

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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

Francesca da Rimini, Symphonic Fantasy after Dante, Op.

32

24 minutes

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 *Inferno* 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.

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, heart-breakingly 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

22 minutes

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.

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

1841–1904

Symphony No. 6 in D major, Op. 60

42 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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