

Elgar's Cello Concerto with Alisa Weilerstein, and Tchaikovsky's Fifth

Thursday, February 18, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Antonio Pappano, conductor · Alisa Weilerstein, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ELGAR 1857–1934 <i>Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85</i>	30'
2	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64</i>	48'
TOTAL MUSIC		78'

Edward Elgar

1857–1934

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85

THE COMPOSER

Edward Elgar (1857–1934) was the composer who, more than any other, restored England to the front rank of European music after two centuries in which it had produced no figure of international stature. Largely self-taught, the son of a Worcester music-shop owner and organist, he made his way slowly from the provinces to national and then world fame, achieving his breakthrough in 1899 with the Enigma Variations. A late Romantic to his core, steeped in Wagner, Brahms and Richard Strauss yet unmistakably English in his blend of nobility, warmth and wistful melancholy, he gave his country a body of great orchestral music: two symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, the Enigma Variations, the oratorio The Dream of Gerontius and the Pomp and Circumstance marches. Knighted and laden with honours, he became the very emblem of Edwardian Britain, though his finest music reaches far beyond pomp into a deep, often autumnal expressivity. His wife Alice's death in 1920 effectively silenced him as a composer for his last years.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Cello Concerto was Elgar's last major work, and the London Symphony Orchestra gave its first performance. Its opening idea came to him in March 1918. He had been in hospital in London for an operation to remove an infected tonsil, and on his return home he wrote down a long, swaying melody without yet knowing what it was for.

30 minutes

Soon afterwards he and his wife Alice withdrew to Brinkwells, a secluded cottage in the Sussex woods, where in the following months he composed three chamber works: a violin sonata, a string quartet and a piano quintet. In 1919 he turned back to the tune and built a concerto around it, finishing the score that August. He described it as ‘a real large work & I think good & alive’.

The music that resulted is unlike the opulent Elgar of the years before 1914. The orchestra is of normal size but is used sparingly, the movements are short, and the prevailing tone is private and autumnal. The war had just ended, and many listeners have heard the concerto as a lament for the world it destroyed. Alice Elgar’s diary, in the autumn of 1918, speaks of new music with a ‘lament’ that ‘should be in a war symphony’. Elgar himself left no programme.

The premiere, on 27 October 1919, opened the LSO’s first season after the war, and it went badly. The soloist was Felix Salmond and Elgar conducted his own piece, while the rest of the concert was in the hands of the orchestra’s new principal conductor, Albert Coates, who overran his rehearsal time and left Elgar almost none. Alice called Coates a ‘brutal selfish ill-mannered bounder’ in her diary. The critic Ernest Newman wrote in *The Observer* that the orchestra had made a ‘lamentable exhibition of itself’. It was more than a year before the concerto was played in London again.

Alice died the following spring, and in the fourteen years left to him Elgar completed nothing else on this scale. The concerto made its way slowly. Beatrice Harrison recorded it twice with the composer, and Pablo Casals took it up, but its great popularity dates from 1965, when the twenty-year-old Jacqueline du Pré recorded it with the LSO under Sir John Barbirolli. Barbirolli knew the piece from the inside: as a young cellist he had played in the orchestra at the first performance.

According to the LSO’s own archive, Elgar hummed the first theme to the orchestra’s leader, W. H. Reed, during his final illness and said that if Reed ever heard someone whistling it on the Malvern Hills after his death, ‘don’t be alarmed. It’s only me.’

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There are four movements, not the usual three, all of them concise, and the first two are joined.

The cello begins alone with a grand, declamatory flourish of full chords. This recitative is the concerto’s signature and will return twice. It dies away, and the violas, unaccompanied, quietly in-

introduce the melody Elgar wrote down in 1918. The cello takes it over and the orchestra slowly gathers behind it, but the movement ends as bare as it began.

A plucked version of the opening recitative leads to the second movement. After several hesitant false starts the cello sets off in rapid repeated notes, a quicksilver scherzo that is over in a few minutes and gives the soloist no rest.

The Adagio is the heart of the work and its simplest music: a single unbroken song for the cello over a reduced orchestra of strings, clarinets, bassoons and horns. It is brief, and it ends on an unresolved harmony, as if the thought were unfinished.

The finale starts with another recitative and then strides out in a robust, march-like main theme, the nearest the concerto comes to the confident Elgar of earlier years. That confidence does not last. Towards the end the pace slackens, the harmony grows more painful, and the cello recalls a phrase from the Adagio. Then the opening recitative of the whole concerto returns in full, and a brusque few bars from the orchestra bring the end.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

48 minutes

1840–1893

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

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 wrote his Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1888, ten years after the Fourth, at a time when he had come to fear that his powers were failing. ‘I want so much to show not only to others, but to myself, that I still haven’t expired,’ he told his patron Nadezhda von Meck that June. A few weeks later he had the work sketched, and before the end of August the score was finished. As it neared completion he allowed himself a cautious verdict: ‘thank God, it is no worse than my previous ones.’

Before starting he had jotted down a plan in a notebook. The introduction was to represent ‘total submission before fate, or, which is the same thing, the inscrutable designs of providence’; the Allegro would bring ‘murmurs, doubts, laments, reproaches’; and for the second movement he asked himself, ‘Shall I cast myself into the embrace of faith?’ He never published this programme and it is not clear how closely he kept to it, but one feature of the finished symphony matches it plainly. The sombre theme heard at the very beginning comes back in every movement, usually as an intruder, and in the finale it is transformed from minor to major and from a funeral tread to a triumphal march.

Tchaikovsky conducted the first performance himself in St Petersburg on 17 November 1888, and took the symphony to Prague soon afterwards. Critical reaction was mixed, and he quickly lost confidence. ‘I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure,’ he wrote after the second performance. ‘There is something so repellent about such excess, insincerity and artificiality.’ It was the finale that troubled him, and the question he raised has never quite gone away: whether its victory is a real one or only loud.

He dedicated the score to Theodor Avé-Lallemant, a director of the Hamburg Philharmonic Society whom he had met in that city in January 1888, and he conducted the work in Hamburg in March 1889.

Audiences have not shared his doubts. The Fifth has long been one of the most often played of all symphonies, for its melodies and for the directness of its emotional journey. It is also the most classically proportioned of his last three symphonies, with four movements in the traditional order, a waltz standing in for the scherzo.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. Two clarinets in their lowest register, over quiet strings, give out the motto theme, a grave melody with the rhythm of a slow march. Fix it in your ear. The Allegro grows

from a lilting, slightly uneasy tune for clarinet and bassoon and rises to several great climaxes, then sinks back into the depths of the orchestra where it began.

Second movement. After a few bars of dark string chords a solo horn plays one of the best-known melodies Tchaikovsky wrote, long-breathed and yearning. The oboe joins it with a second idea, and the music swells into an impassioned love song. Twice the motto theme breaks in at full force on the brass, and after the second interruption the movement ends in exhausted quiet.

Third movement. In place of a scherzo comes a graceful waltz, a reminder that this is the composer of the great ballets. Its middle section is a scurrying, feather-light passage for the strings. Just before the close the motto slips in softly on clarinets and bassoons, like a shadow crossing the ballroom.

Finale. The motto opens the movement, now in the major and broad and solemn in the strings. A stormy Allegro follows and drives to a tremendous halt on a held chord, a pause so emphatic that audiences sometimes start to clap. Then the motto returns as a grand march for the whole orchestra, and in the last bars the trumpets and horns bring back the main theme of the first movement, also turned to the major.

Tonight's artists

Alisa Weilerstein *cello*

The Elgar concerto has followed Alisa Weilerstein through her career. She recorded it with Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin, and this season she plays it on both sides of the Atlantic. Here she performs it with the orchestra that gave its premiere in 1919, and Sir Antonio Pappano and the LSO then take the concerto on their tour of the United States, where the same pairing with Tchaikovsky's Fifth, preceded by Elizabeth Maconchy's Nocturne, is heard in Palm Desert on 26 and 27 February.

Alisa Weilerstein, born in Rochester, New York, in 1982, is an American cellist. She grew up in a family of musicians: her father, Donald Weilerstein, is a violinist, her mother, Vivian Hornik Weilerstein, a pianist, and her brother Joshua a conductor. She took up the cello at four and at thirteen made her professional debut with the Cleveland Orchestra in Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations. She studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music and, unusually for a touring soloist, also took a degree in history at Columbia University, graduating in 2004. In 2011 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Her recordings include the Elgar and Elliott Carter concertos with Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin and Bach's six solo suites. She is a committed advocate of new music and has given the first performances of concertos written for her by Pascal Dusapin, Matthias Pintscher, Joan Tower and others. Her solo project Fragments interleaves the movements of the Bach suites with newly commissioned pieces. She is married to the conductor Rafael Payare.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Elgar**

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2004

A compact life by the leading Elgar writer of his generation, good on the months at Brinkwells and on the silence that followed the Cello Concerto and Lady Elgar's death.

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

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

Brown's one-volume account of Tchaikovsky's life and works, with a clear guide to the Fifth Symphony and to the self-doubt that surrounded it.

DEEPER **Edward Elgar: A Creative Life**

Jerrold Northrop Moore, Oxford University Press 1987

The fullest biography of Elgar, built from his letters, diaries and sketches, which traces the concerto from the tune written down after his operation in 1918 to the troubled premiere.

SOURCES

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2. Press Release: The LSO announces its 2026/27 season, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/press-release-the-lso-announces-its-2026-27-season/>
3. London Symphony Orchestra, February 26 and 27, 2027, Palm Springs Friends of Philharmonic. <https://www.pphil.org/event/2027-02-25-london-symphony-orchestra>
4. Cello Concerto (Elgar), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cello_Concerto_\(Elgar\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cello_Concerto_(Elgar))
5. From the Archive: Elgar's Cello Concerto, 100 Year Anniversary, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/from-the-archive-elgars-cello-concerto-100-year-anniversary/>
6. Elgar: Cello Concerto, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/elgar-cello-concerto>
7. Symphony No. 5 (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Tchaikovsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Tchaikovsky))
8. Symphony No. 5, Tchaikovsky Research. https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Symphony_No._5
9. Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/tchaikovsky-symphony-no-5>
10. Bio, Alisa Weilerstein. <https://alisaweilerstein.com/bio/>
11. Alisa Weilerstein, Cellist, Class of 2011, MacArthur Foundation. <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/21/>
12. Alisa Weilerstein, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alisa_Weilerstein
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15. Edward Elgar: A Creative Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780192840141>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-02-18-pappano>

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