

Dvořák's Seventh and Bartók's Bluebeard

Thursday, November 5, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Klaus Mäkelä, conductor · Gerald Finley, Bluebeard · Jennifer Johnston, Judith

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DVORAK 1841–1904 <i>Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70</i>	40'
2	BARTÓK 1881–1945 <i>Duke Bluebeard's Castle, Op. 11, Sz. 48</i>	60'
TOTAL MUSIC		100'

Antonin Dvorak

1841–1904

Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70

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

If Dvořák's Sixth Symphony is sunlit and Brahmsian in its geniality, the Seventh, written just a few years later, is its dark twin: the most tragic, turbulent and tightly argued of all his symphonies, and for many listeners his greatest. It was born of high ambition. The London Philharmonic Society, which had made Dvořák an honorary member after the triumph of his music in England, commissioned a new symphony, and Dvořák, by now an international figure, was determined to

40 minutes

rise to the occasion. He had recently heard and admired Brahms's new Third Symphony, and it spurred him to write something on the same exalted level: a serious, large-scale symphonic statement rather than a display of Bohemian charm.

He composed it over the winter of 1884–85, in a mood darkened by personal strain and by his fervent Czech patriotism at a time of political tension with Austria. The music has an urgency and a tragic weight unusual for Dvořák, and he poured great care into its construction; of the slow movement he wrote to his publisher that 'there is not one superfluous note.' He completed it in March 1885 and conducted the brilliantly successful premiere at St James's Hall in London on 22 April 1885.

The symphony's stature was recognised early. The great analyst Donald Tovey ranked it, alongside the four Brahms symphonies and Schubert's Ninth, among the supreme symphonies written since Beethoven. It marries Dvořák's inexhaustible melodic gift to a Brahmsian density of argument and a genuinely tragic tone, all without losing the Czech accent (the folk-flavoured rhythms and the songful slow music) that makes the voice unmistakably his.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement begins in shadow: a brooding, restless theme stealing in low on violas and cellos (Dvořák said it occurred to him as a train carrying Czech patriots steamed into Prague station). Listen for the tension between this dark first idea and a warmer, more lyrical second theme, and for the movement's tautness. It is among the most concentrated and dramatic Dvořák ever wrote, ending not in triumph but in a quiet, ominous fade.

The slow movement (*Poco adagio*) is a deep, song-like meditation, opening with a serene wind chorale and rising to impassioned climaxes; note the beautiful horn and woodwind solos that grace it. The third-movement Scherzo is the most overtly Czech music here: a lilting, cross-rhythmed dance with the swing of a furiant, framing a gentler, pastoral trio. The finale gathers the symphony's tragic energies and drives them forward with mounting intensity; listen for the hard-won turn, only in the very final bars, from stormy D minor into a blazing D major, a victory wrested, at the last possible moment, from darkness.

Béla Bartók

1881–1945

Duke Bluebeard's Castle, Op. 11, Sz. 48

THE COMPOSER

Béla Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, then in the Kingdom of Hungary (today Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), and grew up to become one of the towering figures of twentieth-century music, and one of its great explorers. Trained as a pianist and composer at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, he was a formidable virtuoso who might have made his career at the keyboard alone. Instead, in the first decade of the century, he turned to the villages of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, later reaching as far as Algeria, recording peasant songs on wax cylinders and laying, with his friend Zoltán Kodály, the foundations of modern ethnomusicology. That fieldwork was not antiquarianism: the irregular metres, modal scales, and percussive vitality of the music he gathered passed directly into his own language, giving it a flinty rhythmic drive and an earthy modernity unlike anything in the Austro-German tradition he otherwise revered. Bartók loathed fascism: after 1933 he refused to give concerts in Nazi Germany and broke with his publisher there. As Hungary slid toward alliance with Hitler, he emigrated to the United States in 1940, settling in New York. The American years were hard, with failing health, financial anxiety and a sense of exile, yet they produced the radiant Concerto for Orchestra (1943) and the Third Piano Concerto heard tonight. He died of complications of leukaemia in New York on 26 September 1945, his Third Piano Concerto all but finished on his desk.

ABOUT THE WORK

Duke Bluebeard's Castle is Béla Bartók's only opera: a single, unbroken hour of music for just two singers, and one of the most extraordinary psychological dramas in the repertoire. Bartók composed it in 1911, to a Hungarian libretto by his friend the poet Béla Balázs, drawing on the old French folk tale of Bluebeard, the lord whose successive wives vanish behind locked doors. But Balázs and Bartók turned the gruesome legend into a Symbolist parable of the impossibility of truly knowing another person. There is no gore, no on-stage murder; instead the opera becomes an interior journey, the castle itself a metaphor for Bluebeard's soul.

The new wife, Judith, has left family and a betrothed to follow Bluebeard into his dark, windowless castle. One by one she demands the keys to its seven locked doors, insisting on light and openness, on knowing everything about the man she loves. Behind each door lies a part of him, and the opera traces, with growing dread, how her need to know everything destroys the very love she seeks. It is at once a chamber drama of unbearable intimacy and a vast symphonic canvas, scored for a huge orchestra that becomes the castle's living voice.

The work had a difficult birth: rejected in competition as insufficiently theatrical, it waited seven years for its premiere, which finally took place at the Royal Hungarian Opera House in Budapest on 24 May 1918, by which time Bartók had revised it, reworking its quietly devastating ending. Today it is recognised as a landmark of twentieth-century music, and it works superbly in concert, where the orchestra, freed from the stage, can blaze and brood at full strength.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opera is built around the opening of the seven doors, and Bartók gives each its own unmistakable music and colour; follow them, and you follow the drama.

Listen first to the dark, brooding opening, rooted in a shadowy F♯, and to the spoken or sung prologue's invitation to look 'inward.' As Judith demands the keys, each door reveals a tableau: the **torture chamber** (door one), with shuddering strings and a stabbing dissonance, blood seeping through every vision; the **armoury** (door two); the glittering **treasury** (door three), and notice how a blood-red stain taints even the jewels. The **secret garden** (door four) brings lush, fragrant music; then comes the opera's overwhelming central moment, the **fifth door**: it opens onto Bluebeard's vast domains, and the full orchestra erupts in a blazing, organ-capped C major of shattering brilliance, one of the great coups de théâtre in all opera. Listen for how Judith, even here, sees blood on the clouds.

From this radiant summit the music darkens steadily. The sixth door reveals a still **lake of tears**, hushed and desolate; and behind the seventh, against Bluebeard's pleading, Judith finds his three former wives, not dead but enshrined, and must take her place among them. Listen for the heartbreaking close, as Bluebeard is left utterly alone and the music sinks back into the darkness from which it came, the castle's brief light extinguished forever.

Tonight's artists

Gerald Finley *Bluebeard*

Bluebeard is a role that plays to all of Gerald Finley's strengths. The part demands not a villain but a tragic figure: proud, secretive, achingly lonely, longing to be loved yet unable to bear being fully known. Finley's combination of noble, dark-hued tone and searching dramatic intelligence makes him an ideal guide through the castle's seven doors, drawing us into Bluebeard's interior world even as Judith forces it open.

Gerald Finley, born in Montreal in 1960, is one of the most distinguished bass-baritones of his generation, equally celebrated on the opera stage and the concert platform. He came to Britain to study at King's College, Cambridge and the Royal College of Music, and rose to the world's leading houses. Renowned for the intelligence, warmth and dramatic truth of his singing, he is a great Mozartian (Don Giovanni, Figaro, Count Almaviva) and a noted creator of modern roles, most famously J. Robert Oppenheimer in John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*. Bluebeard, which asks for vocal nobility and psychological depth in equal measure, suits him ideally. A Grammy Award winner and an Officer of the Order of Canada, Finley is admired wherever great singing meets great acting.

Jennifer Johnston *Judith*

Judith is the dramatic engine of Bluebeard's Castle: the one who demands light, who insists on opening every door, whose love is inseparable from a need to know everything. The role asks for a singer who can convey both ardour and mounting dread across a single unbroken hour, holding her own against a vast orchestra. Jennifer Johnston's warm, powerful mezzo and her gift for dramatic intensity make her a compelling Judith, partner and antagonist to Finley's Bluebeard in this most intimate of operatic duels.

Jennifer Johnston is an English mezzo-soprano born in Liverpool, whose path to opera was an unusual one: she read law at Cambridge and worked as a barrister in London before turning to singing and training at the Royal College of Music. Affectionately known as the 'Scouse Diva,' she has become one of Britain's most admired mezzos, a former BBC New Generation Artist and winner of the Royal Philharmonic Society's Singer Award in 2021. She is in demand at the leading opera houses and festivals, from Aix-en-Provence and Salzburg to the world's great concert halls, and is especially noted as a singer of Mahler and the great choral and concert repertoire, prized for the richness of her voice and the commitment of her interpretations.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Béla Bartók**

David Cooper, Yale University Press 2018

A modern life of Bartók with the background to Duke Bluebeard's Castle, his only opera, written in 1911 and not staged until 1918.

ACCESSIBLE **Dvořák: His Life and Music**

Neil Wenborn, Sourcebooks 2008

A short life of Dvořák, good on his English success and the Seventh Symphony he wrote for the Philharmonic Society of London.

DEEPER **Inside Bluebeard's Castle: Music and Drama in Béla Bartók's Opera**

Carl S. Leafstedt, Oxford University Press 2005

A full study of Duke Bluebeard's Castle, from Balázs's libretto to the music behind each of the seven doors.

SOURCES

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2. Symphony No. 7 (Dvořák), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_\(Dvořák\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_(Dvořák))
3. Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70, B141, antonin-dvorak.cz. <https://www.antonin-dvorak.cz/en/work/symphony-no-7/>

4. Bluebeard's Castle, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bluebeard%27s_Castle
5. Bartók: Duke Bluebeard's Castle, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/pages/opera/moredetails.asp?musicid=4462>
6. Gerald Finley, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerald_Finley
7. Gerald Finley, bass-baritone, Gerald Finley (official site). <https://www.geraldfinley.com/>
8. Jennifer Johnston (mezzo-soprano), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jennifer_Johnston_\(mezzo-soprano\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jennifer_Johnston_(mezzo-soprano))
9. Béla Bartók, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300234374>
10. Dvořák: His Life and Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781402211966>
11. Inside Bluebeard's Castle: Music and Drama in Béla Bartók's Opera, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195181968>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-11-05-makela>

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