

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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

1770–1827

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

40 minutes

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.

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

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

45 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-08-26-rouvali>

Version 3, 30 September 2026