

Sheku's Saint-Saëns and 'Pictures at an Exhibition'

Thursday, December 17, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Semyon Bychkov, conductor · Sheku Kanneh-Mason, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ADAMS b. 1947 <i>Frenzy</i>	19'
2	SAINT-SAËNS 1835–1921 <i>Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33</i>	19'
3	MUSSORGSKY 1839–1881 <i>Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestration Ravel)</i>	33'
TOTAL MUSIC		71'

John Adams

b. 1947

Frenzy

THE COMPOSER

John Adams (born 1947) is among the most frequently performed living composers, and one of the defining American musical voices of his era. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of minimalism, he forged from its pulsing, repetitive language a richer, more dramatic and harmonically expansive style entirely his own. He first reached a wide public with works like *Harmonielehre* and *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, and went on to write a series of landmark operas drawn from contemporary history (*Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *Doctor Atomic*) that redefined what opera could address. A conductor as well as a composer, deeply versed in the orchestra, he has produced a steady stream of major orchestral scores. His music combines rhythmic drive and brilliant, sensuous orchestration with a distinctly American openness, wit and grandeur.

ABOUT THE WORK

Frenzy is one of John Adams's most recent orchestral works, and it receives its Dutch premiere tonight. Composed in 2023, it was first performed in London in March 2024 by the London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle. Adams subtitled it 'a short symphony,' and it packs into a relatively brief span a varied yet unified symphonic argument, a single, tautly organised orchestral journey.

19 minutes

The title is apt. This is music of high energy and propulsive momentum: the rhythmic drive that has been an Adams hallmark since his minimalist beginnings, now channelled into a densely worked, virtuosic showpiece for a great orchestra. Hearing it open a programme that runs back through Saint-Saëns to Mussorgsky places a brand-new American work in dialogue with the Romantic past, and lets the Concertgebouworkest show off its brilliance in music written for our own moment.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Frenzy lives up to its name: come ready for momentum and brilliance. Listen for the relentless rhythmic energy that drives the piece forward, and for Adams's dazzling, kaleidoscopic orchestration: the way ideas are tossed around the orchestra, woodwinds and brass flashing against churning strings and busy percussion.

Though continuous, the work has the shape of a compact symphony, so listen for its changes of pace and character: passages of headlong drive giving way to broader, more lyrical or mysterious episodes before the energy regathers. Adams is a master of the long build, and of sudden shifts of harmonic colour that light the music up from within. Simply follow the surging, restless energy and the sheer orchestral dazzle of one of today's most communicative composers writing at full tilt.

Camille Saint-Saëns

19 minutes

1835–1921

Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33

THE COMPOSER

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) was one of the most gifted and versatile musicians France ever produced: a child prodigy to rival Mozart, a brilliant pianist and organist, and a composer of effortless craft across every genre. Liszt called him the greatest organist in the world; as a composer he gave France some of its best-loved works, including the opera *Samson et Dalila*, the Third 'Organ' Symphony, the *Carnival of the Animals* and a series of elegant, superbly written concertos. A central figure in French musical life (he co-founded the Société Nationale de Musique to promote French composers), he was also a restless intellectual with a lifelong interest in philosophy and astronomy, and an inveterate traveller. Conservative in his later years and sometimes dismissed as merely facile, he is better seen as a consummate craftsman whose clarity, elegance and melodic generosity define a certain ideal of French music.

ABOUT THE WORK

Saint-Saëns's First Cello Concerto, composed in 1872, is one of the cornerstones of the cello repertoire; composers as different as Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich ranked it among the greatest of all cello concertos. He wrote it for Auguste Tolbecque, a distinguished French cellist, viol player and instrument maker, who gave the premiere with the orchestra of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire in Paris on 19 January 1873.

What makes the concerto special is partly its form. Saint-Saëns broke with the traditional three-separate-movements design and cast the whole work as a single continuous movement, lasting under twenty minutes, within which three connected sections do the work of the usual fast-slow-fast scheme. The result is wonderfully concentrated and forward-moving: there is no time for padding, and the cello sings almost throughout. It is also beautifully judged for the instrument: Saint-Saëns, ever the craftsman, makes the cello brilliant and virtuosic without ever letting the orchestra cover its often low-lying voice.

Elegant, passionate and impeccably made, it is Saint-Saëns at his most appealing, and a perfect vehicle for a charismatic soloist.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There is no orchestral introduction: after a single crisp chord, the cello bursts straight in with the surging, agitated main theme, one of the great concerto openings, immediately gripping. Listen for how this restless A-minor music drives the first section forward, the soloist rarely silent.

The magic of the piece is its seamlessness. Notice how the agitation gives way, without a real break, to the central section: a delicate, courtly minuet, the orchestra playing a graceful, slightly antique dance under which the cello muses and decorates, a moment of poise and charm at the work's heart. Then the music gathers itself again and the opening energy returns, leading to new material and a broad, singing melody before the finale. Keep your ear on the cello line throughout: Saint-Saëns keeps it almost continuously in song, and the whole concerto unfolds as a single, beautifully paced arc from its stormy opening to its triumphant close.

Modest Mussorgsky

1839–1881

Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestration Ravel)

THE COMPOSER

Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881) was the most radical and original of the group of Russian nationalist composers known as ‘The Five.’ A largely self-taught composer who earned his living as a civil servant, he sought a raw, truthful musical language rooted in Russian speech, folk song and history, impatient with the polish of the Western European tradition. His masterpiece is the opera *Boris Godunov*, a towering drama of guilt and power; alongside it stand songs of startling realism and the piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. His career was cut short by alcoholism (he died at forty-two), and he left much of his work unfinished or in rough form, later ‘corrected’ and orchestrated by friends such as Rimsky-Korsakov. Yet it is precisely his rough-hewn boldness, his harmonic daring and his unflinching directness that made him a profound influence on later composers, from Debussy and Ravel to the twentieth century.

ABOUT THE WORK

Pictures at an Exhibition began as a private act of mourning. In 1873 Mussorgsky’s close friend, the architect and artist Viktor Hartmann, died suddenly at only thirty-nine. A memorial exhibition of his drawings and designs was mounted in St Petersburg the following year, and Mussorgsky, deeply moved, responded by composing, in a white-hot three weeks in June 1874, a suite of piano pieces depicting ten of Hartmann’s works, linked by a recurring ‘Promenade’ theme representing the composer himself walking through the gallery from picture to picture. It is one of the most original and pictorial works in all music.

For decades *Pictures* was known mainly to pianists. Its journey to worldwide fame came through orchestration, and above all through the version made by Maurice Ravel in 1922, commissioned by the conductor Serge Koussevitzky and premiered in Paris on 19 October that year. Ravel, the supreme orchestral colourist, treated Mussorgsky’s vivid but pianistic score as a box of paints, conjuring an astonishing range of instrumental colour: the lonely alto saxophone of the ‘Old Castle,’ the braying brass of the ox-cart, the glittering chicks, the shattering grandeur of the final ‘Great Gate of Kiev.’ His orchestration is so brilliant that for many listeners it has become the definitive form of the work, a perfect marriage of Russian imagination and French orchestral genius.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece is a gallery walk, and the recurring **Promenade** is your guide, first heard at the very start on solo trumpet, then returning between several pictures, changing mood and colour to reflect the composer's state of mind as he moves on.

Follow the pictures themselves, each a vivid character study: **Gnomus**, a lurching, grotesque dwarf; **The Old Castle**, a melancholy troubadour's song carried by the alto saxophone; the chattering children of the **Tuileries**; the heavy, trudging ox-cart **Bydło**; the **Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks**, all twittering pizzicato and trills; the two Jewish figures of '**Samuel**' **Goldenberg** and **Schmuyle**, one pompous, one whining; the bustling **Marketplace at Limoges**; the eerie **Catacombs**; the witch **Baba Yaga** tearing through the air in her flying mortar. Listen for how this last picture drives without a break straight into the finale, **The Great Gate of Kiev**, where Hartmann's design for a grand city gate becomes a blazing, bell-crowned hymn, the Promenade theme transformed into overwhelming splendour to bring the work to its magnificent close.

Tonight's artists

Sheku Kanneh-Mason *cello*

Saint-Saëns's First Concerto, with its songful, almost continuous cello line and its blend of fire and elegance, is ideal territory for Sheku Kanneh-Mason, a cellist celebrated above all for the warmth and natural lyricism of his tone. The work's headlong opening and its tender central minuet ask for both passion and poise, and few young cellists combine those qualities so winningly. For Amsterdam audiences it is a chance to hear one of the most charismatic musicians of his generation in a concerto written to let the cello sing from first note to last.

Sheku Kanneh-Mason, born in 1999, is one of the most celebrated cellists of his generation and among the best-known classical musicians in Britain. Raised in Nottingham, the third of seven extraordinarily musical siblings, he shot to national fame in 2016 when he won the BBC Young Musician competition (the first Black musician to do so) and to worldwide attention in 2018 when he performed at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, watched by an audience of millions. An exclusive Decca Classics artist, he made history in 2020 when his album Elgar made him the first cellist to reach the Top 10 of the UK album chart. Admired for the warmth, lyricism and unaffected sincerity of his playing, and a passionate advocate for music education and access, he has become a genuine ambassador for classical music, appearing with major orchestras around the world.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life**

John Adams, Picador 2009

John Adams's memoir of his life as a composer, a way into the sound world of Frenzy.

ACCESSIBLE **Musorgsky and His Circle: A Russian Musical Adventure**

Stephen Walsh, Alfred A. Knopf 2013

Walsh tells the story of Musorgsky and the St Petersburg composers around him, including the death of the artist Viktor Hartmann that led to Pictures at an Exhibition.

DEEPER **Musorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition**

Michael Russ, Cambridge University Press 1992

A Cambridge Music Handbook on Pictures, covering Hartmann's pictures, the piano original and the orchestrations, Ravel's among them.

SOURCES

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12. Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312428617>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-12-17-bychkov>

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