

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

# 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                   | <b>VIVALDI</b> 1678–1741<br><i>Sinfonia in B minor, 'Al Santo Sepolcro', RV 169</i> | 6'  |
| 2                   | <b>BARBER</b> 1910–1981<br><i>Violin Concerto, Op. 14</i>                           | 24' |
| 3                   | <b>BEETHOVEN</b> 1770–1827<br><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

## 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.

## 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*

24 minutes

#### 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.)

#### 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

1770–1827

## *Symphony No. 8 in F major, Op. 93*

26 minutes

### 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.

### 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.

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## 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.

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## CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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