

Mendelssohn's Lobgesang, and Tetzlaff in Adámek's Thin Ice

Sunday, February 7, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Alain Altinoglu, conductor · Christian Tetzlaff, violin · London Symphony
Chorus, choir

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ADÁMEK b. 1979 <i>Thin Ice (Violin Concerto No. 2)</i>	20'
2	MENDELSSOHN 1809–1847 <i>Symphony No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 52 'Lobgesang'</i>	64'
TOTAL MUSIC		84'

Ondřej Adámek

b. 1979

Thin Ice (Violin Concerto No. 2)

20 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Ondřej Adámek, born in Prague in 1979, is a Czech composer and conductor who has lived in Berlin since 2010, when he arrived there as a guest of the DAAD artists' programme. He studied composition at the Academy of Music in Prague and then at the Paris Conservatoire, graduating in 2007. Long stays abroad have left clear marks on his music: he has drawn on Japanese Noh and Bunraku theatre, on flamenco, and on what he heard in India and Bali. His scores combine driving rhythm with a fascination for breath, speech and unusual ways of producing sound, and he has built an instrument of his own, the air-driven Airmachine. In 2018 he founded the vocal ensemble N.E.S.E.V.E.N., and he has conducted his own stage works, among them Seven Stones at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. His concert works include the violin concerto Follow Me, written for Isabelle Faust, and Where are You?, an orchestral song cycle for Magdalena Kožená.

ABOUT THE WORK

Thin Ice is Ondřej Adámek's second violin concerto, and this performance is the first in Britain. It was written for Christian Tetzlaff, who gave the premiere in Paris on 8 February 2026 with the Orchestre National de France under Cristian Măcelaru, as part of Radio France's Festival Présences. Within weeks he had played it again in Winter-

thurs, with the composer conducting, and in Adámek's native Prague. The London Symphony Orchestra is one of four commissioning partners, with the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Musikkollegium Winterthur and the Orchestre National de France.

Adámek's first violin concerto, *Follow Me*, was composed in 2017 for Isabelle Faust and told a story without words: a leader, a crowd that repeats what the leader says, and a crowd that finally turns on its guide. The new concerto is also a drama, but an inward one. In a note published by Boosey & Hawkes the composer says it is 'built on the contrast between raw energy and the voice of remorse, conscience, or fate'. The soloist stands for the first of these, and for most of the piece something is pushing back.

The work lasts about twenty minutes and has four movements. Adámek describes the first as music in which 'playfulness, exuberance, and inexhaustible energy frolic freely', a carefree dance that gradually tips into chaos and ends 'in a plunge into the abyss'. In the second, he writes, 'spontaneity is buried alive': the soloist is shut in a dark, airless space where a reproachful voice alternates with urgent cries. The third movement attempts an escape in what he calls 'a quiet, whispered dance', and it offers only the illusion of freedom. The finale brings the carnival mood back, 'this time almost violently', and sets it against the weight of conscience. The title comes from his last sentence: two forces that cannot be reconciled 'wrestle on thin ice'.

Listeners who know Adámek's music will expect the orchestra to behave unusually. His scores are full of sounds borrowed from speech and breathing and from musical traditions far from the concert hall, and they are driven by a strong, physical sense of rhythm. The orchestra here is of ordinary symphonic size, with piano, harp and three percussionists, but several wind players double on less familiar instruments, including slide flutes, contrabass clarinet and piccolo trumpet.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Because the piece is so new, the composer's outline is the best guide, and it is worth holding on to its two characters. One is the solo violin at play: fast, restless, dancing, unable to keep still. The other is whatever interrupts it. In the finale Adámek describes 'defiant high gestures' colliding with 'a deep, stern motif', so the conflict is laid out across the full height of the orchestra, high against low.

The opening movement sets the pattern. Listen for how long the exuberance lasts before a warning note creeps in underneath it, and for the point at which enjoyment turns into something closer to frenzy.

The two middle movements are the quiet ones, and they differ in kind. The second is tense and confined, with the violin alternately pleading and pretending to submit. The third is hushed in another way, a dance kept to a whisper that is broken off again and again.

In the last movement speed and repetition take over. Adámek speaks of acceleration building 'toward a physical struggle', and the ending does not announce a winner.

Felix Mendelssohn

64 minutes

1809–1847

Symphony No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 52 'Lobgesang'

THE COMPOSER

Felix Mendelssohn was born into one of the most cultivated families in Europe. His grandfather Moses was a celebrated philosopher of the Enlightenment; his father Abraham was a prosperous banker; his sister Fanny was a gifted composer in her own right. Baptized a Protestant in 1816, the young Felix received an extraordinary education in languages, art, philosophy, and music, studying piano with Ludwig Berger and composition with Carl Friedrich Zelter.

A child prodigy who gave his first public performance at age nine, Mendelssohn composed his miraculous overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at seventeen. But he was equally important as a conductor and cultural advocate: his 1829 Berlin performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a landmark event, was instrumental in reviving interest in Bach's music. As music director in Leipzig from 1835, he built the Gewandhaus Orchestra into one of Europe's finest ensembles and founded the Leipzig Conservatory in 1843.

Mendelssohn's music combines Classical clarity with Romantic expressiveness. His essentially conservative tastes set him apart from more radical contemporaries like Liszt, Wagner, and Berlioz, yet his orchestral writing, particularly his handling of color and atmosphere, was highly influential.

ABOUT THE WORK

In June 1840 Leipzig celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of the invention of printing with movable type. For a city that lived by the book trade this was a great civic occasion, and Mendelssohn, conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra and Leipzig's leading musician, was asked for music. He wrote two pieces. The first was a *Festgesang*

for men's voices and brass, sung in the open air when the festival opened; one of its tunes was fitted after his death to the words of 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing'. The second was the Lobgesang, or Hymn of Praise, first performed on 25 June 1840 in the Thomaskirche, the church where Bach had been cantor.

Mendelssohn called it a 'symphony-cantata on words of the Holy Bible'. Three orchestral movements, played without a break, lead into a long sequence of choruses, arias and duets for two sopranos, tenor, chorus, orchestra and organ. He assembled the text himself, mostly from the Psalms and Isaiah, and nowhere does it mention Gutenberg or printing. Its subject is thanksgiving and the passage from darkness into light, which suited a festival honouring the invention that had put the Bible into ordinary hands. The whole work grows from the words of the last verse of the last psalm: 'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.'

A symphony that ends with voices could hardly avoid comparison with Beethoven's Ninth, then only sixteen years old, and other composers of the time were trying out the same mixture; Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* dates from the year before. Mendelssohn's plan differs from Beethoven's, though. The vocal part is not a finale but well over half of the work, and the orchestral movements serve as a prelude to it.

The title 'Symphony No. 2' is not Mendelssohn's. He published the work as Lobgesang, and the number was attached decades after his death by the editors of the collected edition, who needed to fill a gap in the sequence. It has nothing to do with chronology: the 'Italian' Symphony, published later as No. 4, had been performed seven years earlier. The current catalogue of his works lists the Lobgesang with his sacred music.

One part of the score is far better known than the whole: the harmonisation of the chorale 'Nun danket alle Gott' ('Now thank we all our God') found in many hymn books is the one he made for it.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The very first sound is the key to the work: the trombones, alone, proclaim a broad, rising theme, and the full orchestra answers. Much later this theme turns out to be the tune to which the chorus sings 'Alles, was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn' ('Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord'). It returns during the orchestral movements and again in the closing bars, so it frames the whole score.

The three orchestral movements run together. After the energetic first comes a lilting movement in a minor key, more a wistful song for the strings than a scherzo; in its middle section the winds intone a chorale-like melody while fragments of the opening motto pass through the texture. The slow movement that follows is marked 'religioso' and has the warmth of Mendelssohn's Songs without Words.

The voices enter with the motto theme, now with its words. Of the numbers that follow, the best known is the duet for the two sopranos with chorus, 'Ich harrete des Herrn' ('I waited for the Lord'), a piece of great tenderness.

The dramatic centre comes next. The tenor sings of the snares of death and then asks, three times and each time more anxiously, 'Hüter, ist die Nacht bald hin?' ('Watchman, will the night soon pass?'). The answer comes from a solo soprano, unaccompanied at first: 'Die Nacht ist vergangen' ('The night is departed'). The chorus bursts in with the same words, and the darkness is over.

After that blaze Mendelssohn does something simple. The choir sings the chorale 'Nun danket alle Gott', its first verse with no instruments at all and its second with the orchestra moving around the tune. A duet for soprano and tenor leads to the final chorus, which gathers speed in a fugue and then, at the very end, brings back the trombones' theme and the words that began the vocal part.

Tonight's artists

Christian Tetzlaff *violin*

Thin Ice was written for Christian Tetzlaff, who gave its first performance in Paris in February 2026 and then took it to Winterthur and Prague, the homes of two of the other commissioning orchestras. He now brings it to the fourth, for the concerto's first performance in Britain. Few violinists have played as many new concertos, and his way of treating beauty of tone as something to be earned suits a piece about energy under pressure.

Christian Tetzlaff, born in Hamburg in 1966, is a German violinist known for searching, unsentimental interpretations and for a repertoire that runs from Bach's solo sonatas and partitas to the music of his own time. He studied with Uwe-Martin Haiberg in Lübeck and with Walter Levin in Cincinnati, and came to wide attention in 1988 with performances of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto in Munich and Cleveland. Since then he has appeared with most of the world's leading orchestras, and he has championed contemporary concertos by composers such as György Ligeti, Jörg Widmann and Thomas Adès. Chamber music has always been central to his work: in 1994 he founded the Tetzlaff Quartet with his sister, the cellist Tanja Tetzlaff, and for many years he played and recorded with the pianist Lars Vogt. Unusually for a soloist of his standing, he plays a modern instrument, made by the German violin maker Stefan-Peter Greiner.

London Symphony Chorus *choir*

More than half of the Lobgesang belongs to the choir, from the first cry of 'Alles, was Odem hat' to the closing fugue, and its plainest moment, the unaccompanied verse of 'Nun danket alle Gott', is the chorus's alone. The London Symphony Chorus sings it with the orchestra it was founded to partner. The LSO's listing does not yet name the two sopranos and the tenor who take the solo parts.

The London Symphony Chorus was founded in 1966 as the chorus of the London Symphony Orchestra. Now an independent, self-governing choir, it keeps a close association with the LSO, performing and recording the great choral-orchestral repertoire with the orchestra at the Barbican and elsewhere, and also working with other orchestras.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Mendelssohn Remembered**

Roger Nichols, Faber and Faber 1997

Mendelssohn as his friends, pupils and fellow musicians saw him, in their own words, including his years at the head of Leipzig's musical life, when the Lobgesang was written.

ACCESSIBLE **A Portrait of Mendelssohn**

Clive Brown, Yale University Press 2003

Brown takes the composer one aspect at a time (the conductor, the religious man, the reputation in Britain), which helps explain why the Lobgesang was once so loved here and later neglected.

DEEPER **Mendelssohn: A Life in Music**

R. Larry Todd, Oxford University Press 2003

The standard scholarly biography, with a full account of the 1840 Gutenberg festival and of the Lobgesang as Mendelssohn's response to Beethoven's choral symphony.

SOURCES

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2. Ondrej Adámek: Thin Ice concerto for Christian Tetzlaff, Boosey & Hawkes. https://www.boosey.com/cr/news/Ondrej-Adamek-_Thin-Ice_-concerto-for-Christian-Tetzlaff/102779
3. Ondrej Adámek: Thin Ice. Concerto for violin and orchestra No. 2, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/113872>
4. R4: Jonathan Nott and Christian Tetzlaff, Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, Rudolfinum. <https://www.rudolfinum.cz/en/event/34662-prague-radio-symphony-orchestra-r4-jonathan-nott-and-christian-tetzlaff/>
5. L'arc final de Présences 2026 : l'engrenage de la virtuosité, Bachtrack. <https://bachtrack.com/critique-festival-presences-aperghis-tetzlaff-sotty-macelaru-orchestre-national-de-france-paris-fevrier-2026>
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7. Ondrej Adámek, Schott Music. <https://www.schott-music.com/en/person/ondrej-adamek>
8. Ondřej Adámek, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/composer/Ondrej+Adamek>
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13. Program Notes: Lobgesang (Hymn of Praise), Naperville Chorus. <https://napervillechorus.org/program-notes/2003-spring-lobgesang-hymn-of-praise/>
14. Mendelssohn Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571178605>
15. A Portrait of Mendelssohn, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300095395>
16. Mendelssohn: A Life in Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195110432>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-02-07-altinoglu>

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