

Noseda and Szeps-Znaider: Sibelius's Violin Concerto and Prokofiev from the Opera House

Thursday, May 13, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Gianandrea Noseda, conductor · Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Summer Night, Suite from 'Betrothal in a Monastery', Op. 123</i>	19'
2	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47</i>	34'
3	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Four Portraits and Dénouement from 'The Gambler', Op. 49</i>	25'
TOTAL MUSIC		78'

Sergei Prokofiev

19 minutes

1891–1953

Summer Night, Suite from 'Betrothal in a Monastery', Op. 123

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 denunciation 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

Betrothal in a Monastery is the comic opera Prokofiev began in 1940, and its source was an eighteenth-century English comedy: Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Duenna*, a farce of disguises, elopements and a miserly father outwitted by his daughter and her governess, set in Seville. Prokofiev wrote the Russian libretto himself with Mira Mendelson, later his second wife. The opera went into rehearsal, the war stopped it, and it did not reach the stage until 3 November 1946, at the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad.

Ten years after starting the opera, in 1950, Prokofiev went back to it and drew out a five-movement orchestral suite which he called *Summer Night*, Op. 123. The suite belongs to the small group of orchestral works from the last years of his life. What he lifted out of the opera was its warm, nocturnal side, the serenades and love music, framed by two livelier pieces, with the plain melodic style he had been cultivating since his return to the Soviet Union. It lasts about twenty minutes and is rarely played, which makes its appearance here, as the first half of a pairing with his very different early opera *The Gambler*, a real attraction.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Introduction is the opera's short overture: bustling, festive, led by a trumpet tune with the wide, slightly crooked leaps that mark a melody as Prokofiev's. The Serenade is the music of the lovers Antonio and Louisa, slow and warm, with the tenor's line from the opera passing to a solo cello. The Minuet belongs to Louisa's father, Don Jerome, and is a courtly dance that keeps tripping over its own feet, affectionate satire of a man who thinks himself dignified.

'Dreams', subtitled Nocturne, is the heart of the suite: the love theme of the opera's second couple, Clara and Ferdinand, with a solo flute floating over strings divided into many parts. The closing Dance comes from the end of the opera. It starts quietly, on a rhythm that repeats and repeats, and grows to a bright, full climax.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

THE COMPOSER

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) is Finland's greatest composer and one of the supreme symphonists of the twentieth century. His music, above all the seven symphonies and tone poems such as *Finlandia* and *Tapiola*, became inseparable from Finland's emerging national identity during its struggle against Russian domination, and he was revered as a national hero in his own lifetime. His style evolved from late-Romantic richness toward an increasingly concentrated, organic and original conception of symphonic form, in which themes seem to grow and fuse like living things, shot through with the cold light and vast spaces of the Nordic landscape. Famously, after completing the Seventh Symphony, the incidental music to *The Tempest* and the tone poem *Tapiola* in the mid-1920s, he fell almost completely silent for the last thirty years of his life: the 'silence of Järvenpää'.

ABOUT THE WORK

Sibelius wanted to be a violinist before he wanted to be a composer. He practised for years with a virtuoso career in mind, and gave the ambition up as a young man. His only concerto, written in 1903 and 1904, is for the instrument he had failed to master, and it asks the soloist for everything he could once imagine and not play.

Its early history was awkward. Sibelius had promised the piece to the German virtuoso Willy Burmester, who meant to introduce it in Berlin. Short of money, the composer instead arranged a premiere in Helsinki, on 8 February 1904, conducted it himself, and gave the solo part to Victor Nováček, a local teacher who had little time to learn a score finished at the last moment. It did not go well. Sibelius withdrew the concerto and revised it, cutting and tightening, and the version played today was first heard in Berlin on 19 October 1905 with Richard Strauss conducting and Karel Halíř, the orchestra's leader, as soloist. Burmester, passed over a second time, never played it. The dedication went to the Hungarian prodigy Franz von Vecsey, then twelve years old.

The revision produced something unusual among Romantic violin concertos: a display piece in which the orchestra is given real symphonic material, and in which the virtuoso writing grows out of the themes instead of decorating them.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is one of the most recognisable in the repertoire. Muted violins set up a quiet shimmer in D minor and the soloist enters over it at once, with a long, searching melody that seems to begin in the middle of a thought. There is no orchestral introduction and no waiting.

In the first movement, listen for where the cadenza falls. Normally it comes near the end, as a display before the close. Here it stands in the middle and does the work of the development section, so the soloist alone carries the argument forward. The orchestra's own themes, dark and heavy in the lower strings and brass, are as important as the violin's.

The slow movement opens with a short woodwind introduction before the violin enters low in its register with a broad, grave melody; the temperature rises to a passionate climax and falls away again. The finale is a dance over a pounding rhythm in the timpani and low strings, with the soloist leaping across the instrument in double stops, harmonics and rapid scales. The critic Donald Tovey's phrase for it, 'a polonaise for polar bears', has stuck to it, a little unfairly: it is as exhilarating as anything Sibelius wrote.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

25 minutes

Four Portraits and Dénouement from 'The Gambler', Op. 49

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.

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ABOUT THE WORK

The Gambler is the opera of Prokofiev's mid-twenties, written in 1915 and 1916 from Dostoevsky's short novel of 1866. The story is set in a German spa town the novelist calls Roulettenburg. A Russian General, deep in debt, waits for news that his rich aunt has died; the aunt arrives in person, very much alive, and loses a fortune at the tables; Alexei, a penniless tutor in the General's household, loves the General's ward Polina and stakes everything on roulette to win her. Prokofiev set Dostoevsky's prose almost as speech, fast and without arias. A production planned for the Mariinsky Theatre in Petrograd fell victim to the revolution of 1917, and the opera was not staged until the end of the 1920s, in Brussels, in a revised version sung in French.

In 1931 he made an orchestral work from it, and gave it its own opus number, 49. The difficulty was that an opera without set pieces offers nothing to extract. By his own account he took a vocal score, tore out the pages belonging to each of the four main characters, sorted them into piles and recomposed each pile as a portrait. To the four he added a Dénouement drawn from the opera's final act. The result is less a suite of highlights than a set of character studies, and it carries the nervous, sardonic energy of the young Prokofiev into the concert hall at full strength.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Alexei comes first: restless, impulsive music that never sits still, the portrait of a man who thinks faster than he judges. The Grandmother (Babulenska) begins as a formidable old lady who knows her own mind, then a solo violin leads into something more touching, as if the composer liked her too much to leave her as a caricature. The General is all bluster and empty ceremony.

Polina has the longest movement and the most ambiguous. It starts quietly and tenderly, grows stronger and more troubled, and ends subdued. The Dénouement returns to the gaming tables and what follows them. It is the most dramatic music of the five, driven and feverish, with a sharp-edged, dissonant close that offers no consolation. Heard after the moonlit Summer Night suite in the first half, it shows how far apart the two ends of Prokofiev's operatic career were.

Tonight's artists

Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider *violin*

Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider is a regular guest of the LSO and has played the Sibelius concerto throughout his career. Around it Gianandrea Noseda, the orchestra's Principal Guest Conductor, continues the Prokofiev thread of his season: in December he conducted the suites from *The Love for Three Oranges* and *Chout*, and here he turns to two operas that are rarely staged in Britain. This is a single Barbican concert on 13 May 2027; the two Prokofiev suites are also played without the concerto in a Half Six Fix concert the evening before.

Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider, born in Copenhagen in 1975 to Polish-Jewish parents, is a Danish violinist and conductor of the front rank. He announced himself by winning the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels in 1997, following earlier successes at the Carl Nielsen and Sibelius competitions, and went on to a major international career as a soloist, admired for the richness, power and aristocratic breadth of his tone. In recent years he has built an equally significant career on the podium, serving as music director of the Orchestre National de Lyon and as principal guest conductor of the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, a double life as soloist and conductor that gives his music-making an unusually complete musical perspective. He plays a great Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin once owned by Fritz Kreisler.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

Robinson is good on both operas behind this programme: the young Prokofiev racing to finish *The Gambler* before the revolution overtook it, and the middle-aged one escaping into *Sheridan* in 1940.

ACCESSIBLE **Sibelius**

Andrew Barnett, Yale University Press 2010

A clear single-volume life that follows Sibelius work by work, including the unhappy first version of the Violin Concerto and the revision that saved it.

DEEPER **Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1915-1923: Behind the Mask**

Sergey Prokofiev, Cornell University Press 2008

Prokofiev's own diaries for exactly the years in which he composed *The Gambler*, with the Mariinsky rehearsals and their collapse recorded as they happened.

SOURCES

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2. Half Six Fix: Prokofiev, 12 May 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/half-six-fix-prokofiev-12-may-27/>
3. 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/>
4. Betrothal in a Monastery, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betrothal_in_a_Monastery
5. Summer Night, suite from Betrothal in a Monastery, Wise Music Classical. <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/31732/Summer-Night-suite-from-Betrothal-in-a-Monastery--Sergei-Prokofiev/>
6. Prokofiev's Summer Night Suite: Music from Betrothal in a Monastery, The Listeners' Club. <https://thelistenersclub.com/2022/06/15/prokofievs-summer-night-suite-music-from-betrothal-in-a-monastery/>
7. Violin Concerto (Sibelius), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Sibelius\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Sibelius))
8. Violin concerto, Jean Sibelius (Finnish Club of Helsinki). https://www.sibelius.klubi.fi/english/musiikki/ork_viulukonsertto.htm
9. Seven things you didn't know about Sibelius' Violin Concerto, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/seven-things-you-didnt-know-about-sibelius-violin-concerto/>
10. The Gambler (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gambler_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gambler_(Prokofiev))
11. Prokofiev: Four Portraits and Dénouement from The Gambler (review of BIS-2301), MusicWeb International. https://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2020/Jun/Prokofiev_gambler_BIS2301.htm
12. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
13. Sibelius, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300163971>
14. Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1915-1923: Behind the Mask, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780801447020>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-05-13-nosed>

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