

Cho's Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky's War Symphony

Wednesday, September 23, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Dima Slobodeniouk, conductor · Seong-Jin Cho, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23</i>	35'
2	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>Symphony in Three Movements</i>	22'
3	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Waltz Sequence No. 1 from 'Der Rosenkavalier'</i>	13'
TOTAL MUSIC		70'

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia's first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphonies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

35 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Few of the world's best-loved concertos had so unpromising a birth. Tchaikovsky composed his First Piano Concerto over the winter of 1874–75, and on Christmas Eve 1874 he played it through for Nikolai Rubinstein, the most powerful pianist-administrator in Moscow and the man he hoped would premiere it. Rubinstein's response, as Tchaikovsky later recalled in a wounded letter, was devastating: the concerto was 'worthless and unplayable', bad, vulgar, beyond rescue. Stung but defiant, Tchaikovsky declared he would not alter a single note, withdrew the dedication, and offered the work instead to the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, who pronounced it 'so original and noble.'

So it was that this most Russian of concertos received its first performance not in Moscow or St Petersburg but in Boston, on 25 October 1875, with Bülow as soloist: about as far from home as the music could travel. It was an immediate success, and its popularity only grew. Rubinstein himself, to his credit, later came round, took the concerto into his own repertoire and played it many times across Europe.

The irony of Rubinstein's verdict is that the concerto's supposed faults are exactly what audiences adore: its lavish melodies, its grand rhetorical gestures, its sheer generosity of feeling. Tchaikovsky wove folk material into it (a Ukrainian tune sung by blind street musicians shapes the first movement, and a Ukrainian spring song drives the finale), grounding the Romantic splendour in something earthier. The result is a piece of irresistible warmth and brilliance, and one of the cornerstones of the entire piano repertoire.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is one of the most famous passages in all music, and one of the strangest. Horns sound a summoning call, and the piano crashes in with massive rolling chords beneath a broad, soaring melody in the strings. It is music of overwhelming grandeur, yet Tchaikovsky plays a curious trick: this magnificent tune is in the 'wrong' key (D-flat major, not the home B-flat minor), it lasts only a few minutes and, astonishingly, it never returns. The movement proper begins afterwards, built from the nimble Ukrainian folk theme; listen for the long, glittering solo cadenza near its close.

The second movement (*Andantino semplice*) is a tender intermezzo: a solo flute sings a simple, dreamy melody that the piano takes up, before a sudden quicksilver middle section dashes

past like a scherzo and the calm returns. The finale is a whirling rondo on a stamping Ukrainian folk tune, full of rhythmic drive. Keep listening for the moment, near the end, when the orchestra seizes a soaring lyrical theme and carries it to a blazing, triumphant conclusion, the concerto's hard-won answer to its doubters.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

22 minutes

Symphony in Three Movements

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his “neoclassical” period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

This symphony is a late change to the evening. When Joana Mallwitz had to cancel, her replacement, Dima Slobodeniouk, brought Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* in place of Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*: a swap between two works that were both written in the shadow of dictatorship and war.

Stravinsky composed it in the United States between 1942 and 1945, on a commission from the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York, and conducted the New York Philharmonic in the premiere on 24 January 1946. It was his first major work written after he emigrated to America. Stravinsky rarely admitted that anything outside music had shaped his compositions, but he called this one his ‘war symphony’ and described it as a response to the Second World War: the

first movement, he said, was prompted by a documentary about Japanese scorched-earth tactics in China, and the finale by footage of goose-stepping German soldiers and the Allies' mounting success.

The symphony is also built from salvage. The prominent piano part of the first movement comes from a piano concerto Stravinsky had left unfinished, and the second movement, where the harp comes to the fore, reuses music he began in 1943 for the Hollywood film *The Song of Bernadette*, a score that in the end went to Alfred Newman. In the finale the two instruments meet on equal terms.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement bursts in with a violent upward rush and hammered chords, and much of it is driven by jagged, displaced rhythms that recall *The Rite of Spring* thirty years on. Listen for the piano, used less as a soloist than as a percussive member of the orchestra, snapping out its figures against strings and brass.

The second movement (*Andante*) is a sudden change of light: slender, almost courtly music with the harp to the fore, first written for the vision of the Virgin in *The Song of Bernadette*. Its poise is all the more striking between the two outer movements.

The finale (*Con moto*) brings the violence back. After a short interlude, marching figures and blaring brass evoke the war footage Stravinsky described, piano and harp now sharing the spotlight, and the symphony drives to an abrupt, emphatic close.

Richard Strauss

13 minutes

1864–1949

Waltz Sequence No. 1 from 'Der Rosenkavalier'

THE COMPOSER

Richard Strauss was the heir to Wagner and Liszt, the composer who carried the late Romantic tradition into the twentieth century. Born in Munich in 1864, the son of the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, he received a conservative musical education before an encounter with Alexander Ritter, a violinist married to one of Wagner's nieces, converted him to the "music of the future."

Between 1889 and 1898, Strauss composed a series of tone poems that made him the most famous composer in Germany: *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. Each pushed the orchestra to new extremes of virtuosity and expres-

sion. Then he turned to opera, creating the scandalous *Salome* (1905), the shattering *Elektra* (1909), and the nostalgic masterpiece *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Strauss lived long: through two world wars, the Nazi era, and the destruction of the German musical culture he had embodied. His late works, including the *Metamorphosen* for strings and the *Four Last Songs*, are elegies for a lost world. He died in 1949, shortly after completing those final songs.

ABOUT THE WORK

Richard Strauss's opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, first staged in Dresden in 1911, is a comedy of love and time set in the aristocratic Vienna of the Empress Maria Theresa. One of its delicious anachronisms is that it is awash with waltzes, a dance that belongs to nineteenth-century Vienna rather than the 1740s world the opera depicts, but which Strauss deployed gloriously to evoke a dreamlike, nostalgic 'Vienna of the imagination.' These waltzes, above all those attached to the boorish, comic Baron Ochs, give the opera much of its lilt and sparkle, and they were soon irresistible candidates for the concert hall.

Strauss himself drew two concert waltz sequences from the score so that this music could be heard on its own. This First Waltz Sequence (*Erste Walzerfolge*) stitches the great waltz tunes into a single continuous, richly orchestrated showpiece, and it has remained a favourite ever since: a glittering distillation of the opera's charm that needs no knowledge of the plot to enchant.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is pure orchestral delight, and the pleasures are immediate. Listen for the way Strauss spins one waltz melody into the next, the music swirling and dipping with Viennese grace, never quite settling before another tune sweeps in. The orchestration is the marvel: shimmering strings, glinting harp and celesta, suave woodwind solos and warm horns, all handled with the effortless mastery of the man who was perhaps the greatest orchestrator of his age.

Keep an ear out for the lazy, lilting waltz associated with Baron Ochs: heavy-footed and self-satisfied, it is one of the opera's signature tunes. Above all, savour the sense of bittersweet nostalgia that hovers over the whole piece: even at its most exuberant, this is music tinged with the awareness that the gilded world it conjures is already slipping into the past. The sequence builds, as a good Viennese waltz set must, to a sweeping, full-orchestra flourish.

Tonight's artists

Seong-Jin Cho *piano*

Seong-Jin Cho's artistry is usually praised for its elegance and control, qualities forged in the Chopin repertoire that first made him famous. Tchaikovsky's First Concerto asks for something more extrovert: thunderous chords, barnstorming octaves, full-throated Romantic ardour. The interest tonight lies in how a pianist of such refinement meets this most flamboyant of warhorses: whether he tames its excess or rides its grandeur, balancing power with the singing tone and clarity that are his signature.

Seong-Jin Cho, born in Seoul in 1994, is one of the most admired pianists of his generation. He took up the piano at six, gave his first recital at eleven, and won a string of competitions as a teenager before the victory that made his name internationally: first prize at the 2015 International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, the first South Korean ever to win it. Trained in Seoul and then at the Conservatoire de Paris with Michel Béroff, he has since appeared with the world's foremost orchestras and signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon, recording a wide repertoire from Mozart and Schubert to Chopin, Debussy and Ravel. Famed for the poise, refinement and quiet intensity of his playing, he served as Artist in Residence of the Berlin Philharmonic for the 2024–25 season.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music**

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

A compact life of Tchaikovsky, including the story of Nikolai Rubinstein's harsh first verdict on the First Piano Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE **Igor Stravinsky**

Jonathan Cross, Reaktion Books 2015

A short modern life of Stravinsky that reaches his wartime years in America, where he wrote the Symphony in Three Movements.

DEEPER **Stravinsky: A Creative Spring**

Stephen Walsh, University of California Press 2002

The second volume of Walsh's Stravinsky biography covers 1934 to 1971, including the Hollywood years that produced the Symphony in Three Movements of 1945.

SOURCES

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2. Essentials: Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 (25 September 2026), Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwworkest.nl/en/calendar/entree-essentials-tchaikovskys-piano-concerto-no-1-2026-09-25/>
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15. Igor Stravinsky, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781780234946>
16. Stravinsky: A Creative Spring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520227491>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-09-23-mallwitz>

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