

Dawidiuk Conducts Debussy, Poulenc and Tchaikovsky's Fourth

Friday, April 10, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Aurel Dawidiuk, conductor · Leo van Doeselaar, organ

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune</i>	10'
2	POULENC 1899–1963 <i>Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G minor, FP 93</i>	23'
3	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36</i>	44'
TOTAL MUSIC		77'

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.

ABOUT THE WORK

It is hard to overstate the importance of this short, dreamy orchestral piece. Composed in 1894 and inspired by a symbolist poem by Stéphane Mallarmé (in which a faun, drowsing in the afternoon heat,

10 minutes

recalls or imagines his encounters with nymphs), Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is often called the work that opened the door to modern music. The conductor Pierre Boulez claimed that with 'the flute of the faun,' music drew 'new breath.' What was so new was its freedom: instead of building from clear themes developed by Classical rules, Debussy lets the music drift and shimmer, following sensation and atmosphere rather than argument, with colour, harmony and timbre becoming ends in themselves. This is the founding masterpiece of musical 'Impressionism.'

Mallarmé heard the piece and was won over, writing to Debussy that his music 'goes much further, really, into nostalgia and into light, with finesse, with sensuality, with richness.' The premiere took place in Paris on 22 December 1894, conducted by Gustave Doret. At barely ten minutes, it remains one of the most ravishing and influential pieces in the entire repertoire, and a perfect, sensuous opening to a French-tinged programme.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, above all, to the very opening: a solo flute, alone and unaccompanied, winding sinuously downward and back, one of the most famous and evocative beginnings in all music, the languid voice of the faun himself. From this single thread the whole piece unfolds.

Notice how Debussy avoids strong beats and clear cadences, so the music seems to float free of time, drifting through shifting harmonies and exquisite orchestral colours: the warmth of horns, the glint of harps, the antique shiver of small cymbals near the close. Rather than developing themes in the German manner, he keeps returning to the flute's melody, each time recoloured and transformed, as if the faun's reverie circles back on itself. Let the music wash over you: this is not a story to follow but an atmosphere to inhabit: heat, languor, desire and dream, captured in sound.

Francis Poulenc

1899–1963

Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G minor, FP 93

THE COMPOSER

Francis Poulenc was born in Paris in 1899 into a wealthy family of pharmaceutical manufacturers (the firm later became Rhône-Poulenc). Largely self-taught as a composer (his formal training was as a pianist, with the great Catalan virtuoso Ricardo Viñes), he shot to fame in his early twenties as a

23 minutes

member of Les Six, the loose group of young French composers around Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau who rejected both German Romanticism and Debussyan vagueness in favour of wit, clarity, and the music of the streets. The critic Claude Rostand famously described him as ‘half monk, half rascal’, and the phrase has stuck because it is true: Poulenc’s music swings between cabaret-bright irreverence and a depth of religious feeling almost unmatched in twentieth-century music. The turning point came in 1936, when the death of a fellow composer in a car accident prompted a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Black Virgin at Rocamadour and a return to the Catholic faith of his childhood. From then on the two Poulencs coexisted: the boulevardier of the ballets and songs, and the believer of the Stabat Mater, the Gloria, and the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*.

ABOUT THE WORK

The critic Claude Rostand famously described Francis Poulenc as half monk, half rascal: a composer who could write music of deep religious feeling and impish, café-society wit, often within the same piece. His Organ Concerto, composed between 1934 and 1938, is the perfect embodiment of that double nature. It was commissioned by the great Parisian patron Princess Edmond de Polignac, originally as a modest piece with an easy organ part that the Princess could probably play herself; Poulenc, however, soon abandoned the modest idea for something far grander and more dramatic. Scored for the unusual combination of solo organ, string orchestra and timpani (no other winds or brass), it is cast as a single continuous movement that runs through several sharply contrasting sections.

Poulenc composed it not long after a profound reawakening of his Catholic faith, and the concerto is shadowed by that seriousness. It opens with thunderous organ chords that deliberately echo the grandeur of Bach’s organ fantasias, plunging us into a world of almost Gothic solemnity, and then, characteristically, it veers off into music that is by turns lyrical, playful, jazzy and tender, before the darkness returns. The private premiere took place in the Princess’s salon on 16 December 1938, with Maurice Duruflé at the organ and Nadia Boulanger conducting; the first public performance followed at the Salle Gaveau in Paris in June 1939. It is one of the great works for organ and orchestra, and a thrilling vehicle for a virtuoso soloist.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen to the opening: a series of huge, dramatic organ chords, grave and grand, consciously recalling Bach’s great G-minor organ fantasia, an arresting, almost theatrical start that sets a tone of dark solemnity. Then follow how Poulenc keeps chan-

ging the mood, often abruptly: the music swings between this Gothic grandeur and lighter, more lyrical or even jaunty episodes, the 'monk' and the 'rascal' alternating without warning.

Keep your ear on the interplay of the three forces: the organ by turns commanding and delicate, the strings warm and singing, and the timpani adding dramatic punctuation and drive. There are passages of real tenderness and others of nervous energy and bustle, even a touch of the dance hall. The single-movement structure means there is no break to relax in: the music carries you continuously through its contrasts to the return of the solemn opening material and a powerful close. It is a piece that shows off both the colossal range of the organ and the many faces of Poulenc.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

44 minutes

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia's first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphonies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony is one of the most nakedly emotional of all symphonies, written at the most turbulent period of his life. In 1877 he made a disastrous, impulsive marriage that collapsed within weeks and brought him to the brink of breakdown; at the same time he entered into one of the strangest and most fruitful relationships in musical history, with the wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck, who became his patroness and confidante through years of intimate correspondence, on the express condition that they never meet. The Fourth

Symphony is dedicated to her (discreetly, ‘to my best friend’), and in a famous letter he laid out for her a detailed emotional ‘programme’ of the work.

At its heart, he told her, is Fate: ‘that fateful force which prevents the impulse towards happiness from reaching its goal,’ hanging over us ‘like the Sword of Damocles.’ This is the menacing brass fanfare that opens the symphony and returns to shatter its most hopeful moments. Around it Tchaikovsky builds a journey from anxiety and yearning, through melancholy reminiscence and fragile escapism, to a finale that seeks consolation in the simple joys of the common people, though even there Fate intrudes one last time. Premiered in Moscow in February 1878 under Nikolai Rubinstein, it was the first of his three great late symphonies, and it remains a tremendous emotional rollercoaster, superbly orchestrated and overflowing with unforgettable melody.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony opens with the ‘Fate’ motto: a blaring, ominous fanfare for horns and bassoons. Fix it in your mind: it is the seed of the whole work, and it will return at crucial moments to crush the music’s hopes. The first movement that follows is anxious and waltz-haunted, surging between despair and fleeting tenderness, and it is interrupted, climactically, by the return of the Fate fanfare.

The second movement (Andantino) is a melancholy, songful lament, introduced by a plaintive solo oboe, music of wistful loneliness and reminiscence. The third movement is the symphony’s famous trick: a scherzo played almost entirely in *pizzicato*, the strings plucking throughout, conjuring a flickering, fantastical world (with a contrasting wind-band episode in the middle, like a passing military parade). Then the finale erupts: a blazing, festive movement built around a Russian folk song (‘In the field stood a birch tree’), depicting the rough joys of a village holiday. Listen for how, near the end, the dreaded Fate fanfare bursts in once more, but this time the music refuses to be cowed, sweeping it aside and driving to a hard-won, exhilarating conclusion.

Tonight's artists

Leo van Doeselaar *organ*

Poulenc's Organ Concerto demands a soloist who can command both the thunderous, Bach-like grandeur of the great instrument and the quicksilver shifts of mood (solemn one moment, playful the next) that make the piece so characteristic. Leo van Doeselaar, titular organist of the Concertgebouw and a celebrated Bach player, brings exactly the authority and stylistic range the concerto needs, on the hall's magnificent organ.

Leo van Doeselaar, born in Goes in 1954, is one of the Netherlands' most distinguished organists. He studied at the Amsterdam Sweelinck Conservatory, winning the Prix d'Excellence, and has built an international career both as a recitalist on the great historic organs of Europe and as an orchestral soloist. He has worked with many of the leading Baroque ensembles and conductors, is titular organist of the Concertgebouw (his Decca recording of Hindemith's *Kammermusik* No. 7 with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra under Riccardo Chailly won a Grammy), and was professor of organ at the Berlin University of the Arts. A renowned Bach interpreter, he is the ideal soloist for Poulenc's Bach-haunted concerto.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Debussy: A Painter in Sound**

Stephen Walsh, Vintage 2019

A readable life of Debussy that explains how the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* grew from Mallarmé's poem.

ACCESSIBLE **Poulenc: A Biography**

Roger Nichols, Yale University Press 2020

A modern life of Poulenc that covers the 1930s, when his return to Catholic faith shaped works such as the Organ Concerto.

DEEPER **Tchaikovsky**

Roland John Wiley, Oxford University Press 2009

A scholarly life-and-works study of Tchaikovsky, with discussion of the Fourth Symphony and his correspondence with Nadezhda von Meck.

SOURCES

1. Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 by the Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Aurel Dawidiuk, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/tchaikovskys-symphony-no-4-2026-04-10/>

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky · Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

2. Aurel Dawidiuk, conductor, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/aurel-dawidiuk/>
3. Aurel Dawidiuk appointed General Music Director Bochumer Symphoniker, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/stories/aurel-dawidiuk-appointed-general-music-director-bochumer-symphoniker/>
4. 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
5. Claude Debussy, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/orchestra/symphonic-repertoire/claude-debussy/>
6. Organ Concerto (Poulenc), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organ_Concerto_\(Poulenc\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organ_Concerto_(Poulenc))
7. Francis Poulenc, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Poulenc
8. Symphony No. 4 (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Tchaikovsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Tchaikovsky))
9. Symphony No. 4, Tchaikovsky Research. https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Symphony_No._4
10. Leo van Doeselaar, Wikipedia (Dutch). https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_van_Doeselaar
11. Debussy: A Painter in Sound, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780525432630>
12. Poulenc: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300226508>
13. Tchaikovsky, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195368925>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-04-10-dawidiuk>

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