

Bronfman's 'Emperor', and Elgar's Enigma

Wednesday, April 22, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Elim Chan, conductor · Yefim Bronfman, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73 ('Emperor')</i>	40'
2	KOIDE b. 1982 <i>Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain</i>	12'
3	ELGAR 1857–1934 <i>Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma', Op. 36</i>	30'
TOTAL MUSIC		82'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73 ('Emperor')

40 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven's fifth and last piano concerto, composed in 1809 in a Vienna besieged by Napoleon's army, is the grandest and most heroic of them all. The nickname 'Emperor' was not Beethoven's: it was attached later in English-speaking countries, and given his disapproval of Napoleon's conquests he would probably have disliked it. Still, it captures the work's imperial scale and bearing. At around forty minutes it dwarfs his earlier concertos, and it rethinks the very opening of the form: instead of the orchestra setting out first, three

massive chords are each answered immediately by a cascade of free, improvisatory flourishes from the soloist, as if the pianist seizes the music before the formalities can begin.

By 1809 Beethoven's deafness had made playing in public increasingly difficult, and for the first time he did not premiere one of his own piano concertos himself: the first performance was given in Leipzig in 1811, and the Vienna premiere in 1812 fell to his pupil Carl Czerny. He also broke with convention by writing out the first-movement cadenza in full, instructing the pianist not to improvise one, a sign of how completely he now controlled the architecture. Dedicated to his patron and pupil the Archduke Rudolph, it is the magnificent capstone of his concerto writing: heroic, expansive and serenely confident.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is unmistakable: three grand orchestral chords, each crowned by a sweeping solo flourish, a breathtaking gesture that frames the whole concerto. When the orchestra settles into the main theme, listen for its martial, dotted rhythms and forward stride.

The slow movement (*Adagio un poco mosso*) is one of Beethoven's most rapt: a hushed, hymn-like melody in the remote key of B major, the muted strings prayerful, the piano entering with music of extraordinary tenderness. Then comes the magical hinge. As the slow movement dies away, the harmony slips down a semitone, the piano quietly tries out a fragment of a new tune, hesitates, and bursts into the exuberant Rondo finale without a break, on a dancing, off-beat theme. Listen, near the very end, for the famous moment where the music winds down to almost nothing over a soft drum-roll before the final leap to life.

Noriko Koide

12 minutes

b. 1982

Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain

THE COMPOSER

Noriko Koide (born 1982) is a Japanese composer whose music has gained increasing international attention. She studied in Tokyo and then in the Netherlands, at the conservatories of Amsterdam and The Hague, and her teachers included the eminent Japanese composer Toshio Hosokawa. She also immersed herself in traditional Javanese gamelan, studying its performance

and theory in Indonesia, an experience that informs her fascination with delicate, shimmering, finely layered sonority. She won Japan's prestigious Akutagawa Award for music composition in 2007, and her orchestral work *Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain* was shortlisted for a Royal Philharmonic Society Award. Her music is known for its refined textures and its patient, organic unfolding of sound.

ABOUT THE WORK

Receiving its Dutch premiere tonight, *Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain* is a recent orchestral work (2022) by the Japanese composer Noriko Koide, commissioned by BBC Radio 3 and first performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in Japan. Its exquisite, tactile title is a clue to its character: this is music of fine textures and delicate threads, concerned above all with the quality and colour of sound itself. Koide is steeped both in the refined aesthetics of contemporary Japanese music (she studied with Toshio Hosokawa) and in the shimmering, interlocking sonorities of the Javanese gamelan, and both worlds can be felt in her orchestral writing.

The piece, lasting around twelve minutes, unfolds with great patience. As one description puts it, 'a dynamic slowly develops from recumbent sounds', with Koide using big musical gestures sparingly so that small changes register with great intensity. Placed between the grandeur of Beethoven and the warmth of Elgar, it offers a completely different listening experience: an invitation to attend closely to the surface and texture of orchestral sound, to the way music can be woven from the most gossamer-fine materials.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Approach this one with patient, open ears: rather than tunes and dramatic argument, listen for texture, colour and the slow transformation of sound. Koide builds from quiet, 'recumbent' sonorities, and the rewards lie in noticing how delicately the orchestral fabric is woven: threads of sound emerging, overlapping and dissolving, like silk and fine rain.

Listen for the influence of the gamelan in the shimmering, finely layered textures, and for Koide's restraint: because she uses large gestures so sparingly, every swell, every change of colour, every emergence of a clearer line carries real weight. Let the music slow your listening down. This is a piece to be absorbed as an evolving soundscape, fragile and detailed, a contemporary voice freshening the ear between two beloved classics.

Edward Elgar

1857–1934

Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma', Op. 36

THE COMPOSER

Edward Elgar (1857–1934) was the composer who, more than any other, restored England to the front rank of European music after two centuries in which it had produced no figure of international stature. Largely self-taught, the son of a Worcester music-shop owner and organist, he made his way slowly from the provinces to national and then world fame, achieving his breakthrough in 1899 with the Enigma Variations. A late Romantic to his core, steeped in Wagner, Brahms and Richard Strauss yet unmistakably English in his blend of nobility, warmth and wistful melancholy, he gave his country a body of great orchestral music: two symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, the Enigma Variations, the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* and the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. Knighted and laden with honours, he became the very emblem of Edwardian Britain, though his finest music reaches far beyond pomp into a deep, often autumnal expressivity. His wife Alice's death in 1920 effectively silenced him as a composer for his last years.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Enigma Variations is the work that made Elgar famous and announced the arrival of a great English composer. The story of its genesis is charming: one evening in October 1898, relaxing at the piano, Elgar idly improvised a tune and then began playing it in styles that mimicked the personalities of various friends, amusing his wife. From that parlour game grew a full orchestral masterpiece: a theme followed by fourteen variations, each a musical 'portrait' of someone in his circle, identified in the score only by initials or nicknames. He dedicated it 'to my friends pictured within.'

The variations range from the affectionate to the witty to the profound. The most famous by far is the ninth, 'Nimrod', a portrait of Elgar's friend and editor August Jaeger (Jäger means 'hunter' in German; Nimrod was the mighty hunter of the Bible). This slow, swelling Adagio has become one of the most beloved pieces in all British music, played at moments of national mourning and remembrance. But the whole set is a marvel of orchestration and warmth. Then there is the 'enigma' itself: Elgar hinted that, besides the theme we hear, a larger, unheard theme 'goes' through the whole work but is never played, a puzzle he refused to explain and which has teased listeners ever since. The premiere, under Hans Richter in London in 1899, was a triumph that launched Elgar's international career.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First, fix the theme in your ear: a wistful, slightly halting melody in the strings, heard at the very start. Then enjoy the gallery of friends. Each variation has its own character, so listen for the contrasts: tender and lyrical in some, brilliant and boisterous in others. Several are vivid little character sketches, like the one depicting a friend's bulldog tumbling down a riverbank and paddling about (Variation XI), or the graceful portrait of a lady that includes 'a little suggestion of a characteristic laugh' (Variation VIII).

The emotional summit is 'Nimrod' (Variation IX): listen for how it begins almost in a whisper and grows, with infinite patience, into a great surging climax of nobility and warmth: Elgar's tribute to a cherished friendship, and music of overwhelming feeling. The finale is a grand self-portrait (Elgar himself, 'E.D.U.'), gathering up earlier themes and building, with organ and full orchestra, to a triumphant close. And as you listen, you might ponder the enigma: somewhere, Elgar claimed, another and larger theme runs 'through and over' the whole set, though no one has ever conclusively found it.

Tonight's artists

Yefim Bronfman *piano*

The 'Emperor' Concerto is the most heroic and large-scale of Beethoven's piano concertos, demanding both grandeur and finesse: power for its imperial outer movements and a singing, hushed tenderness for its great slow movement. Yefim Bronfman, celebrated for the combination of titanic technique and deep musicianship, is a natural for it: a pianist who can command the work's vast architecture while bringing warmth and poetry to its quiet heart.

Yefim Bronfman, born in Tashkent in 1958 into a family of musicians, is one of the most commanding pianists of our time. He emigrated to Israel as a teenager and made his international debut under Zubin Mehta, going on to a major career based in the United States. Renowned for the power, depth and effortless virtuosity of his playing, combined with great musical intelligence and warmth, he is a favourite partner of the world's leading orchestras and conductors. A Grammy Award winner (for the Bartók concertos with Esa-Pekka Salonen), he commands a vast repertoire, and his combination of titanic technique and natural musicianship makes him an ideal interpreter of the grandest concertos, including Beethoven's 'Emperor.'

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces

Laura Tunbridge, Penguin Books 2020

A fresh, short life of Beethoven told through nine works, including the 'Emperor' Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE Portrait of Elgar

Michael Kennedy, Oxford University Press 1987

A classic life of Elgar that tells how the Enigma Variations and their portraits of his friends made his name.

DEEPER Elgar: Enigma Variations

Julian Rushton, Cambridge University Press 1999

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the Enigma Variations alone, covering its sketches, the friends pictured and the puzzle of the theme.

SOURCES

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2. Concertgebouw Orchestra and Elim Chan: Elgar and Beethoven, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/11110454-concertgebouw-orchestra-and-en-elim-chan-elgar-and-beethoven>
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4. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, Opus 73, Emperor (programme note), Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/piano-concerto-no-5-emperor>
5. UK Premiere of Noriko Koide's Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain at the BBC Proms, European American Music Distributors (Schott Music Group). <https://www.eamdc.com/news/uk-premiere-of-noriko-koide-s-swaddling-silks-and-gossamer-rain-at-the-proms/>
6. The New York Philharmonic, led by Elim Chan, Performs the New York Premiere of Noriko Koide's Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain, European American Music Distributors (Schott Music Group). <https://www.eamdc.com/news/the-new-york-philharmonic-led-by-elim-chan-perform-the-new-york-premiere-of-swaddling-silk-and-gossamer-rain/>
7. Noriko Koide: Biography, Schott Music Japan. <https://www.schottjapan.com/composer/koide/bio.html>
8. 2024: Large-Scale Composition, Royal Philharmonic Society. <https://royalphilharmonicsociety.org.uk/awards/rps-awards/winners-to-date/large-scale-composition/2024-large-scale-composition>
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11. Elim Chan, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elim_Chan
12. Elim Chan, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/elim-chan/>
13. Yefim Bronfman, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yefim_Bronfman
14. About Yefim Bronfman, Yefim Bronfman (official site). <https://yefimbronfman.com/about>
15. Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780241987452>
16. Portrait of Elgar, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780192840172>
17. Elgar: 'Enigma' Variations, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521636377>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-04-22-chan>

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