

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Shostakovich's Eighth, and Maxim Vengerov in Beethoven's Violin Concerto

Sunday, February 21, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican

Antonio Pappano, conductor · Maxim Vengerov, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61</i>	42'
2	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Symphony No. 8 in C minor, Op. 65</i>	64'
TOTAL MUSIC		106'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven composed his only violin concerto in 1806. He wrote it for Franz Clement, one of the leading violinists in Vienna, who had given him useful advice on his opera *Fidelio*. Clement played it at the Theater an der Wien on 23 December 1806, at a benefit concert for himself.

42 minutes

By all accounts the score was finished at the last minute, so late that Clement is said to have played part of the solo more or less at sight. Stories also survive of the entertainment he added to the evening, a piece of his own played on one string with the violin held upside down; the accounts differ on whether this came between the movements of the concerto or at the end of the concert. Whatever happened, the premiere made little impression, and for nearly forty years the concerto was seldom played. It was on a larger scale than any violin concerto before it, a good deal longer than Mozart's, and its solo part, for all its difficulty, offers the player few chances for display.

Its fortunes changed in London in 1844, when the twelve-year-old Joseph Joachim performed it with the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society under Mendelssohn. Joachim kept it in his repertoire for the rest of a long career, and since then it has stood at the centre of the violin repertoire.

What sets the concerto apart is its calm. Beethoven's middle-period works are often thought of as music of struggle, but here the prevailing mood is spacious and lyrical, and the soloist spends much of the time decorating the orchestra's themes with scales, arpeggios and trills high above them. Commentators have traced some of its features, including the drum-taps of the opening, to the French violin school of Viotti, Rode and Kreutzer that Beethoven admired. He left no cadenzas for the violin. Many players have supplied their own, and those by Joachim and by Fritz Kreisler are the ones most often heard.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. Four soft taps on the timpani, alone, begin the concerto, and the woodwind answer with a serene hymn-like phrase. That drum rhythm is the seed of the whole movement: listen for it passing to the violins, the horns and the trumpets, sometimes as a whisper and sometimes with the full orchestra's weight. The orchestra sets out all the themes before the soloist plays a note. When the violin does enter it rises from the depths in broken octaves, as if improvising, and climbs to the top of its range. The quietest and most affecting passage comes in the middle of the movement, where the violin muses in the minor over soft drum-taps from the horns. After the cadenza the soloist plays the second theme very simply, low on the instrument, over plucked strings.

Second movement. Muted strings state a short, grave theme, and what follows is a set of variations in which the theme mostly stays with the orchestra while the violin embroiders around it. Midway the soloist introduces a new melody of its own, one of the stillest moments in Beethoven. The movement does not end: a sudden loud gesture from the strings and a brief cadenza lead straight into the finale.

Third movement. The violin announces the rondo theme on its lowest string, a bouncing tune like a hunting call, and repeats it at once two octaves higher. The episodes between its returns include a plaintive minor-key melody shared with the bassoon. After the final cadenza Beethoven plays games with the theme, sending it through distant keys before two abrupt chords end the piece.

Dmitri Shostakovich

64 minutes

1906–1975

Symphony No. 8 in C minor, Op. 65

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 music." 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 wrote his Eighth Symphony in the summer of 1943, in a little over two months. He began it in Moscow at the start of July and did most of the work at a country retreat near Ivanovo that the Union of Composers ran for its members, finishing early in September. Yev-

geny Mravinsky, to whom the score is dedicated, conducted the USSR Symphony Orchestra in the first public performance in Moscow on 4 November 1943.

The timing shaped its reception. The Seventh Symphony, the ‘Leningrad’, had been performed around the world the year before as a symbol of Soviet resistance. By the autumn of 1943 the Red Army had won at Stalingrad and the course of the war was turning, and something in the same heroic vein, with a victorious ending, was expected. What Shostakovich delivered was an hour of music in which violence and mourning far outweigh hope, and which closes in a quiet C major that is closer to exhaustion than to triumph. He is reported to have said to a friend: ‘If only you knew how much blood that C major cost me.’ The LSO’s own guide to the symphonies calls the Eighth ‘a memorial rather than a battle cry’.

Soviet officials did not know what to do with it. The response was cool, and the composer’s friend Ivan Sollertinsky predicted that music so much ‘tougher and more astringent’ than the Fifth or the Seventh was unlikely to become popular. It was criticised at a composers’ meeting in 1944, and after the party’s decree against ‘formalism’ in music in 1948 it was effectively banned. It returned to Soviet concert programmes only in 1956. Abroad it was for a time nicknamed the ‘Stalingrad Symphony’, a label that had nothing to do with the composer.

Today many musicians regard it as one of the greatest of his fifteen symphonies. It is the first of them to have five movements, and the plan is unusual: an enormous slow first movement, two short and brutal fast ones, and then a slow passacaglia and a finale, the last three played without a break. Shostakovich attached no programme to it. Many listeners hear in it a picture of the war. Others, among them the conductor Kurt Sanderling, who knew the composer, have heard something closer to home: the individual crushed by the Soviet system.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. The symphony opens much as the Fifth does, with a stern, jagged motto in the cellos and basses, answered higher in the strings. Two long melodies follow, both quiet and inward, the second floating in an uneven five-beat metre over a pulsing accompaniment. Over many minutes the music is slowly driven towards a brutal march and a climax of crushing force,

with the drums rolling in great crescendos. What comes out of the wreckage is the most memorable passage in the work: a long, lonely solo for the cor anglais.

Second movement. A heavy-footed march, sardonic and stiff, with a perky solo for the piccolo that sounds like mockery.

Third movement. A relentless toccata. The violas start a mechanical chain of even notes that never lets up and is passed around the orchestra, punctuated by shrieks from the woodwind and thuds from below. In the middle a trumpet plays a garish, circus-like galop over a rattling side drum. It builds to a shattering climax, which collapses directly into the next movement.

Fourth movement. A passacaglia: a slow theme in the bass is repeated again and again, eleven times in all after its first statement, while above it solo wind instruments trace numbed, wandering lines. This is the still centre of the symphony, a requiem without words.

Fifth movement. The harmony brightens to C major and a solo bassoon begins an easy-going, pastoral tune. Other soloists take their turn, but the calm is not secure: the music builds to a return of the first movement's climax. Then it subsides for good. In the last pages a flute and plucked strings touch in the final chord over a long held note, and the symphony fades out.

Tonight's artists

Maxim Vengerov *violin*

Maxim Vengerov plays the Beethoven concerto in the bicentenary year of the composer's death, first at the Barbican and then on the LSO's tour of the United States with Sir Antonio Pappano. The same programme is given at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles on 28 February, the orchestra's first appearance there since 2015, and travels on to Ann Arbor in March. The pairing sets the most serene of Beethoven's concertos against the darkest of Shostakovich's wartime symphonies, so the evening moves from one extreme of the orchestral repertoire to the other.

Maxim Vengerov, born in Novosibirsk in 1974, is a Soviet-born Israeli violinist and conductor. The son of an oboist and a choir director, he began the violin at five with Galina Turchaninova and went on to study with Zakhar Bron. At ten he won the junior Wieniawski competition, and in 1990, at fifteen, the Carl Flesch Competition in London, which opened the way to an international career and a long series of recordings; these have brought him a Grammy and two Gramophone Awards among other prizes. In 1997 he became the first classical musician to be named an International Goodwill Ambassador by UNICEF. He has also built a second career as a conductor, becoming the first chief conductor of the Menuhin Festival Gstaad Orchestra in 2010. Teaching occupies much of his time: he is a professor at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg and, since 2016, Polonsky Visiting Professor of Violin at the Royal College of Music in London.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

A full and readable life of Beethoven that sets the Violin Concerto among the extraordinary run of works he completed in 1806.

ACCESSIBLE **Shostakovich: A Life Remembered**

Elizabeth Wilson, Princeton University Press 2006

Shostakovich's life told through the memories of those who knew him, including first-hand accounts of the war years and of how the Eighth Symphony was received and then suppressed.

DEEPER **Beethoven: Violin Concerto**

Robin Stowell, Cambridge University Press 1998

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the concerto alone: its origins with Franz Clement, the tangled textual history, the cadenzas and two centuries of performance.

SOURCES

1. Beethoven and Shostakovich: Sir Antonio Pappano and Maxim Vengerov, 21 February 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/beethoven-and-shostakovich-21-feb-27/>
2. London Symphony Orchestra with Antonio Pappano, 28 February 2027, LA Phil. <https://www.laphil.com/events/performances/4450/2027-02-28/london-symphony-orchestra-with-antonio-pappano>
3. London Symphony Orchestra with Maxim Vengerov, violin, University Musical Society. <https://ums.org/performance/london-symphony-orchestra-with-maxim-vengerov-violin/>
4. 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/>
5. Violin Concerto (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Beethoven))
6. Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61, LA Phil. <https://www.laphil.com/works/violin-concerto-in-d-major-op-61>
7. Symphony No. 8 (Shostakovich), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_\(Shostakovich\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_(Shostakovich))
8. Shostakovich: Symphony No. 8, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/shostakovich-symphony-no-8>
9. Shostakovich: a Guide to the Symphonies, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/shostakovich-a-guide-to-the-symphonies/>
10. Maxim Vengerov, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxim_Vengerov
11. Maxim Vengerov, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/maxim-vengerov>
12. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
13. Shostakovich: A Life Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780691128863>
14. Beethoven: Violin Concerto, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521457750>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-02-21-pappano>

Version 1, 7 October 2026