follows without a break, set off by drums and sliding trombones. It is a fast, stamping dance led by piano and percussion, with the brass cutting in. Listen for a middle section in which the piano keeps up a rhythmic ostinato while solo woodwinds join it, then a short, angry fugal passage, a brief dance-like moment, and an ending that stops dead at full speed.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

Swan Lake, Suite (compiled by Gustavo Gimeno)

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 symphon-

42 minutes

ies, 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

Swan Lake (1875–76) is the most beloved of all ballets, and its music is among Tchaikovsky's greatest achievements. Yet its 1877 Moscow premiere was poorly received (critics found the score too noisy, too 'Wagnerian' and too symphonic), and Tchaikovsky himself later had doubts about it. Only after his death, in the 1895 St Petersburg revival by Petipa and Ivanov, did *Swan Lake* become the cornerstone of the classical ballet repertoire it is today. The story of Prince Siegfried, the swan-maiden Odette under the spell of the evil sorcerer Rothbart, and the deceiving 'black swan' Odile gave Tchaikovsky the chance to pour out a stream of unforgettable melody and to raise ballet music to genuinely symphonic heights.

Conductors have long drawn concert suites of the finest numbers from the full evening-length ballet; tonight's selection is compiled by the evening's conductor, Gustavo Gimeno. Such a suite gathers the ballet's greatest hits (the haunting swan theme, the great waltz, the characterful national dances, the brilliant set pieces) into a satisfying orchestral showcase, ending the programme, and the year, in a blaze of Tchaikovskian melody and colour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, above all, for the famous 'swan' theme: the melancholy oboe melody over rippling harp and shimmering strings that opens the ballet's lakeside scenes and recurs as its emotional heart, representing Odette and the enchanted swans. It is one of the most instantly recognisable tunes in all music.

Beyond it, enjoy the variety a *Swan Lake* suite offers: the sweeping grand Waltz; the delicate, twinkling 'Dance of the Little Swans' (the famous four cygnets, in tripping staccato woodwinds); the brilliant character dances from around Europe (Hungarian, Spanish, Neapolitan, the swirling Mazurka); and the great dramatic set pieces with their soaring strings and blazing brass. Listen for Tchaikovsky's matchless gift for melody and his

brilliant orchestration, and for the way even dance music becomes, in his hands, music of real symphonic richness and feeling. It is a glorious, festive close to the concert.

Tonight's artists

Yuja Wang *piano*

The LSO announced on 12 October 2026 that, for artistic reasons, Yuja Wang will play Bartók's First Piano Concerto at these concerts instead of Prokofiev's Third. It is a concerto she is carrying this season: in January 2027 she plays it with the Berliner Philharmoniker under Jakub Hrůša, and that orchestra quotes her as saying that in this work Bartók "created a unique sound world". Bartók writes the solo part as percussion and seats the timpani and drums right beside the piano, so much of the drama tonight lies in the exchanges between Wang and the LSO's percussion section.

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 **A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar**

Francis Maes, University of California Press 2006

A history of Russian music that covers both Russian composers on this programme, Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky, and the world each wrote for.

ACCESSIBLE **Musorgsky and His Circle: A Russian Musical Adventure**

Stephen Walsh, Alfred A. Knopf 2013

A vivid group portrait of Mussorgsky and the other composers of the 'Mighty Handful', the world in which Night on the Bare Mountain was born.

DEEPER **Tchaikovsky's Ballets: Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Nutcracker**

Roland John Wiley, Oxford University Press 1991

A detailed study of Tchaikovsky's three ballets, with a full account of the creation and first production of Swan Lake.

SOURCES

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2. London Symphony Orchestra/Gustavo Gimeno: Tchaikovsky and Bartók with Yuja Wang, Barbican. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2026/event/london-symphony-orchestra-gustavo-gimeno>
3. Piano Concerto No. 1 (Bartók), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_\(Bart%C3%B3k\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._1_(Bart%C3%B3k))
4. Bartók: Concerto No. 1 (1926) for piano and orchestra, Universal Edition. <https://www.universaledition.com/en/Works/1.-Konzert/P0042821>
5. Piano Concerto No. 1, Béla Bartók, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/2724/piano-concerto-no-1>
6. Jakub Hrůša and Yuja Wang, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/57083/>
7. Night on Bald Mountain, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_on_Bald_Mountain
8. Swan Lake, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swan_Lake
9. Gustavo Gimeno, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavo_Gimeno
10. Yuja Wang, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuja_Wang
11. A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520248250>
12. Musorgsky and His Circle: A Russian Musical Adventure, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780307272447>
13. Tchaikovsky's Ballets: Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Nutcracker, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780198162490>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-12-17-gimeno>

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