

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

19 minutes

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.

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

1835–1921

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

19 minutes

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 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, im-

mediately 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)

33 minutes

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 ex-

hibition 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.

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 **Tuilleries**; 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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-12-17-bychkov>

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