

# 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                   | <b>BEETHOVEN</b> 1770–1827<br><i>Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73 ('Emperor')</i> | 40' |
| 2                   | <b>KOIDE</b> b. 1982<br><i>Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain</i>                               | 12' |
| 3                   | <b>ELGAR</b> 1857–1934<br><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

### 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.

### 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

b. 1982

### *Swaddling Silk and Gossamer Rain*

12 minutes

#### 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.

#### 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*

30 minutes

### 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.'

### 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 bull-

dog 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.

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## 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.'

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## CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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