

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

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.

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

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 fu-

neral march to shattering catastrophe, and the reception was cool enough that Mahler spent years revising the work and re-thinking how to present it.

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.

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