

Yunchan Lim plays Liszt, Iván Fischer conducts Schubert's 'Great'

Thursday, January 7, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Iván Fischer, conductor · Yunchan Lim, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	WEBER 1786–1826 <i>Overture to 'Der Freischütz', J. 277</i>	
2	LISZT 1811–1886 <i>Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major, S. 125</i>	22'
3	SCHUBERT 1797–1828 <i>Symphony No. 9 in C major, D. 944 ('Great')</i>	55'
TOTAL MUSIC		77'

Carl Maria von Weber

1786–1826

Overture to 'Der Freischütz', J. 277

THE COMPOSER

Carl Maria von Weber, born near Lübeck in 1786, is the composer who, more than any other, founded German Romantic opera and gave it a national voice. A cousin of Mozart's wife Constanze, he grew up in a travelling theatrical family, and the stage was in his blood from the start; he was a brilliant pianist, a sharp-witted music critic, and a conductor who reformed orchestral practice wherever he worked. As opera director first in Prague and then, from 1817, in Dresden, he built a German-language opera company in deliberate opposition to the reigning Italian fashion. His breakthrough came in 1821 with *Der Freischütz*, whose forest setting, folk colour, and supernatural 'Wolf's Glen' scene electrified audiences and became the cornerstone of German Romantic opera, opening the path that led to Wagner, who revered Weber and in 1844 helped bring his remains home to Dresden. Weber's health, never robust, was destroyed by tuberculosis. He travelled to London in 1826 to conduct the premiere of his last opera, *Oberon*, written to an English libretto, and died there a few weeks later, only thirty-nine years old, his orchestral imagination and gift for atmospheric scene-painting having permanently enlarged the expressive range of the Romantic orchestra.

ABOUT THE WORK

Der Freischütz ('The Marksman', or 'The Freeshooter') had its first performance at the Schauspielhaus in Berlin on 18 June 1821, and it is generally counted as the first German Romantic opera. Weber and his librettist Friedrich Kind took the story from a ghost tale by Johann August Apel: a young huntsman, Max, must win a shooting contest in order to marry Agathe, loses his nerve, and lets himself be talked into casting magic bullets in the Wolf's Glen with the help of Samiel, the Black Huntsman, who is the devil under another name. The opera has spoken dialogue between its numbers, in the manner of German popular theatre, but the music that surrounds the supernatural scenes was like nothing audiences had heard. Its success went beyond anything Weber had hoped for. Vienna staged it the same year, and within a short time it had been taken up by theatres across the German lands and well beyond them.

The overture has always had a life of its own in the concert hall. It is not a medley, although almost everything in it comes from the opera. Weber took a handful of the score's most telling ideas and built them into an independent orchestral movement with a slow introduction and a fast main section, so that the piece works as a symphonic drama in miniature. The forest and the hunt, the demonic presence in the Wolf's Glen, Max's despair and Agathe's confidence all appear, and the argument between them is settled in the same way as in the opera: the key of C minor, which belongs to the dark powers, gives way to a bright C major.

For the listener in the concert hall none of the plot needs to be known. What comes across is the thing that made the opera a turning point: an orchestra used for atmosphere and colour, with horns, low clarinets, tremolo strings and soft drum strokes carrying as much of the story as any melody. It is easy to hear why later Romantic composers treated this score as a point of departure, and it makes an apt opening for a programme that goes on to Liszt and Schubert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The overture begins with slow swells from the whole orchestra, like a question left hanging. Then comes its best-known passage: a chorale for the horns over quiet strings, the sound of hunting horns softened into something close to a hymn, and an image of the forest at peace.

The peace does not last. The strings begin to shiver in tremolo, the timpani throb softly, and an uneasy diminished seventh chord settles over the music. In the opera that harmony is tied to Samiel. Out of it grows the fast section, agitated music in C minor taken from Max's aria in the first act.

The contrast, when it comes, is a broad and confident melody in the major: the theme of Agathe's aria in the second act. Notice that it does not win at once. The low strings and brass answer the woodwinds with doubt, the storm returns, and there is a long silence before the full orchestra lands on a blazing C major chord and Agathe's melody comes back to carry the overture home.

Franz Liszt

1811–1886

22 minutes

Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major, S. 125

THE COMPOSER

Franz Liszt was the greatest piano virtuoso of his age, perhaps of any age. Born in Hungary in 1811, he was a child prodigy who studied with Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny and the court composer Antonio Salieri in Vienna. By his twenties, he had invented the modern piano recital and toured Europe amid a public hysteria that the poet Heinrich Heine dubbed "Lisztomania."

Yet Liszt was far more than a showman. In 1848, he abandoned his touring career to become musical director at the Weimar court, where he championed the revolutionary music of Wagner and Berlioz, premiered *Lohengrin*, and invented the symphonic poem, the extended orchestral work that tells a story. His circle included the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, who married Liszt's daughter Cosima. Later in life, he took minor orders in the Catholic Church and composed visionary late works that anticipate the harmonic language of the twentieth century.

Liszt and Johannes Brahms stood in opposing camps in the "War of the Romantics": Liszt led the progressive "New German School" alongside Wagner, while Brahms was claimed by the defenders of classical forms and absolute music.

ABOUT THE WORK

Liszt's two piano concertos were both a long time in the making, and the second took longest of all. He drafted it in 1839, in the middle of the touring years that made him the most famous pianist in Europe, and then put the manuscript away for about a decade. When he took it up again he was living in Weimar as court music director and had

turned his main attention from playing to composing. He revised the concerto several times over, and the last round of changes was not finished until 1861.

The first performance took place in Weimar on 7 January 1857. Tonight's concert falls 170 years later to the day. Liszt did not play the solo part himself: he conducted, and gave the piano to his pupil Hans von Bronsart, to whom the concerto is dedicated. That choice says something about the piece. In manuscript Liszt called it a 'Concerto symphonique', a title that points to a work halfway between concerto and symphony, and the piano writing, difficult as it is, is less of a display than in the First Concerto. For long stretches the soloist accompanies the woodwinds and strings instead of dominating them.

The concerto is in a single unbroken movement made of several linked sections, slow and fast, and how many sections there are depends on who is counting. What holds it together is the technique Liszt made his own in the Weimar years, the transformation of themes. A melody heard at the outset comes back again and again with its rhythm, speed, harmony and character changed, so that a gentle idea can return as a march and a stormy one as a song. Liszt used the same method in his symphonic poems and in the Piano Sonata in B minor. A critic at the first performance is said to have summed up the concerto as 'the life and adventures of a single melody', and the description still serves well. The Concertgebouw Orchestra's own introduction makes a similar point: the themes behave like characters in a story, falling into different situations, clashing and forming alliances.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There is no grand entrance. The concerto opens quietly in the woodwinds, with a slow, dreaming phrase led by the clarinet that drifts between two unrelated chords. Keep hold of this melody, because nearly everything grows from it. The piano comes in almost shyly, decorating it with arpeggios.

The calm is broken by a fast, agitated section that does the job of a scherzo, full of hammered octaves and driving rhythm. When it burns out, listen for one of the loveliest pages in the work: a solo cello sings the opening theme while the piano accompanies, in a style that owes a good deal to Italian opera.

The energy builds again, and the opening melody returns in its most surprising form, as a full-blooded march for the whole orchestra. Some critics have found this transformation vulgar.

Others hear it as the masterstroke of the piece, the moment that brings the music firmly back to its home key of A major after a long journey away from it. From there the concerto presses on to a fast and brilliant close, with the pianist finally given room for glittering runs up and down the keyboard.

Franz Schubert

55 minutes

1797–1828

Symphony No. 9 in C major, D. 944 ('Great')

THE COMPOSER

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) was born in a suburb of Vienna and spent nearly all of his short life in the city. He showed unusual gifts as a child, had his first lessons from his father and an elder brother, and at eleven became a pupil at the Stadtkonvikt school, where he got to know the orchestral music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. He went on studying composition with Antonio Salieri while training and working as a schoolteacher. He wrote at great speed and left more than a thousand works, among them over six hundred songs, the song cycles *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*, the 'Unfinished' and 'Great' C major symphonies, the 'Trout' Quintet, the String Quintet in C and the last three piano sonatas. During his lifetime his music was valued mainly by a circle of friends and admirers in Vienna, and he gave only one public concert of his own works, in March 1828. He died that November, aged thirty-one. In the decades that followed, musicians including Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt and Brahms discovered and championed his music, and he is now counted among the greatest of all composers.

ABOUT THE WORK

For a long time this symphony was thought to be a work of Schubert's last year, and the manuscript does carry the date March 1828. Scholars now agree that he began it in the summer of 1825 and had it fully scored by 1826. In a letter of 1824 he had already said that he meant to prepare the way to 'a grand symphony', and this is that work. The nickname 'Great' was not his. It was first used simply to tell the piece apart from his earlier and shorter Symphony No. 6, the 'Little' C major, though it has long been understood as a description of the music's scale and majesty. The numbering is unsettled too: English-speaking countries call it No. 9, while the current edition of the Deutsch catalogue of Schubert's works lists it as No. 8.

Schubert could not afford to put on a performance. He sent the score to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna with a dedication, and the society paid him a small sum, had parts copied and gave the work an informal run-through. It was then laid aside. Schubert died in November 1828 without hearing it played in public.

Ten years later Robert Schumann visited Vienna and was shown the manuscript by the composer's brother Ferdinand. He recognised at once what it was, and went back to Leipzig with a copy for Felix Mendelssohn, who conducted the first public performance at the Gewandhaus on 21 March 1839. Schumann wrote about the occasion in his journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and praised the symphony for its 'heavenly length', a phrase that has stayed with it ever since. He also wrote that the instruments in it were like human voices, full of life and wit.

Other orchestras were slower to agree. For years the symphony was thought too long and too difficult, and when Mendelssohn tried to introduce it in Paris and London the players refused to go on with it. The demands are real. Schubert asks for unusual stamina from the strings, who repeat their driving figures for pages at a time, and he gives the woodwinds unusually prominent and exposed parts. He also treats the three trombones as full members of the orchestra, with melodies of their own, at a time when they were still mostly kept for special effects.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony begins with two horns alone, in unison, playing a broad, calm melody. Its first three notes simply rise through a major third, and that small figure runs through the whole movement. The slow introduction is unusually long and complete in itself. It quickens without a break into the main Allegro, and at the very end of the movement the horn theme comes back in triumph with the full orchestra behind it.

The second movement, in A minor, moves at a steady walking pace over a march-like tread in the strings. It alternates twice with a warmer, more consoling theme in the major. Listen for the moment when the march builds to a harsh climax, breaks off into silence, and has to begin again quietly.

The Scherzo is on the same large scale as everything else: a stamping, energetic dance worked out at full length, with themes that keep slipping into waltz time. Its central Trio is a broad, swaying song for the woodwinds.

The finale starts with a fanfare of dotted rhythms and triplets and hardly pauses for breath afterwards. The second theme is announced by four repeated notes on the horns, which then become a marching tune over endlessly circling strings. A little later, at the start of the development, the woodwinds play a

phrase that recalls the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth. The four repeated notes return in the coda, hammered out by the whole orchestra, to bring the symphony to its close in C major.

Tonight's artists

Yunchan Lim *piano*

Yunchan Lim made his debut with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in January 2026 in Schumann's Piano Concerto, and returns a year later with a very different kind of Romantic concerto. Liszt's Second gives the soloist plenty to do, but much of it is listening work: accompanying a clarinet or a solo cello, taking over a melody from the orchestra and changing its character. It suits a pianist whose playing has been noticed as much for its imagination as for its technique, and who became the youngest winner of the Van Cliburn Competition in 2022.

Yunchan Lim, born in South Korea in 2004, became an international sensation in 2022 when, at the age of eighteen, he became the youngest ever winner of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. The triumph, crowned by a now-legendary performance of Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto, was watched by millions online and announced a major new talent. Since then he has appeared with leading orchestras and in major recital halls around the world, and his debut studio album of Chopin's Études won a Gramophone Award. Admired for a maturity, seriousness and depth of musicianship well beyond his years, as well as for formidable technical command, he is widely regarded as one of the most exciting pianists to have emerged in a generation. This concert marks his debut with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Schubert**

Christopher H. Gibbs, Cambridge University Press 2000

A short, readable life of Schubert that sets aside the legends, and a good companion to a symphony he never heard performed in public.

ACCESSIBLE **Franz Liszt: Musician, Celebrity, Superstar**

Oliver Hilmes, Yale University Press 2018

A lively modern biography that follows Liszt from the touring years, when he first drafted the Second Concerto, to Weimar, where he finished it.

DEEPER **Schubert: The Music and the Man**

Brian Newbould, University of California Press 1999

Newbould combines biography with close discussion of the music, including the 'Great' C major Symphony and the question of when it was written.

SOURCES

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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-01-07-fischer>

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