

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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

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.

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

b. 1973

Viola Concerto

32 minutes

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.'

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

45 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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Version 1, 7 October 2026