

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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

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.'

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

Symphony in Three Movements

22 minutes

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.

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

1864–1949

Waltz Sequence No. 1 from 'Der Rosenkavalier'

13 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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