

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

1913–1994

Symphony No. 4

22 minutes

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.

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

1862–1918

La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109

24 minutes

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.

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, har-

monies 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

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

30 minutes

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'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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

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