

Ax Plays Williams, and Dvořák's Sixth

Friday, October 9, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Petr Popelka, conductor · Emanuel Ax, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Francesca da Rimini, Symphonic Fantasy after Dante, Op. 32</i>	24'
2	WILLIAMS b. 1932 <i>Concerto for Piano and Orchestra</i>	22'
3	DVORAK 1841–1904 <i>Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60</i>	42'
TOTAL MUSIC		88'

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

24 minutes

Francesca da Rimini, Symphonic Fantasy after Dante, Op. 32

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.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the summer of 1876 Tchaikovsky was travelling (to Bayreuth, where he attended the first complete Ring cycle and came away unconvinced by Wagner) and reading Dante. The fifth canto of the In-

ferno seized him: the story of Francesca da Rimini, the noblewoman married off to a deformed lord but in love with his handsome brother Paolo, the two of them discovered and murdered, and condemned for their adultery to be blown forever on a howling wind through the second circle of Hell. Tchaikovsky wrote that he was ‘inflamed’ with the desire to make a symphonic poem of it, and composed the score quickly that October and November in Moscow. He dedicated it to his friend and former pupil Sergei Taneyev.

Francesca da Rimini belongs to the genre of the symphonic fantasy or tone poem, orchestral music built around a literary subject, and it is among Tchaikovsky’s most viscerally dramatic orchestral works. It is also, not coincidentally, one of his most overtly emotional: the central love music pours out with the same ardour he would soon bring to the great ballets and symphonies, while the framing depiction of Hell gave him licence for some of his most violent and lurid orchestral writing. The first performance took place in Moscow on 9 March 1877, in a concert of the Russian Musical Society conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein, and it was an immediate success.

The piece is cast in a single span but falls clearly into three sections: a fearsome evocation of the infernal whirlwind, a tender central episode in which Francesca tells her story, and a return to the storm that engulfs the doomed lovers. Few works convey so directly Tchaikovsky’s lifelong theme: love crushed by an implacable fate.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening plunges us straight into Dante’s Hell. Listen for the grim, groping introduction in the low strings and winds, the descent through the circles, before the music erupts into the whirlwind itself: a terrifying chromatic gale, strings and woodwind shrieking and spinning, that depicts the souls of the lustful tossed endlessly on the storm. It is some of the most graphic ‘weather’ music in the repertoire.

Then the wind dies down, and a long clarinet solo introduces the work’s emotional heart: Francesca’s narration. This great love theme, taken up and expanded by the strings, is pure Tchaikovsky: yearning, surging, heartbreakingly lyrical. It grows to an overwhelming climax as the lovers’ brief happiness is relived. But the reprieve cannot last. The whirlwind returns, fiercer than before, sweeping the love music away; listen for the shattering final bars, where crashing brass and a furious descent slam the gates of Hell shut on Paolo and Francesca for eternity.

John Williams

b. 1932

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra

THE COMPOSER

John Williams is, by almost any measure, the most influential composer of orchestral music in the past half-century. Born in Queens in 1932 to a jazz percussionist father, he took piano lessons in New York with the legendary Rosina Lhévinne of Juilliard and at first planned a career as a concert pianist before turning to composition. Five Academy Awards (for *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, and *Schindler's List*), more than two dozen Grammy Awards, and an honorary knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 2022 only begin to suggest his impact.

Less widely known is Williams's parallel career as a composer of concert music. Across more than five decades he has produced a symphony and a long line of concertos, for flute, violin, cello, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, trumpet, tuba and more, many written for celebrated soloists of our time. From 1980 until 1993 he served as conductor of the Boston Pops, and he remains its laureate conductor today.

ABOUT THE WORK

The world knows John Williams as the most celebrated film composer in history, the creator of the themes for *Star Wars*, *Jaws*, *E.T.*, *Indiana Jones*, *Schindler's List* and so much more. Less widely known is his parallel life as a composer of concert music: concertos for violin, cello, flute, oboe, horn, tuba and harp, written for many of the world's leading players. This Piano Concerto, receiving its Dutch premiere tonight, is one of his very latest works, and it came about through a charming exchange. Williams had mentioned to friends that he might write a piano concerto, and the pianist Emanuel Ax told him: if you write it, I will play it. Williams took up the challenge: he began the piece in 2022 and completed it for Ax, who gave the world premiere at Tanglewood on 26 July 2025, with Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Williams, then ninety-three, was present to hear it.

The concerto is, in Williams's own description, a 'proper' concerto in the classical three-movement, fast-slow-fast design: not a film score for piano, but a fully-fledged addition to the concert repertoire. Yet it carries the fingerprints of its composer's whole musical life: the luminous orchestration, the rhythmic vitality, and a deep affection for the great jazz pianists Williams loved in his own youth as a working pianist. He has spoken of invoking the spirits of Art Tatum, Bill Evans and Oscar Peterson, and the solo writing has a freedom and a glinting harmonic colour that nod to that world while remaining wholly Williams.

For Amsterdam audiences this is a rare chance to hear brand-new music by a living legend, played by the very pianist for whom it was written, a piece still fresh from its first performances, finding its place in the world.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Because the concerto is so new, come to it with open ears rather than expectations. Williams follows the time-honoured fast–slow–fast plan, so listen for the architecture: an opening movement of bustling energy and dialogue between piano and orchestra; a central slow movement that is the lyrical core; and a finale that lets the soloist off the leash.

Keep your ear out for the jazz inflections Williams has woven in: the supple, improvisatory feel of certain solo passages, the bluesy harmonic shadings, the rhythmic snap that recalls the great jazz pianists rather than the Romantic virtuoso tradition. And listen, as always with Williams, to the orchestra: even in a concert work he is one of the supreme orchestrators alive, and the interplay of piano with woodwind, harp, percussion and strings is full of the iridescent colour that has thrilled audiences in the cinema for sixty years. Above all, notice the rapport between soloist and music. This is Emanuel Ax playing a concerto shaped around his own pianism, a true collaboration between composer and performer.

Antonin Dvorak

42 minutes

1841–1904

Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60

THE COMPOSER

Antonin Dvorak was born on September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, a small village north of Prague in Bohemia. The eldest of fourteen children, he was expected to follow his father into the butcher's trade, but his unmistakable musical talent led him on a different path. After studying at the Prague Organ School, Dvorak spent years playing viola in theatre orchestras while composing in his spare time, often in conditions of considerable hardship.

His breakthrough came when Johannes Brahms, serving on a jury for a composition prize, recognized Dvorak's exceptional gifts and recommended him to his own publisher, Simrock. The resulting Slavonic Dances (1878) were an immediate international success. Following in the footsteps of Bedrich Smetana, Dvorak went on to achieve worldwide fame as a Czech composer.

His time as director of the National Conservatory in New York (1892-1895) produced some of his most beloved works, including the “New World” Symphony and the Cello Concerto.

ABOUT THE WORK

By 1880 Dvořák’s fortunes had been transformed. A few years earlier he had been an obscure Prague violist scraping a living; now, championed by Brahms and taken up by the powerful Berlin publisher Simrock, he was becoming an international name, his Slavonic Dances selling across Europe. The Sixth Symphony is the work of this new confidence. It was written for one of the most prestigious platforms imaginable: Hans Richter, chief conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic, had conducted Dvořák’s Third Slavonic Rhapsody to acclaim and asked the composer for a symphony. Dvořák responded with this sunny, expansive work, composed in just a few weeks in the late summer and autumn of 1880.

The symphony wears its admiration for Brahms openly. It is in D major, the key of Brahms’s recent Second Symphony, which Richter had premiered in Vienna, and it shares that work’s pastoral warmth and broad, song-like lyricism; the very opening, with its gently rocking theme over murmuring strings, is a clear and affectionate homage. Yet the music is unmistakably Dvořák’s own, and unmistakably Czech, nowhere more so than in the third-movement Furiant, a whirling Bohemian dance that no German symphonist could have written.

The Vienna premiere never happened: Richter repeatedly postponed it, and Dvořák, sensing anti-Czech feeling among the Vienna players, eventually withdrew the work. It was first performed instead in Prague, on 25 March 1881, under Adolf Čech, and soon travelled to London and beyond. Long overshadowed by the later ‘New World’ Symphony, the Sixth is increasingly recognised as the work in which Dvořák’s mature symphonic voice fully arrived: melodically generous, superbly crafted, and radiant from first bar to last.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens in sunlit calm: a broad, lilting theme over softly pulsing strings, the Brahmsian glow unmistakable. Listen for how Dvořák builds from this gentle beginning to grand, brass-capped climaxes, always returning to the music’s essential warmth and to a wealth of fresh, singing melody.

The slow movement (Adagio) is a serene, deeply felt song, its long lyrical lines passed around the orchestra and shaded with darker, more dramatic episodes before the calm is restored. Then comes the symphony’s calling card: the Scherzo, marked

Furiant. This is a genuine Czech folk dance, full of cross-rhythms (the music seems to lurch between two-beat and three-beat patterns), driven and exhilarating, with a gentler trio led by the piccolo offering a moment of rustic charm.

The finale opens quietly, almost hesitantly, then gathers momentum through ever-brighter episodes, building to a jubilant, blazing conclusion. Keep listening for the way Dvořák saves his grandest, most exuberant statement of the main theme for the very end, sending the symphony home in a blaze of D-major sunshine.

Tonight's artists

Emanuel Ax *piano*

There is a special poignancy in hearing Emanuel Ax play John Williams's Piano Concerto: the work exists because Ax asked for it, and was written with his particular artistry (warm, generous, unfailingly musical) in mind. One of the most beloved pianists of his generation and a fixture of the world's great concert halls, Ax here is not merely interpreting a new score but completing a collaboration, bringing to Amsterdam a concerto that is in a real sense his own.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Dvořák**

Kurt Honolka, Haus Publishing 2005

A short illustrated life of Dvořák, good on the years around 1880 when the Sixth Symphony carried his name beyond Bohemia.

ACCESSIBLE **John Williams: A Composer's Life**

Tim Greiving, Oxford University Press 2025

A biography of John Williams that follows him from Hollywood into the concert hall, where his Piano Concerto for Emanuel Ax belongs.

DEEPER **Dvořák and His World**

Michael Beckerman (ed.), Princeton University Press 1993

Essays and documents on Dvořák in his Czech setting and abroad, for a closer look at the composer of the Sixth Symphony.

SOURCES

1. Emanuel Ax plays John Williams, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/emanuel-ax-plays-john-williams-2026-10-09/>

Antonin Dvorak ·Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60

2. Concert listing: Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Popelka, Ax, Bachtrack. <https://bachtrack.com/22/291/view/439574>
3. Francesca da Rimini (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesca_da_Rimini_\(Tchaikovsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesca_da_Rimini_(Tchaikovsky))
4. Francesca da Rimini, Tchaikovsky Research. <https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Francesca>
5. John Williams: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/john-williams-concerto-for-piano-and-orchestra>
6. John Williams: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (programme note), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/john-williams-concerto-for-piano-and-orchestra/>
7. Symphony No. 6 (Dvořák), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._6_\(Dvořák\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._6_(Dvořák))
8. Symphony No. 6 in D Major, Op. 60, B112, antonin-dvorak.cz. <https://www.antonin-dvorak.cz/en/work/symphony-no-6/>
9. Dvořák, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781904341529>
10. John Williams: A Composer's Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780197620885>
11. Dvořák and His World, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780691000978>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-10-09-popelka>

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