

Klaus Mäkelä conducts Beethoven's Seventh, Lisa Batiashvili plays Sibelius

Wednesday, January 27, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor · Lisa Batiashvili, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	SCHUMANN 1810–1856 <i>Manfred Overture, Op. 115</i>	12'
2	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47</i>	34'
3	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92</i>	37'
TOTAL MUSIC		83'

Robert Schumann

12 minutes

1810–1856

Manfred Overture, Op. 115

THE COMPOSER

Robert Schumann was born on June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Saxony, into a literary household. His father was a publisher and bookseller, and throughout his life, Schumann remained as devoted to literature as to music, editing an influential music journal and writing eloquent criticism that championed Chopin, Berlioz, and the young Brahms.

After abandoning law studies in Leipzig, Schumann pursued a career as a concert pianist, but a growing weakness in the fingers of his right hand forced him to focus on composition. His piano works of the 1830s, including *Carnaval*, *Kreisleriana*, and *Kinderszenen*, established him as a leading voice of musical Romanticism. In 1840, after a long legal battle with her father, he married the celebrated pianist Clara Wieck, and their union sparked an extraordinary creative outburst: more than half of all Schumann's songs date from that single year.

Schumann's later years were shadowed by mental illness, which had plagued him intermittently since youth. In 1854, after attempting suicide, he was confined to an asylum near Bonn, where he died on July 29, 1856, at the age of forty-six.

ABOUT THE WORK

Lord Byron published *Manfred* in 1817 and called it a dramatic poem. It was never really meant for the stage. Its hero is a nobleman who lives alone in a castle in the Alps, tormented by guilt over the death of Astarte, the woman he loved. The poem hints strongly that she was his sister and that the love was forbidden. The plot is slight, and its real subject is his inner turmoil. He rejects the consolations of faith and penance and chooses to meet his fate on his own terms. For the Romantic generation he was the model of the proud, self-tormenting outsider.

Schumann had known the poem since he was eighteen, and it never lost its hold on him. In 1848, a year of revolutions across Europe, he made his own version of the text and set it as what he called a ‘dramatic poem with music’: an overture followed by fifteen numbers, among them choruses, solo songs and passages in which the actors speak over the orchestra. He thought of it as ‘something completely new and unheard-of’, and it has remained hard to place, being neither an opera nor a concert piece.

The overture was performed first, at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 14 March 1852, with Schumann conducting. The complete work followed three months later in Weimar, where Franz Liszt put it on the stage and conducted. Since then the overture has gone its own way. It is the one part of the score that is regularly played, and it is widely thought to be among the finest orchestral movements Schumann wrote. The composer Hugo Wolf said that it brought the essence of the drama to expression ‘with the simplest strokes’.

It is a portrait more than a narrative. Schumann does not illustrate scenes from the poem. He writes a movement in the form of a symphonic first movement, in the dark and unusual key of E-flat minor, whose restless themes stand for the state of Manfred’s mind.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Three stabbing chords from the full orchestra tear open the curtain. A slow, sorrowing introduction follows, and the tempo gradually quickens until the music breaks into the main fast section.

The principal theme is breathless and driven, always pressing forward and never finding a firm footing. Against it Schumann sets gentler, plaintive phrases. Listen to how the ideas are pulled apart, stretched and joined together again instead of simply being repeated: the whole movement surges up towards passion again and again, and each time falls back.

There is no victory at the end. The fast music exhausts itself, and the slow introduction returns as an epilogue. The overture closes in the minor key, without the redemption a listener might expect.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

34 minutes

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

THE COMPOSER

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) is Finland's greatest composer and one of the supreme symphonists of the twentieth century. His music, above all the seven symphonies and tone poems such as *Finlandia* and *Tapiola*, became inseparable from Finland's emerging national identity during its struggle against Russian domination, and he was revered as a national hero in his own lifetime. His style evolved from late-Romantic richness toward an increasingly concentrated, organic and original conception of symphonic form, in which themes seem to grow and fuse like living things, shot through with the cold light and vast spaces of the Nordic landscape. Famously, after completing the Seventh Symphony, the incidental music to *The Tempest* and the tone poem *Tapiola* in the mid-1920s, he fell almost completely silent for the last thirty years of his life: the 'silence of Järvenpää'.

ABOUT THE WORK

Sibelius wanted, as a young man, to be a violinist. He gave up the ambition, but when he came to write his only concerto it was for the instrument he knew from the inside. The idea was with him from 1899. By the autumn of 1903 the work was far enough advanced for him to promise the dedication to Willy Burmester, a celebrated virtuoso who had once led the orchestra in Helsinki and who offered to give the first performance in Berlin. His wife Aino described him that winter playing the themes on his violin day and night, with so many ideas that he was almost dizzy.

Then Sibelius, short of money, decided to bring the premiere forward and hold it in Helsinki. Burmester could not come. The solo part went to Victor Nováček, a teacher at the Helsinki conservatory, who had little time to learn an extremely difficult piece that the composer had barely finished. The first performance, on 8 February 1904 with Sibelius conducting, was not a success. The critic Karl Flodin, normally a supporter, wrote that the composer had given in to conventional virtuosity.

Sibelius withdrew the concerto and rewrote it. He shortened the first movement, removed a second cadenza and a good deal of display, and tightened the finale. The new version was introduced in Berlin on 19

October 1905, with Karel Halíř as soloist and Richard Strauss conducting. Burmester, passed over a second time, was so offended that he never played the work. It is the 1905 version that became established, though slowly: the concerto's worldwide popularity dates from the 1930s, when Jascha Heifetz recorded it. The original score stayed in the family's keeping and was first recorded only in 1991.

What sets the piece apart from most virtuoso concertos is its seriousness of construction. The orchestra has real material of its own, dark in colour, and the solo cadenza in the first movement is not an interruption but the place where the themes are developed. The scholar and critic Donald Tovey wrote that he had not met 'a more original, a more masterly, and a more exhilarating work'.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro moderato. There is no orchestral introduction. Over a soft, pulsing cushion of strings the soloist enters at once with a long, wandering melody that seems to come out of the far distance. A second theme arrives dark and low on the violin's G string. Where a development section would normally stand, the orchestra falls silent and the soloist plays a long cadenza built on the opening theme, full of double stops, trills and runs. When the themes return they are darker in colour, and the movement ends with the main theme's dramatic material at full strength.

II. Adagio di molto. A short phrase from clarinets and oboes leads in the violin's broad, heartfelt melody, played over plucked strings. It asks for restraint and simplicity more than brilliance. The orchestra turns stormy in the middle of the movement, and the violin answers with plaintive double stops before the opening melody returns and the music sinks to a serene close.

III. Allegro, ma non tanto. Four bars of drumming rhythm from timpani and low strings set the pace, and the violin leaps in on its lowest string with a dance theme of fierce energy. Tovey called this movement 'a polonaise for polar bears', a joke that has stuck to it ever since. A second theme, with something of the waltz about it, is given first to the orchestra. The solo part grows steadily harder, with passages in thirds, arpeggios, octaves and high harmonics, and the major key is won only in the final bars, where the violin's line climbs upward and the orchestra seals the ending with it.

Ludwig van Beethoven

37 minutes

1770–1827

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven composed his Seventh Symphony in 1811 and 1812, part of it during a stay at the Bohemian spa of Teplitz, where he had gone for the sake of his health. It is dedicated to Count Moritz von Fries. More than a year passed before it was heard. The first performance took place on 8 December 1813 in the hall of the University of Vienna, at a charity concert for soldiers wounded at the Battle of Hanau, with Beethoven himself conducting.

It was one of the great public successes of his life. Vienna was in a patriotic fever as Napoleon's power collapsed, and the same concert included the first performance of Beethoven's noisy battle piece *Wellington's Victory*. The orchestra, led by his friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh, was full of well-known musicians who had volunteered their services, among them Louis Spohr, Hummel, Meyerbeer and Salieri. The audience insisted on hearing the second movement again immediately, and the whole concert had to be repeated. Spohr left a description of Beethoven on the podium, flinging his arms apart at a sudden accent and leaping into the air at a loud entry. Beethoven, for his part, counted the symphony among his best works.

The Seventh has no programme and no nickname. What holds it together is rhythm. Each of the four movements is built on a short, obsessively repeated rhythmic pattern, and the energy that results has struck listeners from the start as physical. Richard Wagner, writing in 1850, called the symphony 'the apotheosis of the dance', meaning dance raised to its highest form, and the phrase has never been bettered. The harmony is as bold as the rhythm. Beethoven keeps swerving from the home key of A major into the distant keys of C and F, and the plan of the whole work rests on that tension.

Tonight's performance falls in a Beethoven year: 2027 marks two hundred years since his death in Vienna in March 1827.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Poco sostenuto, Vivace. The slow introduction is unusually long, almost a movement in itself, with long rising scales and excursions into the keys of C and F. At the end everything shrinks to a single note, E, repeated more than sixty times until it catches the skipping dotted rhythm of the Vivace. That rhythm then runs through almost every bar of the movement.

II. Allegretto. A single unstable chord in the winds opens the movement. Then violas and cellos begin a quiet march in A minor on a pattern of one long note, two short and two long, and the theme is at first little more than one repeated pitch. It is handed upward through the strings, gathering a counter-melody and growing each time, like a procession approaching from far away. Gentler episodes in A major bring relief. This is the movement that was encored in 1813, and it has had a life of its own ever since.

III. Presto. A racing scherzo in F major, full of sudden changes between loud and soft. The slower trio, a broad tune in D major said to be based on an Austrian pilgrims' hymn, comes round twice instead of the usual once.

IV. Allegro con brio. The finale goes at a relentless pace. Its whirling main theme is driven by heavy accents, and the movement outdoes even the scherzo in sheer force. The energy never lets up, and by the last pages the music seems to dissolve into pure sound and motion.

Tonight's artists

Lisa Batiashvili *violin*

Few violinists have a longer association with this concerto than Lisa Batiashvili. She came to international notice at sixteen as a prizewinner at the Sibelius Competition in Helsinki, she has recorded the work for Deutsche Grammophon, and in 2018 the Sibelius Academy gave her an honorary doctorate. She has also been a guest of the Concertgebouw Orchestra for some twenty-five years. Here she plays the concerto with a compatriot of the composer on the podium: Klaus Mäkelä, the orchestra's chief conductor designate.

Lisa Batiashvili was born in 1979 in Tbilisi, Georgia, to a violinist father, who gave her first lessons when she was four, and a pianist mother. The family moved to Germany in 1991. She studied in Hamburg with Mark Lubotsky, a pupil of David Oistrakh, and later with Ana Chumachenco. In 1995, aged sixteen, she took second prize at the International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition in Helsinki, and from 1999 to 2001 she was among the first BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists. Alongside the central concerto repertoire she has given first performances of new works, including Magnus Lindberg's Violin Concerto, which is dedicated to her. She has held residencies with the New York Philharmonic and, in the 2023–24 season, the Berliner Philharmoniker. She records for Deutsche Grammophon, and plays a Guarneri 'del Gesù' violin made in 1739. In 2021 she set up the Lisa Batiashvili Foundation to support young musicians from Georgia.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Sibelius**

Andrew Barnett, Yale University Press 2010

A full life and works that follows the Violin Concerto from its first version of 1904 to the revision of 1905, by a writer closely involved with the recordings of both.

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision**

Lewis Lockwood, W. W. Norton 2017

A chapter on each of the nine symphonies, written for the general listener, with the Seventh placed in the Vienna of 1812 and 1813.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius**

Daniel M. Grimley (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2004

Essays by leading Sibelius scholars on the music, its Finnish background and its reception, for readers who want to go further into the composer of the Violin Concerto.

SOURCES

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3. Programme Note: Robert Schumann, 'Manfred' Overture, op. 115 (by Malte Krasting), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/robert-schumann-manfred-overture-op-115/>
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10. Lisa Batiashvili, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lisa_Batiashvili
11. Biography, Lisa Batiashvili (official website). <https://www.lisabatiashvili.com/biography>
12. Sibelius, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300163971>
13. Beethoven's Symphonies: An Artistic Vision, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393353853>
14. The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521894609>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-01-27-makela>

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