

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

1875–1937

Piano Concerto in G major, M. 83

22 minutes

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.

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

1862–1918

La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109

24 minutes

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.

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

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

30 minutes

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.

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 Interna-

tional 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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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