

A Last Concerto and a First Symphony

Friday, February 20, 2026 · 19:30 · Musikverein
Andris Nelsons, conductor · Lang Lang, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BARTÓK 1881–1945 <i>Piano Concerto No. 3, Sz. 119</i>	24'
2	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 1 in D major</i>	52'
TOTAL MUSIC		76'

Béla Bartók

1881–1945

Piano Concerto No. 3, Sz. 119

THE COMPOSER

Béla Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, then in the Kingdom of Hungary (today Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), and grew up to become one of the towering figures of twentieth-century music, and one of its great explorers. Trained as a pianist and composer at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, he was a formidable virtuoso who might have made his career at the keyboard alone. Instead, in the first decade of the century, he turned to the villages of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, later reaching as far as Algeria, recording peasant songs on wax cylinders and laying, with his friend Zoltán Kodály, the foundations of modern ethnomusicology. That fieldwork was not antiquarianism: the irregular metres, modal scales, and percussive vitality of the music he gathered passed directly into his own language, giving it a flinty rhythmic drive and an earthy modernity unlike anything in the Austro-German tradition he otherwise revered. Bartók loathed fascism: after 1933 he refused to give concerts in Nazi Germany and broke with his publisher there. As Hungary slid toward alliance with Hitler, he emigrated to the United States in 1940, settling in New York. The American years were hard, with failing health, financial anxiety and a sense of exile, yet they produced the radiant Concerto for Orchestra (1943) and the Third Piano Concerto heard tonight. He died of complications of leukaemia in New York on 26 September 1945, his Third Piano Concerto all but finished on his desk.

24 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

The Third Piano Concerto is Bartók's farewell, the last work he all but completed, written in the final months of his life in 1945, against the gathering shadow of the leukaemia that would kill him that September. He had emigrated to the United States in 1940, and the American years had been bruising: illness, money worries, and the ache of exile pressing on a composer used to standing at the centre of his own musical culture. Yet the late works that emerged from that hardship are among the most luminous and reconciled he ever wrote, and the Third Concerto is the most serene of all.

There is a tender private story behind it. Bartók's first two piano concertos are ferocious, percussive, fiendishly difficult, and written for himself to play. The Third is gentler and more lyrical, and it was conceived as a gift: a surprise birthday present and, he knew, a legacy for his wife, the pianist Ditta Pásztory-Bartók, so that she would have a concerto to perform after he was gone. He worked on it through the summer of 1945, racing the disease. He very nearly won that race. At his death the score was complete but for the orchestration of its final seventeen bars, which his friend and fellow émigré Tibor Serly completed from Bartók's notes. Ditta, grief-stricken, did not give the premiere; that fell to Bartók's former pupil György Sándor, with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, on 8 February 1946.

The concerto is cast in three movements and looks, in part, backward, to a clarity and balance that feels almost neo-Baroque or neo-Classical, the spiky modernism of the earlier Bartók softened into something songful and humane. The outer movements are bright and folk-inflected; the slow central movement is the heart of the work, a hushed hymn of thanks. Across its twenty-odd minutes the Third Concerto offers a portrait of a composer making peace: with his illness, with his exile, and with the music he was about to leave behind.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement (*Allegretto*) opens not with a flourish but with a quiet, flowing folk-like theme in the piano over a soft shimmer of strings, the keyboard treated lyrically, as a singing voice rather than a percussion battery. Listen for how Hungarian and Romanian melodic turns colour the writing, and for the unforced, almost conversational dialogue between soloist and orchestra. This is Bartók with his sharpest edges put away.

The central *Adagio religioso* is the emotional core, and one of the most moving things Bartók wrote. Its outer sections are a solemn chorale. The marking 'religioso' is no accident, and

many listeners hear in it an echo of Beethoven's 'Heiliger Dankgesang', the convalescent's hymn of thanksgiving from the A minor String Quartet. Bartók, gravely ill, is making his own gesture of gratitude. At the movement's centre comes something unmistakable to anyone who knows him: 'night music', that private Bartók world of chirping birds, rustling insects, and trills evoking the sounds of the nocturnal countryside, the orchestra alive with tiny flickers around the piano's quiet musings.

The finale bursts in without pause: a vigorous, dancing rondo full of folk-rhythm propulsion, with a sturdy fugal passage that shows the old contrapuntal master still fully in command. Listen for the swing between exuberant dance and rigorous counterpoint, and for the way the concerto ends: bright, affirmative, untroubled. Knowing this was the last music Bartók finished, that hard-won brightness is what stays with you.

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 1 in D major

THE COMPOSER

Gustav Mahler was born on July 7, 1860, in the Bohemian village of Kaliště (now in the Czech Republic), the second of fourteen children in a Jewish family. Death was a constant presence in his childhood: many of his siblings died in infancy. This early acquaintance with mortality would permeate his music throughout his life.

Mahler's prodigious musical talent emerged early: at four he discovered his grandparents' piano and took to it at once. At fifteen he entered the Vienna Conservatory, and he later turned to conducting to earn his living, reserving composition for summer holidays. His conducting career was meteoric: by 1897, at age thirty-seven, he had become artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera, where his innovative productions and exacting standards made him one of the most celebrated opera conductors of his era.

As a composer, Mahler worked on a monumental scale. His nine completed symphonies (plus an unfinished tenth) and five song cycles represent a titanic achievement, bridging nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century modernism. Yet during his lifetime, his conducting reputation far outstripped his recognition as a composer. It was only after his death in 1911, and particularly after 1945, that Mahler's compositions gained the worldwide acclaim they enjoy today.

52 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Mahler's First Symphony is the sound of a young composer announcing himself, and very nearly being shouted down for it. He worked on it mainly between 1887 and 1888, while a busy opera conductor in Leipzig, and its premiere in Budapest on 20 November 1889, under his own direction, baffled and divided its first audience. Listeners did not know what to make of a symphony that swung from naïve birdsong to a grotesque funeral march to shattering catastrophe, and the reception was cool enough that Mahler spent years revising the work and rethinking how to present it.

Part of the confusion came from the labels Mahler himself attached and then stripped away. In its early outings the symphony carried a literary programme: it was billed as a 'symphonic poem' and, at one performance, as 'Titan', after a novel by Jean Paul (at Hamburg in 1893). There was even an extra movement, a tender Andante called 'Blumine,' which Mahler later cut. By the time the score reached its final, four-movement form, he had discarded the title, the programme, and the explanatory movement names, insisting the music speak as pure symphony. The nickname 'Titan' has clung to it ever since out of habit, but it is generally dropped today, and Mahler would have approved.

What remains is a remarkably original first symphony that already contains the whole Mahler world in embryo: the fusion of nature-painting, folk music, irony, and metaphysical struggle; the vast orchestra used with chamber-music precision one moment and overwhelming force the next; the borrowing from his own songs, especially the 'Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen' (Songs of a Wayfarer), whose melodies thread through the outer movements. The symphony traces an arc from innocence to catastrophe to hard-won triumph, the 'from darkness to light' journey that would become a Mahlerian signature, here attempted for the first time and brought off with the audacity of a composer who has not yet learned what cannot be done.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony opens with one of the most extraordinary beginnings in the repertoire: a single note, an A, held across seven octaves of strings, a shimmering haze 'like a sound of nature,' as Mahler put it. Out of this primordial dawn come distant fanfares, cuckoo calls, and finally a sunny walking-tune lifted from the Wayfarer songs. This is the awakening of a world; listen for the patience with which Mahler lets it come to life before the music breaks into open-air joy.

The second movement is a robust, foot-stamping Ländler, the rustic Austrian waltz, full of peasant vigour, framing a more graceful, lilting trio. It is the symphony at its most earthbound and good-humoured.

The slow movement is the strangest and most famous stretch of the whole work. A solo double bass, an instrument almost never given a melody, intones the round 'Frère Jacques,' but shifted into the minor, turning the nursery tune into a grotesque, limping funeral march. One likely spur was Moritz von Schwind's woodcut of woodland animals solemnly burying a hunter, and the music is exactly that: mock-tragic, with sudden eruptions of tawdry café-band and klezmer-tinged music cutting across the cortège. Then, astonishingly, a passage of heartbreaking tenderness (again from the Wayfarer songs) opens like a window onto consolation before the march resumes.

The finale erupts without warning: a scream of dissonance and a plunge into storm. This is the catastrophe, and from it Mahler must wrest a triumph. Listen for the long, hard-fought struggle, the false dawns, the return of the symphony's opening nature-haze, and finally the blazing D major chorale, with the horns, in most performances, standing to play out over the full orchestra. After everything, the music does not merely end; it conquers.

Tonight's artists

Lang Lang *piano*

Bartók's Third Concerto is a valedictory gift wrapped in serenity, folk-song clarity outside and a hushed 'Adagio religioso' within, and it asks the soloist not for thunder but for tenderness, colour, and song. Lang Lang, a pianist whose fame rests on dazzling virtuosity, here turns inward: the night-music shimmer and the chorale-like calm of this farewell score reward exactly the lyrical poise and tonal beauty he has cultivated in his maturity.

Lang Lang, born in Shenyang, China, in 1982, is one of the most widely known classical musicians in the world. He began piano lessons at the age of three, studied at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and in 1997 moved to the United States to study with Gary Graffman at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. His breakthrough came in 1999 at the Ravinia Festival, when, still a teenager, he stepped in at the last moment for the ailing André Watts to play Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a performance that made him famous almost overnight. He has since appeared with the world's leading orchestras, including the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, and recorded widely for Deutsche Grammophon and Sony Classical. A committed advocate of music education, he launched the Lang Lang International Music Foundation in 2008 to bring music to children, and in 2013 was designated a United Nations Messenger of Peace with a special focus on global education.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Béla Bartók: The American Years**

Agatha Fassett, Dover Publications 1970

A friend's memoir of Bartók's exile in America, the final years in which he wrote the Third Piano Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE **Mahler: A Biography**

Jonathan Carr, Overlook Press 1998

A compact, well-written life of Mahler, a good starting point for the young composer of the First Symphony.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Bartók**

Amanda Bayley, Cambridge University Press 2001

Scholarly essays on Bartók's musical language, his folk-music research and his works, a deeper context for the Third Piano Concerto.

SOURCES

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 9. Mahler: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780879518028>
 10. The Cambridge Companion to Bartók, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521669580>
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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-02-20-nelsons>

Version 3, 30 September 2026