

Ólafsson's 'Emperor' and Prokofiev's Triumph

Wednesday, August 26, 2026 · 20:00 · Concertgebouw
Santtu-Matias Rouvali, conductor · Víkingur Ólafsson, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73 ('Emperor')</i>	40'
2	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		85'

Ludwig van Beethoven

40 minutes

1770–1827

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

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 composed his Fifth and final piano concerto in 1809, a year in which Vienna was bombarded and briefly occupied by Napoleon's army. During the bombardment he sheltered in his brother's cellar with pillows over his ears to protect what remained of his hearing. There is a grandeur and a defiance in the music that the circumstances seem to have pressed into it. The famous nickname 'Emperor,' though, was not Beethoven's and refers to no particular emperor; its origin is unclear. It was attached later in the English-speaking world, sometimes credited to the pianist-publisher Johann Baptist Cramer, as a tribute to the work's imperial scale and bearing.

That scale was genuinely new. At around forty minutes, the 'Emperor' is far longer than any concerto Beethoven had written before, and it rethinks the relationship between soloist and orchestra. Instead of the customary orchestral introduction followed by the pianist's entrance, the work opens with three great chords from the orchestra, each answered immediately by a cascade of free, improvisatory flourishes from the piano, as if the soloist were striding onstage and seizing the music before the formalities can begin. Beethoven also broke with tradition by writing out the first-movement cadenza in full and instructing the pianist not to improvise one, a sign of how completely he now wanted to control the architecture of the piece.

By 1809 Beethoven's deafness had advanced to the point where he could no longer appear as a concerto soloist, and so, for the first time, he did not give the premiere of one of his own piano concertos himself. The work's first public performance took place in Leipzig on 28 November 1811, with Friedrich Schneider as soloist; the Vienna premiere followed on 12 February 1812, played by Beethoven's devoted pupil Carl Czerny. The concerto is dedicated to the Archduke Rudolph of Austria: Beethoven's patron, pupil and friend, and the dedicatee of many of his greatest works. It stands as the magnificent close to his concerto writing: heroic, expansive, and serenely confident.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is unmistakable. Three weighty orchestral chords, each crowned by a sweeping solo flourish, throw the door open before the movement proper has even begun, a gesture of breathtaking confidence that frames the entire work. When the orchestra finally settles into the main theme, listen for its martial, dotted rhythms and the way Beethoven keeps the music striding forward; the piano, when it returns, decorates and extends rather than merely competes.

The slow movement (*Adagio un poco mosso*) is one of Beethoven's most rapt creations: a hushed, hymn-like melody in the remote key of B major, the orchestra muted and prayerful, the piano entering with music of extraordinary tenderness. Then comes the magical hinge of the whole concerto: as the slow movement dies away, the harmony sinks by a semitone, the piano quietly tries out a fragment of a new tune, hesitates, and then suddenly bursts into the exuberant Rondo finale without a break. That dancing, off-beat main theme, hurled out by the soloist, drives the rest of the piece. Keep your ear on the very end,

where the music seems to wind down to almost nothing over quiet repeated timpani strokes before the piano and orchestra leap back to life for a jubilant final flourish.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

45 minutes

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 in Sontsivka, then part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine), and was admitted to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904, several years younger than most of his classmates. By his teens he was already a fearsome pianist and an enfant terrible of Russian modernism, scandalising audiences with the percussive dissonance of his early works.

In 1918, Prokofiev left Russia with official Soviet permission and spent nearly two decades in the West, first in the United States, then mostly in Paris, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, and concertos that earned him a place among the leading modernists of his generation. After several years of shuttling between Paris and Moscow, he settled permanently in the Soviet Union in 1936. The remaining years of his life were marked by official denunciation in 1948, deteriorating health, and personal tragedy. He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. Soviet newspapers, consumed by the dictator's death, barely noted his passing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Prokofiev wrote his Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1944, in about a month at the composers' retreat near Ivanovo, though ideas for it had been gathering in his sketchbooks for years. He described it as a work 'glorifying the grandeur of the human spirit.' After a long and restless career that had taken him from pre-revolutionary St Petersburg to Paris and the United States and finally, in the 1930s, back to the Soviet Union, this was his first symphony in fourteen years, and it arrived at a charged moment. By 1944 the tide of the Second World War had turned in the Soviet Union's favour, and the symphony's mood of hard-won strength and forward momentum chimed exactly with a country sensing that victory was at last in reach.

The premiere, on 13 January 1945 in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, became the stuff of legend. Prokofiev himself conducted. As he raised his baton, artillery salvos thundered outside, a moment later described by the pianist Sviatoslav Richter, who was in the hall. The guns were celebrating the Red Army's crossing of the Vistula and its advance into Germany. The coincidence sealed the work's

identity as a kind of victory symphony, and it was an immediate triumph, soon carried abroad and quickly established in the international repertoire.

Yet the Fifth is far from simple patriotic rhetoric. It is a big, four-movement symphony in the grand tradition, melodically generous but shadowed throughout by Prokofiev's characteristic irony and sudden harmonic swerves. Its lyricism can turn grim or grotesque in an instant; its triumph is earned through passages of real darkness. This is Prokofiev at the height of his powers, writing music of broad public statement that never loses the sardonic edge and rhythmic bite that were his alone.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony opens not with fireworks but with breadth: a spacious Andante in which a long, noble theme unfolds on flute and bassoon, gradually drawing in the whole orchestra. Listen for how Prokofiev builds to a shattering brass-and-percussion climax at the movement's close: the 'grandeur of the human spirit' made audible.

The second movement is a glittering, mechanical scherzo (Allegro marcato), its restless clockwork theme driven by an insistent ostinato. It is brilliant and slightly sinister, full of the toccata-like motion Prokofiev loved, with a quicker central section before the machine grinds back into gear. The slow movement (Adagio) is the symphony's emotional core, a grieving, wide-spanning lament whose beauty repeatedly clouds over into something darker and more anguished; here the war's cost seems to be felt directly.

The finale begins with a hushed backward glance at the symphony's opening before launching a bustling, good-humoured Allegro giocoso, the cellos setting off a jaunty tune. Keep listening past the high spirits: in the closing pages the music accelerates and the orchestra's gleam takes on a harsh, almost manic glint, strings whirring and percussion clattering, so that the final triumph arrives with a steely, ambiguous edge entirely characteristic of Prokofiev.

Tonight's artists

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*

The Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson has become one of the most sought-after musicians of his generation, admired for the clarity, colour and intellectual curiosity he brings to everything from Bach to Glass. In Beethoven's 'Emperor' those qualities meet the most public and heroic of the piano concertos, a work that rewards both grandeur and finesse. Listen for how he balances its imperial sweep against the inwardness of the slow movement, where his gift for hushed, singing tone comes into its own.

Víkingur Ólafsson, born in Reykjavík in 1984, is one of the most sought-after pianists of his generation. He had his first lessons from his mother, a piano teacher, and studied at the Juilliard School in New York before returning to Iceland, where he founded his own record label, Dirrindí, and the Reykjavík Midsummer Music festival. Since signing with Deutsche Grammophon he has released a series of thoughtfully conceived albums (Philip Glass, Johann Sebastian Bach, Debussy and Rameau, Mozart and his contemporaries) which have won him a wide international following. His recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations, which he performed around the world throughout the 2023/24 season, won the Grammy Award for Best Classical Instrumental Solo in 2025. Admired for the clarity, rhythmic precision and imaginative programming of his playing, he joins the Berliner Philharmoniker this season.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: The Music and the Life**

Lewis Lockwood, W. W. Norton 2005

Lockwood joins Beethoven's life to close readings of the music, including the 'Emperor' Concerto, written in Vienna in 1809, the year of Napoleon's bombardment.

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

A full life of Prokofiev from his St Petersburg youth to the Soviet years in which he wrote the Fifth Symphony in 1944.

DEEPER **The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years**

Simon Morrison, Oxford University Press 2010

Morrison draws on Soviet archives to show the conditions in which Prokofiev worked after his return to Moscow, the world of the war-time Fifth Symphony.

SOURCES

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3. Santtu-Matias Rouvali, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santtu-Matias_Rouvali
4. Piano Concerto No. 5 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._5_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._5_(Beethoven))
5. Ludwig van Beethoven: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in E-flat major, Op. 73, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/ludwig-van-beethoven-concerto-for-piano-and-orchestra-in-e-flat-major-op-73/>
6. Symphony No. 5 (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Prokofiev))
7. Music and war: a guide to Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5, Houston Symphony. <https://houston-symphony.org/music-war-guide-prokofievs-symphony-no-5/>
8. Beethoven: The Music and the Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393326383>
9. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
10. The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199753482>



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