

Northern Visions

Friday, September 25, 2026 · 19:30 · Musikverein

Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	LUTOSŁAWSKI 1913–1994 <i>Symphony No. 4</i>	22'
2	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109</i>	24'
3	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82</i>	30'
	TOTAL MUSIC	76'

Witold Lutosławski

22 minutes

1913–1994

Symphony No. 4

THE COMPOSER

Witold Lutosławski, born in Warsaw in 1913, was the leading Polish composer of the twentieth century after Szymanowski and one of the most admired symphonists of his age. His youth was shadowed by catastrophe. His father was executed by the Bolsheviks in Moscow in 1918, and in the destruction of Warsaw in 1944 most of his music was lost; of the many arrangements he and Andrzej Panufnik had played as a piano duo in the city's cafés, only his two-piano Variations on a Theme by Paganini survived. In the post-war years he worked under the constraints of Stalinist cultural policy, drawing on folk material in works such as the Concerto for Orchestra (1954) while privately developing a far more radical language. The thaw of the late 1950s liberated him: the Funeral Music for Bartók and, above all, the *Jeux vénitiens* of 1961 introduced his personal brand of controlled chance, or 'aleatoricism': passages in which players are given fixed material but coordinate freely rather than in strict time, producing shimmering, unpredictable textures while the composer retains command of harmony and form. From this came his mature style, built on intricately layered chromatic harmony and the so-called 'chain' technique of overlapping musical strands. An elegant, fastidious craftsman and a distinguished conductor of his own music, Lutosławski won major international honours, among them the Grawemeyer Award, and remained, to the end, a model of artistic integrity. He died in Warsaw in 1994, his Fourth Symphony among his last completed works.

ABOUT THE WORK

Lutosławski's Symphony No. 4 was his last symphony and one of his final major scores, completed in 1992 and premiered in Los Angeles on 5 February 1993 with the composer conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which had commissioned it and which Esa-Pekka Salonen was then leading, a connection that gives tonight's performance a particular resonance. The premiere marked Lutosławski's eightieth birthday, and the work has the distilled, unhurried authority of a master who no longer needed to prove anything. He died barely a year after its premiere, so the Fourth stands as a kind of valediction, the summation of a symphonic language he had refined over four decades.

Unlike his Third Symphony of 1983, a turbulent and sharply sectional drama, the Fourth unfolds as a single continuous span of roughly twenty-two minutes: two parts, an introduction and a main movement, played without a break. Within that span Lutosławski deploys the two techniques most closely associated with his maturity. The first is what he called 'chain' form: rather than building paragraphs that begin and end together, he overlaps strands of music so that one idea is already fading as the next emerges, the seams deliberately staggered like the links of a chain. The effect is of music that is always in the process of becoming, with no clean joins to mark where one thing stops and another starts. The second is his celebrated 'ad libitum' or controlled-aleatory writing, in which groups of players are given precisely notated material but are instructed to play it freely, out of strict ensemble, so that the lines blur into a glittering, slightly unstable haze of sound. Crucially, Lutosławski always kept the harmony and the large shape firmly under his own control: the freedom is local and textural, never structural.

What is striking about the Fourth is its lyricism. The chromatic harmony that had once sounded austere here turns warm, even songful, and the symphony is dominated by long, singing lines, often in the strings and high woodwinds, that give it an almost Romantic glow. There is darkness and unease too, and the music gathers toward powerful climaxes, but the prevailing impression is of a late style that has made its peace with beauty. It is the late work of a composer who spent his life balancing rigour and spontaneity, and who, at the end, let the singing voice come to the fore.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Because the Fourth runs without pause, the most useful thing to listen for is the way Lutosławski manages flow rather than division. The opening is hushed and exploratory: fragmentary

woodwind phrases drift in over a low cushion, the music seeming to assemble itself out of the air. Notice how ideas overlap (a phrase in the clarinets is already handing over to the oboes before it has finished), so that the texture is continuous but never static. This is the ‘chain’ technique at work; resist the urge to listen for clear sections and instead follow the long thread.

Listen too for the contrast between the symphony’s two ways of moving. In some passages the orchestra plays together in measured time, the harmony clear and directed; in others the players are turned loose into the ‘ad libitum’ freedom, and the sound becomes a shimmering blur, many lines flickering independently. The alternation between these states, the focused and the diffuse, is one of the work’s great pleasures.

Follow the long melodic lines, especially in the violins, which are the emotional core of the piece. As the symphony progresses, these gather urgency and the orchestra swells toward a series of climaxes, the brass and percussion lending weight. The closing pages bring a final, hard-won intensity before the music subsides. Above all, attend to colour: Lutosławski was a supreme orchestrator, and the Fourth is a masterclass in instrumental shading, every chord weighted and lit with extraordinary care.

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

La Mer, completed in 1905 and premiered that October in Paris under Camille Chevillard, is Debussy's largest purely orchestral work and one of the central documents of musical modernism. He called it not a symphony but 'three symphonic sketches,' a careful evasion of the German symphonic tradition he both admired and wished to escape. The sea had haunted his imagination since childhood; he once remarked that he had been intended for a sailor's life, and he kept a lifelong attachment to the sea. Tellingly, he composed much of the work far from any coast, beginning it while staying with his in-laws in landlocked Burgundy and finishing it during a turbulent period in his private life. He drew the sea less from direct observation than from memory and imagination. For the cover of the first edition he chose a detail from Hokusai's famous woodcut *The Great Wave*, a sign of his fascination with Japanese art and of the visual, picture-making impulse that runs through the score.

Debussy disliked the label 'Impressionist' that critics fastened to his music, but *La Mer* shows why it stuck and also why it is inadequate. The work is indeed full of glinting surfaces, dissolving harmonies and washes of orchestral colour: water rendered in sound with unprecedented subtlety. Yet beneath the shimmer lies a rigorous structure. Far from being formless atmosphere, *La Mer* is tightly organised by the transformation and return of a handful of melodic cells, and its three movements are bound together by recurring motifs so that the whole arcs toward a genuine climax. It is at once the most sensuous and the most cunningly built of Debussy's scores.

The three movements carry evocative titles. 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer' ('From dawn to midday on the sea') traces the ocean waking, from a dark, barely-there opening through gathering light to a blazing noon. 'Jeux de vagues' ('Play of the waves') is a scherzo of darting, iridescent figuration, the most elusive and quicksilver of the three. 'Dialogue du vent et de la mer' ('Dialogue of the wind and the sea') is the dramatic finale, a great surging confrontation of the elements that gathers up earlier themes and drives them to an overwhelming close. Together they form not a literal seascape but a meditation on water, light and motion, music that seems to breathe and swell with the tides.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

In the first movement, listen for the sense of something vast slowly coming to life. The opening is dark and almost motionless (low strings, soft timpani, distant horns), and out of it Debussy gradually adds light and movement, fragments of melody

glinting in the woodwinds. The arrival of ‘midday’ is unmistakable: a radiant, broad theme in the brass, the sun at its height. Keep this brass chorale in your ear, because Debussy will bring it back transformed at the very end of the work.

The second movement is the hardest to grasp and the most magical. There is no firm melody to hold onto; instead the music is all flickering surface: rapid figures passed between harp, woodwinds and divided strings, harmonies that shimmer and dissolve before they can settle. Don’t try to track a tune. Let the play of colour and the constant rippling motion wash over you; this is Debussy at his most weightless.

The finale is the most dramatic music of the three. Listen for a real sense of struggle: surging swells, sudden gusts, and a haunting, song-like theme that rises out of the turbulence. Debussy weaves back ideas heard earlier, including the noon brass theme from the first movement, so that the whole work seems to gather itself for its conclusion. The ending is a great elemental climax, the orchestra at full power, the wind and the sea, after their long dialogue, breaking together in a final wave of sound.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

30 minutes

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82

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’s Fifth Symphony has one of the most complicated histories in the orchestral repertoire, and the version heard today is the third the composer made. He began it during the First World War, and the first version was premiered in Helsinki on 8 December 1915, Sibelius

us's fiftieth birthday, marked as a national celebration in a Finland still under Russian rule and stirring toward independence. But he was dissatisfied. He revised the work in 1916, then set it aside and returned to it again, finally completing the definitive version premiered in 1919. The struggle was real: his diaries from these years record both euphoria and despair, and the famous battle to fuse the symphony's opening movements into a single coherent span occupied him through repeated rewritings. The result is one of his most affirmative and broadly loved works, music of granite strength and luminous, hard-won optimism.

The Fifth marks a turning point in Sibelius's symphonic thinking. Where the Fourth Symphony of 1911 had been bleak, compressed and forbidding, the Fifth opens outward into spacious, sunlit grandeur. Yet it is no less radical in form. Sibelius was increasingly preoccupied with the 'organic' growth of a symphony, the idea that themes should emerge and transform gradually, as if grown rather than assembled, and the Fifth is a prime example. Most strikingly, he took what had originally been two separate movements, a slow introduction and a fast scherzo, and welded them into one continuous, accelerating structure, so that the symphony's opening movement seems to speed up imperceptibly until it is launched into a whirling dance. This compression of four movements into three is the work's great structural coup.

The symphony's most celebrated inspiration came from nature. On 21 April 1915 Sibelius watched sixteen swans circling overhead and wrote in his diary that it was 'one of the great experiences of my life.' From that vision came the great swinging horn theme of the finale, known ever since as the 'Swan Hymn': a broad, rocking figure that seems to embody flight itself. The Fifth, scored without the heaviest forces, achieves its monumentality through breadth and weight of utterance rather than sheer size, and it ends with one of the boldest gestures in all symphonic music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement is the one to follow most closely, because it does something extraordinary. It opens quietly, with a horn call and gently unfolding woodwind phrases over a soft tremolo: spacious, pastoral, unhurried. Listen for the way the tempo seems gradually to quicken: there is no obvious break, but the music accelerates by degrees until it has transformed itself into a fast, spinning scherzo, the trumpets ringing out at the top.

This single accelerating arc, fusing slow introduction and dance into one, is Sibelius's great formal achievement; the join is meant to be almost impossible to locate.

The central slow movement is a gentle set of variations on a simple, songful theme, passed pizzicato among the strings and taken up by the woodwinds, graceful and untroubled, with hints of the finale's swinging rhythm already stirring beneath the surface.

The finale is the heart of the symphony. After a rushing, whispering opening in the strings, listen for the great 'Swan Hymn' to emerge in the horns: a broad, rocking theme, swinging back and forth like wings beating, inspired by the swans Sibelius watched in flight. Over it the violins sing a long, yearning melody. The music builds toward an overwhelming peroration, and then comes the ending no listener forgets. Instead of a continuous flourish, Sibelius closes with six massive, hammered chords, each separated by a yawning silence, scattered almost unpredictably so that you can never quite tell when the next will fall. The effect is startling, monumental, and strangely moving: a symphony that ends not with a rush but with six great strokes carved out of silence.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

A history of twentieth-century music with a chapter on Sibelius, and a good frame for Lutosławski's place in the century.

ACCESSIBLE **Sibelius**

Andrew Barnett, Yale University Press 2010

A full life of Sibelius that follows the long struggle with the Fifth Symphony and its revisions.

DEEPER **Sibelius: Symphony No. 5**

James Hepokoski, Cambridge University Press 1993

A scholarly handbook on the Fifth Symphony, tracing its three versions and the form of its final one.

SOURCES

1. Concert of the Society of Friends of Music in Vienna, 25 September 2026, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-of-the-society-of-friends-of-music-in-vienna/10892/>

2. Wiener Philharmoniker / Salonen, 29 September 2026 (same programme, shown as past event), Wiener Konzerthaus. <https://konzerthaus.at/en/program-and-tickets/wiener-philharmoniker-salonen/63730>
3. Esa-Pekka Salonen, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esa-Pekka_Salonen
4. Esa-Pekka Salonen: Biography, Deutsche Grammophon. <https://www.deutschegrammophon.com/en/artists/esapekkasalonen/biography>
5. Witold Lutosławski, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witold_Lutos%C5%82awski
6. Witold Lutosławski: Biography, Culture.pl. <https://culture.pl/en/artist/witold-lutoslawski>
7. Symphony No. 4 (Lutosławski), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Lutos%C5%82awski\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Lutos%C5%82awski))
8. Symphony No. 4, Witold Lutosławski, Culture.pl. <https://culture.pl/en/work/symphony-no-4-witold-lutoslawski>
9. Symphony No. 4, Witold Lutosławski (programme note), The Ford / Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.theford.com/musicdb/pieces/3984/symphony-no-4>
10. La mer (Debussy), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_mer_\(Debussy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_mer_(Debussy))
11. La mer, Claude Debussy (programme note), The Ford / Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.theford.com/musicdb/pieces/442/la-mer>
12. Programme Note: La Mer, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/claude-debussy-la-mer/>
13. Symphony No. 5 (Sibelius), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Sibelius\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Sibelius))
14. Fifth symphony (1915-1919), Jean Sibelius (Sibelius.fi). https://www.sibelius.klubi.fi/english/musiikki/ork_sinf_05.htm
15. Sibelius: Symphony No. 5, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/symphony-no-5-sibelius>
16. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
17. Sibelius, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300163971>
18. Sibelius: Symphony No. 5, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521409582>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-09-25-salonen>

Version 3, 30 September 2026