

Ehnes Plays Barber, and Beethoven's Eighth

Thursday, June 11, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Fabio Luisi, conductor · James Ehnes, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	VIVALDI 1678–1741 <i>Sinfonia in B minor, 'Al Santo Sepolcro', RV 169</i>	6'
2	BARBER 1910–1981 <i>Violin Concerto, Op. 14</i>	24'
3	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Symphony No. 8 in F major, Op. 93</i>	26'
TOTAL MUSIC		56'

Antonio Vivaldi

1678–1741

Sinfonia in B minor, 'Al Santo Sepolcro', RV 169

6 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) was the great virtuoso violinist-composer of the Venetian Baroque, and one of the most influential composers of his age. Ordained a priest (his red hair earned him the nickname ‘il Prete Rosso,’ the Red Priest), he spent much of his career at the Ospedale della Pietà, a Venetian home for foundling girls, whose famous all-female orchestra and choir he supplied with a torrent of music. He wrote some five hundred concertos (most famously The Four Seasons), which did much to establish the three-movement concerto form and whose driving rhythms and brilliant solo writing influenced composers across Europe, Bach among them. Alongside the concertos he produced operas and a substantial body of sacred music. Hugely celebrated in his lifetime, he died in poverty and obscurity in Vienna, and was largely forgotten until the twentieth-century Baroque revival restored him to his place as one of the era’s titans.

ABOUT THE WORK

This brief, intense work shows a side of Vivaldi far removed from the sparkling exuberance of The Four Seasons. The Sinfonia ‘al Santo Sepolcro’ (‘at the Holy Sepulchre’) is a piece of sacred chamber music for strings, written for the solemnity of Holy Week, most likely to be played during a service at the Pietà, the Venetian institution where

Vivaldi worked. Its title evokes the tomb of Christ, and its mood is correspondingly grave, dark and devout: a world of suspensions, dissonance and shadow.

In just a few minutes Vivaldi conjures an atmosphere of profound mourning. The piece is in two short linked sections, and it dispenses entirely with his usual brilliant solo display in favour of a concentrated, almost severe expressiveness, closer in spirit to the sacred music of the German Baroque than to the Venetian concerto. It makes a striking, contemplative opening to the concert, a moment of Baroque solemnity before the Romantic lyricism of Barber and the high spirits of Beethoven.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, in the opening Adagio, for the grinding dissonances and ‘sighing’ suspensions (notes that clash and only slowly resolve), which create the work’s atmosphere of grief and solemnity. This is music of darkness and weight, the strings moving in slow, heavy harmonies, deliberately archaic and intense; it sounds almost nothing like the Vivaldi of the popular concertos.

The second section is a short fugal Allegro, faster and more contrapuntal, the instruments imitating one another, but it too keeps to the prevailing seriousness of B minor rather than breaking into brightness. The whole piece is over in a few minutes, but it leaves a powerful impression: a glimpse of Vivaldi the devout church musician, capable of music as grave and moving as anything in the Baroque. Let its hushed solemnity set the mood before the concert opens out.

Samuel Barber

1910–1981

Violin Concerto, Op. 14

THE COMPOSER

Samuel Barber (1910–1981) was one of the most beloved American composers of the twentieth century, and one of the most unabashedly lyrical. Trained at the Curtis Institute (where he studied composition, piano, conducting and singing), he largely turned his back on the modernist experiments of his contemporaries in favour of a rich, Romantic idiom rooted in beautiful melody and warm harmony. That gift made him famous: his Adagio for Strings became perhaps the most performed piece of American concert music, a byword for elegiac beauty. He won two Pulitzer Prizes, wrote in every genre from song to opera (Vanessa) to concerto, and at his best com-

24 minutes

bined emotional directness with impeccable craftsmanship. The Violin Concerto, an early work, is among his most cherished: a perfect distillation of his lyrical voice.

ABOUT THE WORK

Barber's Violin Concerto, written in 1939–40 when the composer was not yet thirty, is one of the most popular American concertos, and the subject of a famous (if disputed) story. It was commissioned by a wealthy Philadelphia industrialist for his ward, the young violinist Iso Briselli. According to the often-told tale, Briselli loved the lyrical first two movements but complained that the brilliant, fast finale was too lightweight and didn't match them; Barber declined to change it, and the first performance eventually went to another violinist, Albert Spalding, with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Ormandy in 1941. (Briselli's own account was more nuanced, but the contrast between the movements is real.)

That contrast is precisely the concerto's character. The first two movements are gloriously lyrical (long-breathed, romantic, songful), showing Barber's melodic gift at its most ravishing. Then the finale erupts as a brief, headlong perpetual-motion tour de force, the soloist rocketing through relentless fast figuration. The result is a concerto of two halves: heart-on-sleeve beauty followed by sheer virtuoso dazzle. Barber began it in Switzerland and Paris in the summer of 1939 and, with war looming, returned home to finish it in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, and something of both the lyrical longing and the nervous energy of that moment seems to live in the music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens immediately with the solo violin singing one of Barber's most beautiful long melodies, warm, lyrical and unhurried, with no orchestral preamble. Listen for the sheer songfulness of the writing, and for the way the music unfolds with romantic generosity, building to passionate climaxes.

The slow movement (Andante) is introduced by a plaintive solo oboe, before the violin enters with music of deep, elegiac tenderness, close in spirit to Barber's famous Adagio. This is the emotional heart of the concerto, rapt and song-like. Then comes the surprise: the finale (Presto in moto perpetuo) is a brief, furious whirlwind: a few minutes of relentless, rapid figuration for the soloist, glittering and breathless, dancing to a sudden, abrupt end. Listen for the dramatic gear-change from the lyrical

warmth of the first two movements to this dazzling burst of pure motion, the ‘two halves’ that once caused such trouble, and that make the concerto so satisfying to hear.

Ludwig van Beethoven

26 minutes

1770–1827

Symphony No. 8 in F major, Op. 93

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 Eighth is the sunniest and most compact of his symphonies; he affectionately called it ‘my little Symphony in F,’ to distinguish it from the longer ‘Pastoral’ Sixth in the same key. He wrote it in the summer of 1812, immediately after the mighty Seventh, and where that work is grand and Dionysian, the Eighth is witty, genial and full of high spirits, a deliberate look back to the elegance and proportion of Haydn and Mozart, though shot through with Beethovenian muscle, surprise and humour. It received its premiere in Vienna in 1814, on a programme that also included the Seventh; the audience, perhaps expecting another grand statement, gave it only a polite reception, which annoyed Beethoven, who insisted it was ‘much better’ than its hugely popular predecessor.

The Eighth is the work of a composer relaxing and having fun, but its apparent lightness conceals tremendous craft and no small eccentricity. It is full of jokes: sudden violent accents, comic stops and starts, a ‘metronome’ joke, and a finale of irrepressible energy with one of the most outrageous surprises in any symphony. Short, brilliant and good-humoured, it makes a joyous close to the concert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement bursts straight in, without introduction, on a genial, dancing theme. Listen for its Haydnesque good humour, but also for the sudden, almost violent *sforzando* accents and dynamic surprises that are pure Beethoven.

The second movement is one of his great musical jokes: a fast, ticking *Allegretto scherzando*, said to parody the steady tick of the newly invented metronome, a nod to Beethoven's friend Mälzel, its inventor. Listen for the staccato 'tick-tock' chords in the winds under the chattering tune. In place of a slow movement, the third is an old-fashioned, slightly gruff *Tempo di Menuetto*, with a lovely horn-and-clarinet trio. The finale is a whirlwind of energy. Listen, partway through, for the notorious moment when a single loud, 'wrong' note (a sudden bark of C-sharp) erupts out of nowhere, derailing the music; Beethoven keeps returning to and 'explaining' this joke right up to the riotous, hammered-home ending.

Tonight's artists

James Ehnes *violin*

Barber's Violin Concerto demands two quite different things of its soloist: a glowing, songful lyricism for its first two movements, and dazzling, pinpoint virtuosity for its perpetual-motion finale. James Ehnes, renowned for both the beauty of his tone and the immaculate precision of his technique, is ideally equipped for both, able to spin Barber's long romantic melodies with warmth and then dispatch the finale's whirlwind figuration with effortless brilliance, on his great 1715 Stradivarius.

James Ehnes, born in Brandon, Manitoba in 1976, is one of the most admired violinists in the world, a musician prized for his flawless technique, purity of tone and patrician musical taste. A prodigy who made his orchestral debut at thirteen, he trained at the Juilliard School and has gone on to a major international career as soloist, chamber musician and recording artist, winning multiple Grammy and Juno awards. He is artistic director of the Seattle Chamber Music Society and a member of the Order of Canada, and plays the 1715 'Marsick' Stradivarius. Admired equally in the Classical, Romantic and twentieth-century repertoire, his combination of effortless brilliance and refined lyricism makes him an ideal interpreter of Barber's concerto.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

A lively full-length life of Beethoven that sets the compact, witty Eighth Symphony in the crowded year of 1812.

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision**

Lewis Lockwood, W. W. Norton 2017

Lockwood takes the nine symphonies one at a time, so you can read the chapter on the Eighth before the concert.

DEEPER **Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music**

Barbara B. Heyman, Oxford University Press 1994

The standard scholarly study of Barber, with a detailed account of how the Violin Concerto was commissioned, disputed and first performed.

SOURCES

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2. Fabio Luisi conducts Beethoven with the Concertgebouw Orchestra, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/11158053-fabio-luisi-conducts-beethoven-with-the-concertgebouw-orchestra>
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4. Sinfonia al Santo Sepolcro in B minor RV 169, West Cork Music. <https://westcorkmusic.ie/works/sinfonia-al-santo-sepolcro-in-b-minor-rv-169>
5. Sinfonia in B minor, RV 169 (Vivaldi, Antonio), IMSLP. [https://imslp.org/wiki/Sinfonia_in_B_minor%2C_RV_169_\(Vivaldi%2C_Antonio\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Sinfonia_in_B_minor%2C_RV_169_(Vivaldi%2C_Antonio))
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7. Barber: Violin Concerto, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/barber-violin-concerto>
8. Samuel Barber: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14, Nashville Symphony. <https://www.nashvillesymphony.org/classical-program-notes/samuel-barber-concerto-for-violin-and-orchestra-op-14/>
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10. Symphony No. 8 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_(Beethoven))
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12. James Ehnes, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Ehnes
13. James Ehnes, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. https://www.pittsburghsymphony.org/pso_home/biographies/guest-artists/james-ehnes
14. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
15. Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393353853>
16. Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195090581>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-06-11-luisi>

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