

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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

12 minutes

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 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.

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 en-

ergy. 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

24 minutes

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 Soci-

ety 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.

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)

42 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

Version 4, 18 October 2026