

Time's Echo Live: Schoenberg, Weinberg and Shostakovich's 'Babi Yar'

Friday, January 15, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Andrey Boreyko, conductor · Gregor Horsch, cello · Alexander Roslavets, bass
· Laurens Symfonisch, choir

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	SCHOENBERG 1874–1951 <i>A Survivor from Warsaw, Op. 46</i>	7'
2	WEINBERG 1919–1996 <i>Fantasia for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 52</i>	19'
3	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Symphony No. 13 in B-flat minor, Op. 113 ('Babi Yar')</i>	60'
	TOTAL MUSIC	86'

Arnold Schoenberg

1874–1951

A Survivor from Warsaw, Op. 46

THE COMPOSER

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) was born in Vienna and was largely self-made as a composer, with Alexander Zemlinsky, later his brother-in-law, as his mentor. His early works, such as *Verklärte Nacht* and the huge *Gurre-Lieder*, grow out of the late Romantic language of Brahms and Wagner. In the years before the First World War he gave up traditional tonality in works including *Pierrot lunaire*, and by 1923 he had arrived at the twelve-tone method, a way of organising all twelve notes of the chromatic scale that shaped a great deal of later twentieth-century music. He was also a teacher of great influence, and Alban Berg and Anton Webern were among his pupils. From the mid 1920s he directed a master class in composition at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. When the Nazis forced him out in 1933 he formally returned to the Jewish faith in Paris and emigrated to the United States. He settled in Los Angeles, became a professor at the University of California there in 1936 and an American citizen in 1941, and lived in the city until his death.

7 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

A Survivor from Warsaw lasts about seven minutes and is one of the most concentrated pieces Schoenberg ever wrote. He composed it in Los Angeles in August 1947, when he was seventy-two and in poor health, for a narrator, men's chorus and orchestra. The words are his own.

The first push came from outside. Early in 1947 the dancer and choreographer Corinne Chochem sent him a partisan song from the ghettos and asked for a piece based on it. Schoenberg replied that he wanted to set a scene from the Warsaw Ghetto, of doomed Jews who began to sing before going to their deaths. The two could not agree on terms, but the idea stayed with him, and a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation gave him the occasion to write it as a work of his own. He drafted the text and the music in a matter of weeks.

The narrator is a man who has survived and cannot remember everything. He recalls a morning roll call: the reveille before dawn, the prisoners driven out, the old and the sick beaten to the ground by a sergeant, the order to count off faster and faster so that the sergeant will know how many he is sending to the gas chamber. At the moment when the counting becomes a stampede, the men begin to sing the Shema Yisroel, the Jewish declaration of faith. The narration is in English, the sergeant shouts in German, and the prayer is sung in Hebrew.

The account is not a historical record of the Warsaw Ghetto, and scholars have pointed out that it runs together different events. Schoenberg knew this and said that accuracy was not the point. The text, he wrote, was a warning to Jews never to forget what had been done to them, and 'the main thing is, that I saw it in my imagination'.

The first performance was given on 4 November 1948, far from the great musical centres, by the Albuquerque Civic Symphony Orchestra under Kurt Frederick in New Mexico. The audience was so shaken that the piece was played a second time on the spot.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece is written with Schoenberg's twelve-tone method, but there is no need to follow the technique. The orchestra works in short, sharp gestures that illustrate the narrator's words almost as a film score would.

It opens with a trumpet call, the reveille, which returns through the piece like a memory that will not go away. Listen for the fanfares that go with the sergeant, and for the weeping figures in the violins when the narrator speaks of the groans of the beaten.

The narrator's part is neither sung nor simply spoken. Schoenberg wrote out its rhythm and its rise and fall, but asked that it should never settle into definite pitch.

When the prisoners count off, the music accelerates along with them, faster and louder, until the narrator compares the sound to a stampede of wild horses. At its peak the men's chorus enters with the Shema Yisroel. After the fragmented music and broken speech that have gone before, it is the only sustained singing in the piece, and the work ends with it.

Mieczysław Weinberg

19 minutes

1919–1996

Fantasia for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 52

THE COMPOSER

Mieczysław Weinberg was born in Warsaw in 1919 to a family of Polish-Jewish musicians who worked in the Yiddish theatre. His life was shattered in September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland: Weinberg fled east on foot toward Soviet territory, while his parents and sister remained behind. They were murdered at the Trawniki concentration camp. He never saw them again.

After years in Minsk and Tashkent, Weinberg settled in Moscow in October 1943 and met Shostakovich, the start of one of the most remarkable friendships in twentieth-century music. The two played each other their new works, and Weinberg was Shostakovich's partner in the four-hand play-throughs of his new orchestral scores. When Weinberg was arrested by Stalin's secret police in February 1953 and held at the Lubyanka, Shostakovich wrote to the secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria on his behalf and offered to take in Weinberg's young daughter should the worst happen. Stalin's death a few weeks later led to Weinberg's release that April.

Despite a catalogue of staggering scale (more than twenty symphonies, seventeen string quartets, seven operas, concertos, ballets, songs and a large body of film music), Weinberg remained largely unknown in the West for decades. Only since the 1990s has his music begun to take its rightful place in the international repertoire, with major orchestras, including the Berliner Philharmoniker, championing his cause.

ABOUT THE WORK

Mieczysław Weinberg knew at first hand the history that the other two works on this programme remember. A Polish Jew from Warsaw, he fled east when Germany invaded in 1939 and spent the rest of his life in the Soviet Union, where Shostakovich became his close friend and supporter. The safety he found there was never complete. The years after 1948 were hard for every serious Soviet composer, and harder for a Jewish one as official antisemitism grew, and early in 1953 Weinberg was arrested on trumped-up charges of Zionist agitation.

The Fantasia for cello and orchestra belongs to exactly this period. He worked on it between 1951 and 1953, and the Weinberg scholar David Fanning has remarked that two years was an extraordinarily long time for a composer who usually wrote with great fluency. It sits among a group of suites, rhapsodies, sinfoniettas and concertinos in which Weinberg seems to have tried to meet halfway the official demand for a simpler, more tuneful style. The reviewer Robert Hugill, writing about a recent recording, put it another way: the idea was to play safe with folk-inspired pieces, but the result is more complex than it needed to be, as if Weinberg could not quite play the game.

The music is full of melody, and much of it sounds as though it could be folk song. Hugill hears Polish tunes in it, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra's own introduction speaks of klezmer melancholy and Polish folk melodies. Fanning is more careful, noting that neither the composer nor his commentators left any clue as to whether the themes are borrowed or invented. Either way the tone is bittersweet, and closer to private song than to public display.

The work first reached an audience in the composer's own arrangement for cello and piano, which according to Fanning was played in November 1953 by the cellist Daniil Shafran with the pianist Nina Musinyan, and published the following year. No performance of the orchestral version during Weinberg's lifetime has been documented. Like much of his music, it has come into its own only in recent decades.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Fantasia plays without a break for a little under twenty minutes, and its shape is an arch. It begins slowly, gathers speed step by step to a fast central section, and then retraces its steps to end as quietly as it began.

After a short orchestral introduction of Romantic warmth, the cello enters with the main melody, a long, folk-like tune with a tinge of melancholy. Notice how lightly Weinberg scores the accompaniment, so that the soloist never has to force.

The next section is a little quicker and lighter on its feet, with the lilt of a dance. It leads to the central Allegro con fuoco, robust and vigorous music in which the cello has to work hard against the full orchestra.

The energy drains away into a cadenza for the cello alone, strong in gesture but still melancholy in mood. From there the music goes back the way it came: the lighter dance returns, then the opening melody, now gentler than before, and the piece fades into silence.

Dmitri Shostakovich

60 minutes

1906–1975

Symphony No. 13 in B-flat minor, Op. 113 ('Babi Yar')

THE COMPOSER

Dmitri Shostakovich was born on September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg (then still the Russian capital) into a cultured family. His father was an engineer, and it was his mother who gave him his first piano lessons. The young Dmitri showed exceptional talent, entering the Petrograd Conservatory at thirteen and graduating at nineteen with his First Symphony, whose triumphant premiere in 1926 soon brought him international fame.

Shostakovich's life thereafter became inseparable from the tortured history of the Soviet Union. His 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was initially a sensation, but in 1936 a devastating Pravda editorial, widely taken to reflect Stalin's own displeasure, condemned it as "muddle instead of music." Shostakovich lived for years in fear of arrest, at one point waiting at night on the landing outside his flat so that his family would not be disturbed if the knock came.

Yet under this shadow, Shostakovich composed a stream of masterpieces. His fifteen symphonies and fifteen string quartets constitute one of the twentieth century's greatest artistic achievements: music that bears witness to its era's terrors while transcending them through its humanity and craft. He died in Moscow on August 9, 1975.

ABOUT THE WORK

Babi Yar is a ravine on the edge of Kyiv. On 29 and 30 September 1941 the German occupiers shot some 34,000 Jews there, and the killing went on at the site until 1943. For years afterwards the Soviet authorities raised no memorial, and the fact that most of the victims were

Jews went unspoken. In September 1961 the young poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko published a poem in the *Literaturnaya gazeta* that began from that absence and turned it into a denunciation of anti-semitism, in Russia's past and in its present.

Shostakovich read the poem and decided almost at once to set it. By the spring of 1962 he had finished what he first thought of as a one-movement symphonic poem for bass soloist, a chorus of basses and orchestra. Then he found further poems by Yevtushenko that he wanted to add, and asked the poet to write one more. The single movement grew into a symphony of five, completed on 20 July 1962. The other four poems have nothing to do with the massacre. They deal with the power of humour to outlive every tyrant, the patience of women queueing in the shops, the memory of fear under Stalin, and the difference between a career and a conscience. Together they make a portrait of Soviet life as Shostakovich saw it. The nickname 'Babi Yar', taken from the first movement, is not in his manuscript.

Getting the work performed was a struggle. Shostakovich took the score to the conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky in Leningrad, who declined to conduct it, and the refusal caused a rift between the two men. Kirill Kondrashin took it on. Officials pressed for the concert to be called off until the last moment, but it went ahead on 18 December 1962 in Moscow, with the Moscow Philharmonic and the bass Vitaly Gromadsky. Kondrashin later remembered the applause that broke out after the first movement and the long ovation at the end. The Moscow press printed nothing about it. Under official pressure Yevtushenko then supplied eight substitute lines for the first movement, on Soviet patriotic themes, and these were used in the performances that followed. Today the original text is sung.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The sound of this symphony is like no other. There are no high voices: one bass soloist and a chorus of basses who sing almost throughout in unison, as a single massive voice, often repeating or answering the soloist. The vocal writing follows the rhythm of speech, in a manner that goes back to Mussorgsky, and the words are always in the foreground.

I. Babi Yar (Adagio). A bell tolls, and the voices begin with the poem's starting point: that no monument stands at Babi Yar. The soloist takes the poet's part, imagining himself in turn as Dreyfus, as a boy in the Białystok pogrom, and as Anne Frank,

and the music moves through these scenes like episodes of an opera. Listen for the violence with which the orchestra breaks in on the quiet Anne Frank episode.

II. Humour (Allegretto). A raucous, mocking scherzo. Rulers have tried to buy humour, to kill it and to lock it up, and each time it gets away.

III. In the Store (Adagio). A slow, bare lament for the women who queue patiently in the shops. At its very end the chorus leaves its unison for two soft, harmonised chords, like an amen.

IV. Fears (Largo). The darkest music in the work, harmonically unsettled from its first bars. 'Fears are dying out in Russia', the chorus sings, in tones that suggest they are not dead yet. The mood lifts only once, for a parody of a Soviet marching song.

V. A Career (Allegretto). After so much darkness, two flutes open the finale with a gentle, almost innocent tune. The poem is an ironic attack on careerists and their cynical self-interest, and a tribute to those who do real creative work whatever it costs them; bassoon and trumpets add their own sarcastic comments. The symphony ends softly and lyrically, with the bell that opened it sounding again in the last bars.

Tonight's artists

Gregor Horsch *cello*

The soloist in Weinberg's Fantasia comes from inside the orchestra. Gregor Horsch has led the Concertgebouw Orchestra's cello section since 1997, and here he steps forward in a piece that asks less for bravura than for a singing line and a feeling for half-lights. It is chamber music on a large scale, and it gains from being played by a cellist among his own colleagues.

Gregor Horsch, born in Germany in 1962, has been principal cellist of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra since 1997. He studied at the Freiburg University of Music and then at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, where he graduated with honours. Around the end of his studies he won a series of awards: the Pierre Fournier Award in London in 1988, a prize at the Scheveningen International Music Competition in 1989 and the Gaspar Cassadó competition in Florence in 1990. Before joining the Concertgebouw Orchestra he was principal cellist of the Netherlands Ballet Orchestra and of the Residentie Orchestra in The Hague.

Alexander Roslavets *bass*

The solo part of the Thirteenth Symphony is one of the longest and most exposed in the bass repertoire: the singer is on his feet for most of an hour, and has to be storyteller, satirist and mourner by turns. Alexander Roslavets brings to it a voice trained in the Russian operatic tradition and a stage career that takes in both Wagner's giants and Tchaikovsky's kings. The orchestra's announcement singles out his deep voice in both this symphony and Schoenberg's A Survivor from Warsaw.

Alexander Roslavets is a Belarusian bass. He studied at the Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatory in St Petersburg and was a member of the Young Artists Opera Programme of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow from 2014 to 2016. In 2016 he joined the ensemble of the Hamburg State Opera, where his roles have included Fafner in Wagner's Ring, Sarastro in Die Zauberflöte and Prince Gremin in Eugene Onegin. As a guest he has sung the title role in Cherubini's Ali Baba at La Scala in Milan, King René in Tchaikovsky's Iolanta at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and Vodník in Dvořák's Rusalka at the Glyndebourne Festival.

Laurens Symfonisch *choir*

Only the men of Laurens Symfonisch sing in this concert. In Schoenberg's piece they enter once, at the very end, with the Shema Yisroel. In Shostakovich's symphony they are present from the first line to the last, a chorus of low voices singing in unison as the collective voice beside the soloist.

Laurens Symfonisch is a young Rotterdam-based symphonic choir, formed to sing works that call for large choral forces and known until the 2010s as the Rotterdam Symphony Chorus. It is one of the choirs of Laurens Vocaal, under the artistic direction of Wiecher Mandemaker, and has sung with orchestras including the Rotterdam Philharmonic and the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Time's Echo**

Jeremy Eichler, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2023

The book this concert series is named after and built around: Eichler's account of how composers, Schoenberg and Shostakovich among them, turned the Second World War and the Holocaust into musical memorials.

ACCESSIBLE **Shostakovich: A Life Remembered**

Elizabeth Wilson, Princeton University Press 2006

Shostakovich's life told through the recollections of those who knew him, a vivid way into the world in which the Thirteenth Symphony was written and first performed.

DEEPER **Shostakovich: A Life**

Laurel E. Fay, Oxford University Press 2005

The standard documentary biography, careful about what can and cannot be established, including the events around the Thirteenth Symphony and its text.

SOURCES

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3. A Survivor from Warsaw (article by Amy Wlodarski), Music and the Holocaust, World ORT. <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/memory/memorials/a-survivor-from-wars/>
4. Arnold Schoenberg, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Schoenberg
5. Arnold Schönberg, Universal Edition. <https://www.universaledition.com/en/Contacts/Arnold-Schoenberg/>
6. Weinberg: Concertos (CHSA 5064), booklet note by David Fanning, Chandos Records. <https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/CH5064.pdf>
7. Exploring Weinberg: two works for cello and orchestra alongside the last Chamber Symphony No. 4, Planet Hugill. <https://www.planethugill.com/2022/04/exploring-weinberg-two-works-for-cello.html?m=1>

Dmitri Shostakovich · Symphony No. 13 in B-flat minor, Op. 113 ('Babi Yar')

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9. Symphony No. 13 (Shostakovich), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._13_\(Shostakovich\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._13_(Shostakovich))
10. Symphony No. 13, Babi Yar (programme note by Harlow Robinson), Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://bso.org/works/symphony-no-13-babi-yar>
11. Dmitri Shostakovich, Symphony No. 13, Op. 113 'Babi Yar' (concert note by Laurel E. Fay), American Symphony Orchestra. <https://americansymphony.org/concert-notes/symphony-no-13-op-113-babi-yar-1962>
12. Andrey Boreyko, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/andrey-boreyko/>
13. Andrey Boreyko, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrey_Boreyko
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16. Alexander Roslavets, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/alexander-roslavets>
17. Alexander Roslavets, Royal Ballet and Opera. <https://www.rbo.org.uk/people/alexander-roslavets>
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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-01-15-boreyko>

Version 1, 7 October 2026