

Iván Fischer's Two Worlds: Bernstein, the Beatles and Bohemia

Wednesday, March 11, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Iván Fischer, conductor · Guy Braunstein, violin · Mirella Hagen, soprano ·
Olivia Vermeulen, mezzo-soprano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BERNSTEIN 1918–1990 <i>Three Dance Episodes from 'On the Town'</i>	11'
2	BEATLES <i>Abbey Road Concerto (arr. Guy Braunstein)</i>	35'
3	DVORAK 1841–1904 <i>Selections from Moravian Duets (orch. Tibor Gátay)</i>	16'
4	SMETANA 1824–1884 <i>Vltava and other episodes from 'Má vlast'</i>	25'
TOTAL MUSIC		87'

Leonard Bernstein

1918–1990

Three Dance Episodes from 'On the Town'

THE COMPOSER

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990) was the most charismatic American musician of the twentieth century, a phenomenon who refused to choose between his many gifts. He was a great conductor (music director of the New York Philharmonic, and a legendary Mahlerian), a brilliant pianist, a beloved music educator whose televised Young People's Concerts taught a generation, and a composer who moved effortlessly between the concert hall and Broadway. His concert works include three symphonies, the Chichester Psalms and the theatre-piece Mass; on Broadway he created On the Town, Wonderful Town, Candide and, above all, West Side Story. What unites them is an irrepressible energy, a love of jazz and Latin rhythm, a gift for soaring melody, and a very American blend of sophistication and exuberance. Few musicians have ever communicated such sheer joy in music-making.

11 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

On the Town was Leonard Bernstein's first Broadway musical, a smash hit of 1944 about three sailors on a single day's shore leave in wartime New York, racing around the city in search of fun and romance. It grew out of his ballet Fancy Free (choreographed by Jerome Robbins), and dance was central to it from the start. Bernstein later extracted three of its dance numbers as a concert suite, the Three Dance Episodes, which was first heard in concert in 1946.

The music is pure Bernstein, and pure New York: brash, jazzy, syncopated, tender by turns, bursting with the energy of the wartime city. Together the three episodes make an irresistible curtain-raiser, a portrait of a young composer, not yet thirty, already fizzing with the theatrical flair and rhythmic punch that would soon produce West Side Story. It is a fitting opener for an evening conducted by Iván Fischer, who shares Bernstein's belief that the concert hall should be a place of joy and surprise.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The three episodes are arranged fast–slow–fast for maximum contrast. The first, 'The Great Lover,' is a brassy, swaggering dance, full of jazzy syncopation and big-band swagger. The second, 'Lonely Town: Pas de Deux,' is the emotional heart: a tender, bluesy slow dance, an instrumental version of the show's wistful song 'Lonely Town,' with aching solo woodwind lines.

The finale, 'Times Square: 1944,' is the showstopper: a riot of urban energy built around the show's most famous tune, 'New York, New York' ("a helluva town"). Listen for the jazzy percussion, the wailing brass, the sense of a great city at full tilt, and for Bernstein's irresistible rhythmic drive, which never lets up until the exuberant final bars.

The Beatles

35 minutes

Abbey Road Concerto (arr. Guy Braunstein)

THE COMPOSER

The Beatles (John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr) were the most influential popular musicians of the twentieth century. Formed in Liverpool around 1960, they reshaped popular music in barely a decade together, evolving from exuberant beat-pop to the studio-crafted sophistication of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and Abbey Road. Their final recorded album, Abbey Road (1969), is among their most admired, famous for the seamless medley of songs on its second side and for classics including 'Come Together,' 'Something' and 'Here Comes the Sun.' The

melodic richness, harmonic ingenuity and sheer craftsmanship of the Beatles' songs have made them a magnet for classical arrangers, including the violinist Guy Braunstein, whose Abbey Road Concerto reimagines their music for violin and orchestra.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Abbey Road Concerto is a recent hybrid: a violin concerto built from the songs of the Beatles' celebrated 1969 album Abbey Road, created by the violinist Guy Braunstein, for many years concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic. Familiar melodies from the album are interwoven with Braunstein's own music, which stitches the songs into the larger shape of a concerto, and the orchestration is by the composer and arranger Ljova (Lev Zhurbin).

The result is neither a medley nor a straight transcription but a concerto that happens to be woven from beloved tunes, heard through the lens of the classical concert tradition. It is a piece that lives in two worlds at once, which is exactly the spirit of tonight's programme: before the interval, music by two American-Jewish artists, Bernstein and Braunstein; after it, the Bohemian world of Dvořák and Smetana. Braunstein himself takes the solo part.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Half the fun is recognising the songs, so listen for famous melodies from Abbey Road surfacing in the solo violin and the orchestra, with the violin taking the place of the singer and finding the vocal line in each song.

But listen, too, for the connective tissue, Braunstein's own music, which binds the songs into a concerto shape rather than a jukebox sequence. Notice how the Beatles' material is developed and transformed, and how the solo writing balances tunefulness with real virtuosity. This is crossover at its most affectionate: concert craftsmanship in the service of some of the best-loved songs ever written.

Antonin Dvorak

1841–1904

Selections from Moravian Duets (orch. Tibor Gátay)

THE COMPOSER

Antonin Dvorak was born on September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, a small village north of Prague in Bohemia. The eldest of fourteen children, he was expected to follow his father into the butcher's trade, but his unmistakable mu-

16 minutes

sical talent led him on a different path. After studying at the Prague Organ School, Dvorak spent years playing viola in theatre orchestras while composing in his spare time, often in conditions of considerable hardship.

His breakthrough came when Johannes Brahms, serving on a jury for a composition prize, recognized Dvorak's exceptional gifts and recommended him to his own publisher, Simrock. The resulting Slavonic Dances (1878) were an immediate international success. Following in the footsteps of Bedrich Smetana, Dvorak went on to achieve worldwide fame as a Czech composer. His time as director of the National Conservatory in New York (1892-1895) produced some of his most beloved works, including the "New World" Symphony and the Cello Concerto.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Moravian Duets are among the works that changed Dvořák's life. In the mid-1870s he was a struggling, little-known Prague musician, earning extra money as a piano teacher to the family of a wholesale merchant, Jan Neff. It was Neff who encouraged him to arrange Moravian and Slavic folk songs for the family to sing, and out of this grew a cycle of duets for two voices and piano, settings of Moravian folk poetry composed between 1875 and 1881. Rather than simply harmonising existing tunes, Dvořák composed his own fresh, characterful music to the folk texts.

Their importance was enormous: when Dvořák submitted them for an Austrian state stipend, the adjudicating panel included Johannes Brahms, who was so taken with the duets that he recommended them to his own powerful publisher, Simrock. Simrock published them, then commissioned the Slavonic Dances, and Dvořák's international career was launched. Tonight a selection is heard in an orchestrated version (by Tibor Gátay) and sung by two voices, soprano and mezzo-soprano, bringing out the warmth, charm and folk freshness that first enchanted Brahms.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

These are miniatures, short and songful settings of folk verses about love, nature and village life, so listen for the intertwining of the two voices, soprano and mezzo, weaving together in close harmony, by turns playful, tender and melancholy. Even orchestrated, the music keeps the intimacy of its origins as domestic music-making.

Listen for the unmistakable Dvořákian fingerprints that so charmed Brahms: the natural, song-like melodies with their folk lilt, the gently swaying dance rhythms, and the bittersweet shifts between major and minor that give even the happiest

songs a touch of wistfulness. Each duet is a little scene; let the voices and the orchestral colours paint them, and enjoy this glimpse of the unaffected, melodious art with which the young Dvořák first won the wider world.

Bedřich Smetana

1824–1884

25 minutes

Vltava and other episodes from 'Má vlast'

THE COMPOSER

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884) is regarded as the father of Czech national music, the first great composer to give the Czech lands a musical voice of their own. Working at a time of rising Czech national consciousness under Austrian rule, he sought to create a distinctly Czech art music, drawing on the rhythms, dances and legends of his homeland. His comic opera *The Bartered Bride* became a national institution, and his cycle of symphonic poems *Má vlast* ('My Homeland') a patriotic touchstone. Like Beethoven, Smetana suffered the cruellest fate for a musician: he went completely deaf in 1874, and composed much of his greatest music, including the most famous parts of *Má vlast*, hearing it only in his imagination. His final years were darkened by deafness and mental illness, but he had already secured his place as the founding figure of Czech music, a direct inspiration to Dvořák and those who followed.

ABOUT THE WORK

Má vlast ('My Homeland') is Smetana's supreme patriotic statement: a cycle of six symphonic poems, composed between 1874 and 1879, celebrating the landscapes, legends and history of Bohemia. Astonishingly, Smetana wrote almost all of the cycle after he had gone deaf in 1874 (only the opening *Vyšehrad* was largely finished before), hearing the music only in his inner ear. Tonight's programme presents episodes from the cycle and ends with its most beloved movement, *Vltava*.

Vltava (known in German and English as 'The Moldau') traces the course of Bohemia's great river, from two small mountain springs, through forests and meadows where a peasant wedding is in progress, past water-nymphs dancing in the moonlight, through the wild St John's Rapids, and finally as a broad, majestic stream flowing past the ancient castle of *Vyšehrad* and through Prague. Its sweeping main melody, one of the most famous tunes in all music, has become an unofficial Czech anthem. The other episodes of *Má vlast* extend the portrait: the legendary fortress of *Vyšehrad*, the warrior-maiden *Šárka*, the sunlit countryside of Bohemia's woods and fields. Conduc-

ted by a great Central-European musician steeped in this tradition, it makes a glowing, patriotic close to an evening of music rooted in place and people.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Vltava is a musical journey down a river, so follow the water. Listen at the start for two intertwining flute and clarinet lines, the two little springs that form the river's source, which gradually swell as more instruments join and the stream grows. Then the great river theme arrives: a broad, flowing, slightly melancholy melody in the strings that recurs throughout, carrying us downstream.

Along the way, listen for the vivid scenes Smetana paints: hunting horns in the forest; a rustic peasant wedding (a village polka); a magical, shimmering night scene with moonlit water-nymphs (hushed strings, harp and high woodwind); and the churning turbulence of the St John's Rapids, where the orchestra roars and crashes. Finally the river broadens into a majestic major-key statement of the main theme as it flows through Prague, with a grand quotation of the noble 'Vyšehrad' castle motif before it sweeps away into the distance. In the further episodes from *Má vlast*, listen for the same vivid storytelling, Smetana conjuring his beloved homeland entirely from memory and imagination.

Tonight's artists

Guy Braunstein *violin*

The Abbey Road Concerto is doubly Guy Braunstein's: he created it, and he plays it. Few performers could be better suited: a violinist of the highest pedigree (a former Berlin Philharmonic concertmaster) who is also the composer who heard a violin concerto hidden inside the Beatles' album and brought it into being. Hearing him play his own labour of love, making the violin 'sing' these beloved songs, is the heart of the evening's first half.

Guy Braunstein, born in Tel Aviv in 1971, is a violinist, conductor and composer of wide-ranging gifts. Trained in Israel and the United States (his teachers included Glenn Dicterow and Pinchas Zukerman), he was appointed concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic in 2000, remarkably elected unanimously by the players although he had never played in an orchestra before. He held the position until 2013, leaving to concentrate on his solo, chamber and conducting careers. A musician of restless creativity, he is also increasingly active as an arranger and composer, most strikingly in his Abbey Road Concerto, his own violin-concerto reimagining of the Beatles' album, which he performs here.

Mirella Hagen *soprano*

Dvořák's Moravian Duets are intimate two-voice songs, and they depend on a true partnership of singers blending in close harmony. Soprano Mirella Hagen brings a bright, flexible voice to the upper line, pairing with the mezzo Olivia Vermeulen to capture the folk freshness and tender interplay that first charmed Brahms in these little gems.

Mirella Hagen is a soprano who studied in Stuttgart and began her career in the opera studio of the Staatsoper Stuttgart. She sang in the ensembles of Theater Regensburg, Opera Vlaanderen, Oper Dortmund and the Staatstheater Braunschweig before pursuing a wide-ranging freelance career, and at the Bayreuth Festival she sang Woglinde and the Woodbird in Frank Castorf's Ring under Kirill Petrenko. Since 2024 she has been professor of voice at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln. Her bright, agile soprano is well suited to the folk-inflected charm of Dvořák's Moravian Duets.

Olivia Vermeulen *mezzo-soprano*

Mezzo-soprano Olivia Vermeulen, a singer who has worked with Iván Fischer before, supplies the lower voice in Dvořák's Moravian Duets, her warm, expressive tone intertwining with Mirella Hagen's soprano. Together the two voices bring out the intimacy and folk-flavoured charm of these settings, music written for shared, domestic music-making and here lifted onto the concert stage.

Olivia Vermeulen is a Dutch mezzo-soprano who has established herself as a versatile and acclaimed soloist on the international stage. She studied in Detmold and in Berlin (with Julie Kaufmann), and made her Paris Opera debut in 2019 in Scarlatti's *Il primo omicidio* under René Jacobs. Equally at home in Baroque opera, Mozart, song and contemporary music, she has sung Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* with Iván Fischer and the Budapest Festival Orchestra and appeared at major European houses and festivals; her recital album 'Dirty Minds' won both the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik and the Edison Klassiek Prize. Her warm, characterful mezzo is ideally suited to the folk-song world of Dvořák's duets.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Leonard Bernstein**

Humphrey Burton, Faber & Faber 2018

A full life of Bernstein by a friend and collaborator, including his wartime breakthrough with *On the Town*.

ACCESSIBLE **Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties**

Ian MacDonald, Chicago Review Press 2007

A song-by-song guide to every Beatles recording, including the Abbey Road songs arranged for this programme.

DEEPER **Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War**

Carol J. Oja, Oxford University Press 2016

A scholarly study of *On the Town* and its creation in wartime New York, the show behind the Three Dance Episodes.

SOURCES

1. Iván Fischer leads Dvořák, Smetana and Bernstein and Guy Braunstein performs The Beatles, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwwork.nl/en/calendar/ivan-fischer-leads-dvorak-smetana-and-bernstein-2026-03-11/>
2. *On the Town* (musical), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Town_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Town_(musical))
3. List of compositions by Leonard Bernstein, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Leonard_Bernstein
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7. Moravian Duets, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moravian_Duets
8. Má vlast, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A1_vlast
9. Bedřich Smetana, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bed%C5%99ich_Smetana
10. Guy Braunstein, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy_Braunstein
11. Mirella Hagen: Vita, Mirella Hagen. <https://www.mirella-hagen.com/vita/>
12. Biography, Olivia Vermeulen. <https://oliviavermeulen.com/biography>
13. Leonard Bernstein, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571337934>
14. Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781556527333>
15. Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780190467586>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-03-11-fischer>

Version 3, 30 September 2026