

Rattle and Tamestit: Debussy, Filidei's Viola Concerto and Prokofiev's Fifth

Thursday, April 15, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Sir Simon Rattle, conductor · Antoine Tamestit, viola

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune</i>	10'
2	FILIDEI b. 1973 <i>Viola Concerto</i>	32'
3	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		87'

Claude Debussy

1862–1918

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

THE COMPOSER

Claude Debussy, born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1862 to a family of modest means, entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten and spent the next decade exasperating his professors with chords that broke every rule. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884, endured (resentfully) the obligatory residence at the Villa Medici in Rome, and then set about quietly dismantling the foundations of nineteenth-century music. With the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), and *La Mer* (1905), he created a new musical language, built on colour, atmosphere, and suggestion rather than Germanic development, that made him the single most influential composer of the early twentieth century. Critics called the style 'impressionism,' borrowing the term from painting; Debussy himself detested the label, insisting he was striving for precision, not haze. He died in Paris in March 1918, while the city was under German bombardment in the final year of the First World War.

10 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Debussy was 32 and little known outside a small Parisian circle when the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was first played, at a concert of the Société Nationale de Musique on 22 December 1894. The Swiss conductor Gustave Doret had spent hours going through the score with him beforehand, and Debussy went on making changes until almost the last minute. Critics were divided, but the audience was not: the piece was encored on the spot. It was his first real success with an orchestra, and it has never left the repertoire.

The starting point was a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, whom Debussy knew well by the early 1890s. *L'après-midi d'un faune*, published in 1876, is a monologue for a faun who wakes in the heat of the afternoon and tries to recall an encounter with nymphs, unsure whether it happened or whether he dreamed it. Debussy started work in 1892 and finished the score in the autumn of 1894. At one stage the project was announced as a 'Prélude, Interludes et Paraphrase finale', which suggests music to go with a reading or staging of the poem, but only the *Prélude* was ever written. Debussy was careful to call it a very free illustration and not a summary: a series of scenes through which the faun's desires and dreams pass before he gives in to sleep. Mallarmé, who had been wary of having his verse set to music at all, was won over, and told Debussy that the music prolonged the emotion of the poem.

In 1912 Vaslav Nijinsky danced the faun in his own choreography for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, a production that scandalised Paris. Musicians have tended to see the scandal elsewhere. Pierre Boulez dated modern music from this score, writing that the flute of the faun brought new breath to the art of music: ten minutes in which melody, harmony and orchestral colour drift free of the forward drive that had governed symphonic music for a century.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece begins with a flute alone. Its melody slides down by half-steps and climbs back again, covering the awkward interval of a tritone, so that for the first few bars there is no telling what key the music is in. A harp glissando and soft horns reply, and then there is a bar of silence. Debussy brings the flute melody back again and again, and almost every time the harmony underneath it is different: the tune stays put while the light on it changes.

The orchestra is small and chosen for softness. There are no trumpets, no trombones and no drums; in their place are three flutes, a cor anglais, four horns and two harps. Listen to how often the strings are divided or muted, and how the oboe and clarinet take over from the flute to quicken the pulse in the first part.

At the centre the music turns to a broad, warm melody in D-flat major, sung first by the woodwind and then by all the strings in unison, the one passage where the piece swells to a full-throated climax. It subsides, and the flute theme returns in longer notes, interrupted by skittish little figures in the woodwind.

In the closing bars two tiny antique cymbals sound for the first time, bright pinpricks over the strings. Muted horns and violins play the theme once more, and the piece ends on a few plucked notes.

Francesco Filidei

32 minutes

b. 1973

Viola Concerto

THE COMPOSER

Francesco Filidei, born in Pisa in 1973, is an Italian composer and organist. He studied at the Luigi Cherubini Conservatory in Florence and at the Paris Conservatoire. He performs internationally as an organist, and his own music has been played by specialist groups such as Ensemble intercontemporain. He is best known for his operas: *Giordano Bruno*, first staged in Porto in 2015, and *L'inondation*, to a libretto by Joël Pommerat, which opened at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in 2019.

ABOUT THE WORK

Francesco Filidei's *Viola Concerto* is the newest piece in this programme by eighty years, and these are its first performances in Britain. He wrote it in 2023 and 2024 for Antoine Tamestit, to whom it is dedicated, and Tamestit gave the first performance in 2024 with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Sir Simon Rattle, that orchestra's chief conductor, has taken the piece up. He calls it a masterpiece, and has said of Filidei's music: 'It's not just the sheer sensual beauty that he creates, but the sense of humour ... it is a way of writing music that draws the audience in.'

Filidei is an organist as well as a composer, trained in Florence and Paris, and he came to wide notice through his operas. The concerto is so far known mainly through those who have performed and presented it. The LSO describes it as theatrical and exploratory; the Konzerthaus Dortmund, where Tamestit also plays it this season, calls it as entertaining as it is virtuosic.

Little has yet been published about the score, so what follows relies on the soloist.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Tamestit has described the piece as being in seven movements that amount to ‘a sort of viola joke, but in the best way’: the story of a player discovering the instrument, what it can do and what sounds it has in it. He has also said that he did not fully understand it while practising alone, and that it fell into place only when he rehearsed with the orchestra and heard its colours and its sense of drama.

That suggests how to listen. The viola has long been the butt of orchestral humour, the instrument in the middle with the smallest solo repertoire, and a concerto that starts from the joke and turns it into a display of everything the instrument can do is making a point. Follow the relationship between soloist and orchestra as a piece of theatre: who leads, who imitates, and when the viola is finally allowed simply to sing. The performance lasts a little over half an hour.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 in Sontsivka, then part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine), and was admitted to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904, several years younger than most of his classmates. By his teens he was already a fearsome pianist and an enfant terrible of Russian modernism, scandalising audiences with the percussive dissonance of his early works.

In 1918, Prokofiev left Russia with official Soviet permission and spent nearly two decades in the West, first in the United States, then mostly in Paris, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, and concertos that earned him a place among the leading modernists of his generation. After several years of shuttling between Paris and Moscow, he settled permanently in the Soviet Union in 1936. The remaining years of his life were marked by official denun-

45 minutes

ciation in 1948, deteriorating health, and personal tragedy. He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. Soviet newspapers, consumed by the dictator's death, barely noted his passing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Prokofiev wrote his Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1944 at Ivanovo, north-east of Moscow, where the Union of Soviet Composers kept a country estate as a retreat for its members. He was there with Mira Mendelson, later his second wife, and found it idyllic: a large quiet room, good food and a forest in new leaf. The piano score was done in about a month. Some of the themes had been waiting in his notebooks for years, but it was fourteen years since he had finished a symphony, and this was the first he had written since moving back to the Soviet Union for good in the 1930s.

The war had turned by then. The Red Army was driving the Germans back, and the Allies had landed in Normandy in June. Prokofiev said that he thought of the symphony as a hymn to free and happy Man, to his mighty powers and his pure and noble spirit, and added that he had not chosen the theme deliberately: it had been born in him and clamoured for expression.

He conducted the first performance himself in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory on 13 January 1945. The pianist Sviatoslav Richter, who was in the audience, remembered that as Prokofiev raised his baton an artillery salute began to thunder outside, and that he stood waiting with his arms up until the guns fell silent. The salvos, it is said, were announcing a Red Army advance. The symphony was an immediate success at home and, within months, abroad, and it marked the height of his standing in the Soviet Union during his lifetime.

How far the piece is the straightforward celebration its composer described has been argued over ever since. Its breadth and confidence are real, but so are the grinding dissonances at its climaxes and the manic edge of its fast music. Listeners can decide for themselves.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. Unusually, the symphony opens with a slow movement, or at least a broad one. Flute and bassoon, an octave apart, play a calm rising melody, and the rest of the movement grows from it and from a second, more yearning tune for flute and oboe. Prokofiev thickens the sound by stages. In the coda the opening theme returns with the whole orchestra, tam-tam, bass drum and piano behind it, in one of the loudest and heaviest passages he ever wrote.

Second movement. The scherzo comes second. Over a ticking accompaniment in the violins the clarinet plays a jaunty, slightly sour tune that is passed around the orchestra. The middle section is a swaying dance framed by a woodwind call. When the opening returns it does so slowly and menacingly, low in the brass, and then accelerates until it is racing.

Third movement. The slow movement is the emotional centre. A long melody in the woodwind rises over a rocking figure in the strings, and the violins take it into their highest register. The middle of the movement darkens into something like a funeral march, with harsh trills and a climax of real violence, before the first melody comes back and the music ebbs away.

Fourth movement. A quiet introduction looks back to the opening of the symphony, with the cellos, divided into parts, recalling its first theme. Then the violas set up a chugging rhythm and the clarinet launches the main tune, cheeky and athletic. The mood is festive for most of the way. In the last minute the celebration becomes mechanical and shrill; suddenly the full orchestra drops out, leaving a handful of solo strings scrubbing away with percussion and piano, and one last crescendo slams the door.

Tonight's artists

Antoine Tamestit *viola*

Antoine Tamestit is the concerto's dedicatee and gave its first performance in 2024; this Barbican concert is its UK premiere. He is playing it throughout the 2026/27 season, with Sir Simon Rattle and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra among others. Rattle, the LSO and Tamestit repeat the whole programme at the Wiener Konzerthaus on 23 April, the night before they play Mahler's Third there. The evening before the Barbican concert, Rattle also conducts and introduces the Prokofiev on its own in the LSO's hour-long Half Six Fix series.

Antoine Tamestit, born in Paris in 1979, is one of the world's foremost violists, a soloist who has done much to raise the profile of his instrument. Trained at the Paris Conservatoire and at Yale, and a pupil of the great violist Tabea Zimmermann, he won major prizes including first place at the ARD and William Primrose competitions and was a BBC New Generation Artist. He is celebrated for his flawless technique and, above all, for the exceptional warmth and richness of his tone. A committed champion of new music, he has premiered concertos written for him, including Jörg Widmann's. He plays the 'Mahler' Stradivarius of 1672, the very first viola made by Antonio Stradivari, and one of the most storied instruments in the world.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE Debussy: A Painter in Sound

Stephen Walsh, Vintage 2019

Walsh writes about Debussy's music as vividly as about his life, and his account of the Faune explains why ten quiet minutes changed what composers thought an orchestra was for.

ACCESSIBLE Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

The standard English-language life of Prokofiev, readable and fair, with a good account of the Ivanovo summer and the wartime premiere of the Fifth.

DEEPER The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years

Simon Morrison, Oxford University Press 2010

Morrison used the Moscow archives to reconstruct Prokofiev's Soviet years in detail; essential for the question of what the Fifth Symphony's optimism meant in 1945 and what followed in 1948.

SOURCES

1. Debussy, Filidei and Prokofiev: Sir Simon Rattle and Antoine Tamestit, 15 April 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/debussy-filidei-and-prokofiev-15-apr-27/>
2. London Symphony Orchestra / Tamestit / Rattle, 23 April 2027, Wiener Konzerthaus. <https://konzerthaus.at/en/program-and-tickets/london-symphony-orchestra-tamestit-rattle/63728>
3. Half Six Fix: Prokofiev 5, 14 April 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/half-six-fix-prokofiev-5-14-apr-27/>
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. Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pr%C3%A9lude_%C3%A0_l%27apr%C3%A8s-midi_d%27un_faune
6. Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/prelude-to-the-afternoon-of-a-faun>
7. London Symphony Orchestra/Sir Simon Rattle: Debussy, Filidei and Prokofiev, Barbican. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/node/222198>
8. Antoine Tamestit remains undeterred in his mission for the viola, Chicago Symphony Orchestra. <https://cso.org/experience/article/25128/antoine-tamestit-remains-undeterred-in-his-mi>
9. Antoine Tamestit (biography), Dresdner Philharmonie. <https://dresdnerphilharmonie.de/en/dresdner-philharmonie/biographies/antoine-tamestit/>
10. Konzert: Antoine Tamestit spielt Filidei Violakonzert, Stadt Dortmund. https://www.dortmund.de/dortmund-erleben/veranstaltungskalender/termin_135830.html
11. Antoine Tamestit, Intermusica. <https://intermusica.com/artist/Antoine-Tamestit>
12. Francesco Filidei, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesco_Filidei
13. Francesco Filidei, Ricordi. <https://www.ricordi.com/en-US/Composers/F/Filidei-Francesco.aspx>
14. Symphony No. 5 (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Prokofiev))
15. Music and war: a guide to Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5, Houston Symphony. <https://houston-symphony.org/music-war-guide-prokofievs-symphony-no-5/>
16. Debussy: A Painter in Sound, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780525432630>
17. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
18. The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199753482>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-04-15-rattle>

Version 1, 7 October 2026