

Star-Crossed, Sea-Swept, and a Jazz-Touched Concerto

Saturday, August 8, 2026 · 11:00 · Großes Festspielhaus
Tugan Sokhiev, conductor · Lang Lang, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	RAVEL 1875–1937 <i>Piano Concerto in G major, M. 83</i>	22'
2	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109</i>	24'
3	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Romeo and Juliet, Suite from the Ballet, Op. 64 (selection)</i>	30'
TOTAL MUSIC		76'

Maurice Ravel

22 minutes

1875–1937

Piano Concerto in G major, M. 83

THE COMPOSER

Maurice Ravel was born on March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, a small town in the French Basque Country near the Spanish border. His mother was Basque and his father a Swiss-born engineer and inventor, a heritage that would profoundly shape his musical identity. From an early age, Ravel showed exceptional musical talent and entered the Paris Conservatoire at fourteen, where he studied with Gabriel Fauré and absorbed the harmonic innovations of his time.

Often paired with Claude Debussy under the “Impressionist” label, Ravel himself rejected this categorization. Where Debussy was spontaneous and atmospheric, Ravel was a meticulous craftsman, obsessed with formal perfection and clarity. This perfectionism produced some of the most beloved works in the orchestral repertoire: the hypnotic *Boléro*, the shimmering *Daphnis et Chloé*, and the virtuosic *Gaspard de la nuit*.

By the late 1920s, Ravel was France’s most celebrated living composer, yet he remained restless, constantly seeking new sounds and influences. A triumphant four-month tour of North America in 1928 brought him face to face with jazz, which impressed him deeply. These experiences would flow directly into his final orchestral works.

ABOUT THE WORK

Ravel composed his G major Piano Concerto between 1929 and 1931, at the very end of his creative life, and he poured into it everything he had absorbed on his 1928 concert tour of the United States. There he heard a great deal of jazz and met George Gershwin, whose ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ he admired. The American experience left its mark all over the concerto’s outer movements, which crackle with blue notes, syncopation, jazzy slides, and the bright brass colours of the dance band. Ravel was explicit about his aim. A concerto, he insisted, should be ‘light-hearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or dramatic effects’, and he cited Mozart and Saint-Saëns as his models. This was to be entertainment of the highest craftsmanship, sparkling, witty and beautifully made, and he resisted the Romantic notion that a concerto must be a heroic struggle between soloist and orchestra.

He had, in fact, intended to play the solo part himself, and conceived the work partly as a vehicle for a grand farewell tour. But fatigue, failing health and the pressure of other work got in the way, and he handed the premiere to the French pianist Marguerite Long, who gave the first performance at the Salle Pleyel in Paris on 14 January 1932, with Ravel conducting the *Orchestre Lamoureux*. It was an immediate success and has remained one of the most beloved of all twentieth-century concertos, prized for the way it balances dazzle and tenderness.

That balance is the work’s secret. For all the jazz glitter of its fast movements, the heart of the concerto is its central *Adagio assai*, a long, serene, songful movement of extraordinary purity, utterly different in mood. Ravel labored over it more than over anything else in the score. He wrote its seemingly effortless, endless opening melody a bar or two at a time (‘How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!’), and said he took as his model the *Larghetto* of Mozart’s *Clarinet Quintet*, a lesson in how a long lyric line should breathe. The result sounds entirely spontaneous, a piano singing a slow, grave waltz-like tune over a quiet accompaniment, but it is the product of painstaking labour, art concealing art.

The outer movements draw on a second source as personal as the jazz: Ravel’s Basque heritage. He was born in the Basque country near the Spanish border, and the concerto’s brilliant, sun-struck energy carries echoes of that southern, dance-driven world alongside the American imports. Jazz from one side of the Atlantic and Basque dance from the European margin meet in the same bright, exact, glittering music, a characteristically Ravelian fusion in which nothing is heavy and everything is perfectly placed.

Scored for a modest orchestra used with maximum colour (prominent winds, harp, and a glinting percussion section), the concerto treats the piano less as a Romantic hero than as the brightest voice in a brilliant ensemble. It is short, a little over twenty minutes, and it wastes not a second. By the time he wrote it Ravel was a master of orchestral economy, and the G major Concerto is among the most concentrated demonstrations of his craft: dazzling on the surface, deeply felt at its core, and finished to a jeweller's tolerance.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens with a literal crack, a whip-snap, that launches a fast, sun-bright tune, part Basque dance, part music-hall. Listen for the jazz inflections that follow: bluesy, bent notes; brassy slides in the trumpet and trombone; the piano spinning fast, glittering passagework against the orchestra's swing. Ravel keeps changing the light, tossing the material between piano and winds, and the whole movement has the feel of a brilliant improvisation that is in fact controlled to the last note. Notice the harp and piano glissandos that flash across the texture like sunlight on water.

The slow movement, *Adagio assai*, is the emotional centre and the great surprise. The piano enters alone, unaccompanied, with a long, slow, song-like melody that seems simply to unspool, calm, grave, almost sad, over a gentle rocking pulse. This is the tune Ravel agonised over 'bar by bar'; let it breathe, and notice how long it goes on before the orchestra even enters. When the winds do join, listen especially for the entry of the *cor anglais* (English horn) late in the movement, taking up the great melody while the piano decorates it with quiet, rippling filigree high above. It is one of the most ravishing passages in the whole repertoire: stillness and song, after the glitter of the opening.

The finale (*Presto*) snaps the spell instantly: a brief, explosive burst of chords and the music is off, a headlong, breathless dash of just under four minutes. Listen for the jazzy, march-like brass fanfares, the clattering percussion, the woodwinds skirling like a circus band, and the piano racing through it all in a brilliant *moto perpetuo*. Ravel builds the whole movement on a handful of insistent, repeated figures that whip past faster than the ear can quite hold them, and he ends, characteristically, not with a

grand peroration but with a sudden, witty hammer-blow that stops the music dead. Blink and you have missed it; that abruptness is the joke, and the perfection.

Claude Debussy

24 minutes

1862–1918

La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109

THE COMPOSER

Claude Debussy, born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1862 to a family of modest means, entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten and spent the next decade exasperating his professors with chords that broke every rule. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884, endured (resentfully) the obligatory residence at the Villa Medici in Rome, and then set about quietly dismantling the foundations of nineteenth-century music. With the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), and *La Mer* (1905), he created a new musical language, built on colour, atmosphere, and suggestion rather than Germanic development, that made him the single most influential composer of the early twentieth century. Critics called the style 'impressionism,' borrowing the term from painting; Debussy himself detested the label, insisting he was striving for precision, not haze. He died in Paris in March 1918, while the city was under German bombardment in the final year of the First World War.

ABOUT THE WORK

Debussy loved the sea, and distrusted the idea of writing about it. 'I have an endless store of memories,' he wrote to a friend while at work on '*La Mer*', and in composing it he drew on those memories, and on paintings and prints, far more than on the sea itself. He composed the score between 1903 and 1905, much of it not by the water at all but inland: in Burgundy and, crucially, during the personal upheaval in which he left his first wife for Emma Bardac, the woman who would become his second. In the same letter he noted, half-joking, that he had been intended for 'the fine career of a sailor' and that only the chances of life had led him away from it. What he produced is not a postcard but a memory of the sea, recollected and recomposed: less a depiction than an evocation of light, motion, and immensity.

He was careful, too, about what to call it. Debussy resisted the word 'symphony', preferring the cooler designation 'three symphonic sketches' ('*esquisses symphoniques*'), as if to deny the work the architectural pretensions of the German tradition he wished to escape. Yet '*La Mer*' is among the most tightly built of all his orchestral scores. Beneath its shimmering surface lies real symphonic logic: themes that are introduced, transformed, and recalled across movements, and

a long-range plan that drives the whole toward a blazing conclusion. The ‘sketch’ label is a feint. This is large-scale construction disguised as impression.

The premiere, given in Paris on 15 October 1905 by the Orchestre Lamoureux under Camille Chevillard, was not a success. The climate around Debussy was poisoned: his abandonment of his wife (who had attempted suicide) had cost him friends and sympathy, and some of the hostility in the hall was personal rather than musical. Critics carped; Pierre Lalo of *Le Temps* famously wrote that he did not hear, see or feel the sea. The work’s reputation recovered quickly, and ‘*La Mer*’ is now recognised as one of the supreme orchestral achievements of the century, a score that taught later composers, and film music after them, how to make an orchestra glitter and surge.

The published score carried on its cover Hokusai’s woodblock print ‘The Great Wave off Kanagawa’, Debussy’s own choice. It is a telling emblem. Like the Japanese print, ‘*La Mer*’ stylises the sea rather than reproducing it: the wave is pattern as much as water, design as much as nature. Debussy’s three movements move from dawn over the open sea, through the restless play of the waves, to a dramatic dialogue between wind and water, a progression that is at once a time of day, a rising weather system, and a purely musical crescendo of energy.

What makes the score endlessly fresh is its orchestration. Debussy treats the orchestra as a single vast instrument of colour, dividing the strings into many parts, threading solo woodwinds through the texture, deploying harps, muted brass, and a glinting battery of percussion to catch the light. Nothing is merely decorative; every shimmer is structural, every flash of colour part of the form. ‘*La Mer*’ is the sound of a composer who has heard the ocean so often that he can dream it more truly than he can see it.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement, ‘*De l’aube à midi sur la mer*’ (From dawn to midday on the sea), begins in near-darkness: low, slow stirrings, a bare fifth in the strings, distant timpani like a swell felt before it is seen. Listen as the light comes up almost imperceptibly: fragments of melody surfacing in the woodwinds, the harps rippling, the texture thickening as the sun climbs. The seed of the whole work is sown in these first quiet minutes: short rising-and-falling motifs that will recur, transformed, across all three movements. The movement ends in a sudden blaze of brass and a great cresting chorale: midday, the sea at full light.

The second movement, 'Jeux de vagues' (Play of the waves), is the scherzo: quicksilver, weightless, never settling. Here Debussy's orchestration is at its most dazzling: glissandos in the harps, flickers of glockenspiel and triangle, solo woodwinds tossing fragments back and forth like spray. There is no firm theme to hold onto, and that is the point: the music imitates the constant, purposeless, gleaming motion of water, light scattering on a moving surface. Let it shimmer; don't search for a tune.

The finale, 'Dialogue du vent et de la mer' (Dialogue of the wind and the sea), is the most dramatic and the most clearly symphonic. It opens darkly and turbulently, the wind rising, and stages a genuine struggle between two forces, the brass and lower strings answering the agitated upper voices. Listen for the return, transformed, of the rising motifs from the first movement: Debussy gathers his earlier material and drives it forward. A long, surging build leads to a final climax in which a grand, hymn-like brass theme (foreshadowed at midday in the first movement) returns in glory, and the whole sea seems to rear up at once. The closing pages are pure exhilaration, wind and water resolved not into calm but into overwhelming, radiant force.

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

30 minutes

Romeo and Juliet, Suite from the Ballet, Op. 64 (selection)

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 in Sontsivka, then part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine), and was admitted to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904, several years younger than most of his classmates. By his teens he was already a fearsome pianist and an enfant terrible of Russian modernism, scandalising audiences with the percussive dissonance of his early works.

In 1918, Prokofiev left Russia with official Soviet permission and spent nearly two decades in the West, first in the United States, then mostly in Paris, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, and concertos that earned him a place among the leading modernists of his generation. After several years of shuttling between Paris and Moscow, he settled permanently in the Soviet Union in 1936. The remaining years of his life were marked by official denunciation in 1948, deteriorating health, and personal tragedy. He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. Soviet newspapers, consumed by the dictator's death, barely noted his passing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Prokofiev's 'Romeo and Juliet' began as a commission in the mid-1930s and very nearly ended as a scandal. The composer had returned to the Soviet Union after years abroad, and a ballet on Shakespeare's tragedy, first for the Kirov in Leningrad and then for the Bolshoi in Moscow, was to be one of his major homecoming statements. What he delivered unsettled the dancers and administrators who received it. The score was long, the rhythms were tricky, and, most notoriously, Prokofiev had at first drafted a happy ending in which the lovers survive. He defended the change on purely choreographic grounds: 'live people can dance, but the dying can hardly be expected to dance in bed.' Wiser counsel prevailed and Shakespeare's ending was restored, but the early resistance ran deeper than the plot. The Bolshoi declared the music impossible to dance to, and the dancers complained that they could not hear it and that its rhythms were unpredictable. The full stage premiere was delayed for years and finally took place not in Russia at all but in Brno, in what was then Czechoslovakia, in 1938. The Soviet premiere followed in Leningrad in 1940, with the great Galina Ulanova as Juliet, and the ballet's triumph was at last secured.

Long before the dancers caught up with him, Prokofiev made sure the music itself would be heard. Impatient and shrewd about his own livelihood, he extracted concert suites from the ballet (two of them in 1936, before the staged premiere, and a third in 1946), choosing and re-ordering numbers to make self-standing orchestral sequences rather than a danced narrative. These suites carried the music into concert halls worldwide and became, for most listeners, the way they first met the work. They do not follow Shakespeare's plot in order; they are anthologies of the ballet's best pages, and a conductor is free to draw from across all three to build a programme.

That is exactly what happens here. The selection performed in this concert is the conductor's own: a sequence assembled from the numbers Prokofiev spread across his three concert suites, chosen and ordered for this occasion rather than dictated by the composer. Such freedom is in the spirit of the suites themselves, which Prokofiev never intended as fixed. A typical programme of this kind gathers the most vivid set-pieces: the brooding, jackbooted 'Montagues and Capulets' with its famous heavy tread; the delicate, skittering portrait of 'Juliet as a Young Girl'; the scenes at the Capulets' ball and in the streets of Verona; the tender balcony music; and the tragic close. The exact contents will vary, but the dramatic arc, from civic menace

through young love to catastrophe, survives any reasonable ordering, because Prokofiev's characterisation is so sharp that each number announces its own place in the story.

What unites the whole is Prokofiev's gift for instantly legible musical portraiture. He gives the feuding clans a theme of crushing weight, gives Juliet a music that literally grows up over the course of the ballet, and shadows the lovers' tenderness with harmonic premonitions of doom. It is film-music vividness wedded to symphonic craft, which is one reason the suites have outlived the choreographic disputes that nearly buried the score, and why they remain among the most beloved orchestral showpieces of the twentieth century.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The number almost everyone knows is 'Montagues and Capulets' (often titled 'Dance of the Knights'): listen for the dissonant, hanging chords that open it like a warning, then the famous striding theme: brass and strings hammering out a slow, arrogant march that seems to make the whole orchestra walk in heavy boots. It is the sound of two proud houses spoiling for a fight, and once you have heard it you will recognise it anywhere. Notice, in its central section, a sudden lightening: a thin, prim little tune on the flute and a sweetly bowed solo, a glimpse of Juliet's grace inside the menace.

For 'Juliet as a Young Girl', the contrast could not be sharper. Prokofiev paints a girl who cannot keep still: quicksilver scurrying runs in the high woodwinds and strings, breaking off into a tender, lyrical melody and then darting away again. The music's restlessness is the characterisation: she is thirteen, mercurial, not yet the tragic heroine. Track how that lyrical strain returns, deepened, later in the work; Prokofiev lets her music mature as she does.

Throughout, listen for the way Prokofiev uses the orchestra as a cast of characters. The tenor saxophone and lower brass add darker, heavier colours; the celesta, harp, and high strings open up the private, nocturnal world of the lovers. In the balcony and love music, the melodies stretch long and warm but are repeatedly clouded by a darker harmony underneath: beauty with a shadow across it, the tragedy already written into the tenderness. And in the closing pages, whatever numbers end the selection, attend to how the great love themes return stripped of

their warmth, slowed and hollowed, as the music that once meant first love is made to mean death. The seed of the ending is sown in the first heavy chord.

Tonight's artists

Lang Lang *piano*

Ravel wanted his G major Concerto 'light-hearted and brilliant', and its outer movements ask the soloist for exactly that: jazz-touched glitter, blue notes, and breathless, music-hall speed, all dispatched with effortless flash. But the work's heart is the long Adagio assai, where the piano enters alone with a slow, song-like melody that must simply float, unhurried, before the orchestra answers. Lang Lang's blend of keyboard dazzle and unabashed lyricism suits both faces of the piece: the brilliant surface and the singing, serene core.

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 **Ravel**

Roger Nichols, Yale University Press 2013

A life of Ravel by a leading authority on French music, covering the late years of the Piano Concerto in G.

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

A readable life of Prokofiev that covers his return to the Soviet Union and the troubled birth of Romeo and Juliet.

DEEPER **Debussy: La Mer**

Simon Trezise, Cambridge University Press 1994

A short scholarly handbook on La Mer: how Debussy composed it, how it is built and how it was received.

SOURCES

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2. Concert Sokhiev, Salzburg Festival 2026, 9 August 2026 (same programme), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-sokhiev/10847/>
3. Tugan Sokhiev, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/tugan-sokhiev>
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7. La mer (Debussy), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_mer_\(Debussy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_mer_(Debussy))
8. Programme note: Claude Debussy, La Mer, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/claude-debussy-la-mer/>
9. Debussy: La Mer, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.indianapolissymphony.org/backstage/program-notes/debussy-la-mer/>
10. Claude Debussy, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Debussy
11. Romeo and Juliet (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_and_Juliet_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_and_Juliet_(Prokofiev))
12. Prokofiev: Suite from Romeo and Juliet, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.indianapolissymphony.org/backstage/program-notes/prokofiev-suite-from-romeo-and-juliet/>
13. Sergei Prokofiev: Suite from Romeo and Juliet, Nashville Symphony. <https://www.nashvillesymphony.org/classical-program-notes/sergei-prokofiev-suite-from-romeo-and-juliet/>
14. Ravel, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300187762>
15. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
16. Debussy: La Mer, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521446563>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-08-08-sokhiev>

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