

Jazz, Metamorphosis, and a Boléro

Saturday, November 28, 2026 · 15:30 · Musikverein
Alain Altinoglu, conductor · Rudolf Buchbinder, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	GERSHWIN 1898–1937 <i>Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra</i>	32'
2	DUTILLEUX 1916–2013 <i>Métaboles</i>	17'
3	RAVEL 1875–1937 <i>Boléro</i>	15'
TOTAL MUSIC		64'

George Gershwin

1898–1937

Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra

THE COMPOSER

George Gershwin (1898–1937) was the great reconciler of America’s musical worlds, a composer who moved between Broadway, the jazz-inflected popular song, and the concert hall with a fluency no one before him had achieved. Born in Brooklyn to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents and raised on New York’s Lower East Side, he left school at fifteen to work as a ‘song plugger’ in Tin Pan Alley, absorbing the harmonic vocabulary of popular music while teaching himself the craft of composition. His early fame came from songs and stage shows written with his brother Ira as lyricist, a body of work that gave the American songbook some of its most enduring standards. But Gershwin longed to be taken seriously as a concert composer, and in 1924 the bandleader Paul Whiteman gave him his chance with the commission that became *Rhapsody in Blue*, a sensational fusion of jazz idiom and symphonic ambition. There followed the *Concerto in F*, the tone poem *An American in Paris*, the *Cuban Overture*, and finally the folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935), his most ambitious work. He died in 1937 of a brain tumour at only thirty-eight, at the height of his powers, leaving a body of music that, more than that of any other composer, sounds like America itself.

32 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

The Concerto in F is George Gershwin's most ambitious purely orchestral statement, and a deliberate answer to the question raised by his sudden fame. In February 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue* had made him the most talked-about young composer in America, but that piece had been a collaboration: Gershwin wrote it for two pianos, and Ferde Grofé orchestrated it for Paul Whiteman's band. Critics and friends wondered aloud whether Gershwin, the self-taught Tin Pan Alley songwriter, could handle the larger forms of the concert hall on his own. The conductor Walter Damrosch settled the matter by commissioning a full-scale piano concerto for the New York Symphony Society, to be played by the composer himself.

Gershwin took the challenge seriously. The story goes that, having signed the contract, he hurried to buy a book to learn exactly what a concerto was. It was a tale he liked to tell, and one that, true or not, captures his determination to do the thing properly. This time he orchestrated every note himself, mastering the apparatus of the symphony orchestra rather than handing the task to another. He worked through the summer of 1925, much of it in a rented studio, and conducted a private read-through at his own expense to hear the results before the premiere. The Concerto in F was first performed at Carnegie Hall on 3 December 1925, with Gershwin as soloist and Damrosch conducting; it has held the repertoire ever since.

The concerto follows the classical three-movement plan (fast, slow, fast) but fills that inherited frame with the sounds of 1920s America: the syncopations of jazz and ragtime, the harmonies of the blues, the brassy swagger of the dance band, all woven into a genuinely symphonic argument. Gershwin described his intentions movement by movement, speaking of the Charleston rhythm of the first movement, the 'poetic, nocturnal atmosphere' of the second, and the relentless drive of the finale. What makes the work more than a clever importation of popular idiom is the seriousness of its construction: themes are developed, transformed, and recalled across movements, and the writing for piano is genuinely virtuosic, demanding both the percussive attack of a jazz player and the long lyrical line of a Romantic soloist. The Concerto in F stands as the moment when Gershwin proved he could build a large concert structure entirely in his own hand, and on his own terms.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens not with the piano but with a rap of the timpani and a swinging orchestral introduction in Charleston rhythm. Listen for that dance pulse, which sets the movement's restless energy. The piano enters with a brooding, bluesy theme, and the two ideas are tossed, combined, and built toward a grand restatement before the close.

The slow movement is the heart of the concerto and its most famous page. It opens with a smoky, nocturnal blues led by a solo muted trumpet over softly sighing woodwinds, a sound straight out of a late-night club, evoking an empty city street. When the piano enters it brings a brighter, more songful melody, and the movement alternates between that lyrical warmth and the trumpet's bluesy melancholy. Listen for the muting on the brass, which gives the whole movement its veiled, intimate colour.

The finale erupts without pause: a fast, hammering toccata in driving rhythm, packed with the syncopations and brassy outbursts of the dance hall. Gershwin brings back themes from the earlier movements, including the trumpet blues, so that the whole concerto seems to gather and recapitulate itself, racing to a brilliant, emphatic close that brings the soloist and orchestra together in full cry.

Henri Dutilleux

1916–2013

Métaboles

THE COMPOSER

Henri Dutilleux (1916–2013) was one of the most refined and individual voices in twentieth-century French music, a composer who stood apart from every passing school, working slowly, revising endlessly, and leaving a small but exceptionally polished body of work. Born in Angers into a family with artistic roots (his great-grandfather had been close to the painters of the Barbizon school), he trained at the Conservatoire de Paris and won the Prix de Rome in 1938. Rather than aligning himself with the serialist avant-garde that dominated post-war Paris, or retreating into neo-classicism, Dutilleux forged a personal language that drew on the sensuous orchestral colour of Debussy and Ravel, the harmonic richness of Roussel, and an admiration for jazz and for the music of Bartók and Stravinsky. His hallmark techniques, 'progressive growth' (in which themes are revealed only gradually) and a fluid sense of memory and transformation, give his music a dreamlike, evolving quality. A perfectionist who withdrew works he found unworthy, he produced

17 minutes

relatively few scores, but those that survive (the two symphonies, the cello concerto *Tout un monde lointain...*, the string quartet *Ainsi la nuit*, and *Métaboles*) are treasured for their craftsmanship, imagination, and luminous orchestration. He continued composing into his nineties, honoured as a quiet master of his art.

ABOUT THE WORK

Métaboles is, alongside his two symphonies and the cello concerto, one of the works on which Henri Dutilleux's reputation as a master orchestrator rests. It was commissioned by the Cleveland Orchestra and its conductor George Szell to mark the orchestra's fortieth anniversary, and the Cleveland players gave the premiere in January 1965. Dutilleux, true to his exacting nature, had laboured over the score for several years, and the result is a tautly organised, brilliantly coloured single span lasting around seventeen minutes, a piece that has become one of his most frequently performed orchestral works.

The title points directly to the music's method. A 'metabole' is, in rhetoric, a figure in which the same idea is restated in transformed words; in biology, 'metabolism' is the process of continual change by which a living thing renews itself. Dutilleux uses the word to describe a music in which the material is constantly being transmuted: themes are not so much developed in the traditional sense as made to mutate, shifting their shape, colour, and character as they pass from one section of the orchestra to another. The work unfolds in five linked movements, played without a break, each bearing a single evocative adjective for a title: *Incantatoire*, *Linéaire*, *Obsessionnel*, *Torpide*, and *Flamboyant*. The five are bound together by an ingenious scheme: each movement grows out of the material of the one before, and a thematic cell is handed on from section to section, so that the whole forms a continuous chain of transformation that finally returns, in the blazing finale, to recall the very opening.

The other organising principle is orchestral colour. Each of the five movements foregrounds a different family of instruments (woodwinds, strings, brass, percussion, and finally the full ensemble) so that the piece becomes a kind of journey through the orchestra, every panel painted in its own distinct hue. This pairing of structural rigour with sensuous, ever-shifting sound is quintessential Dutilleux: a composer who built his music like a watchmaker yet made it shimmer like Debussy. *Métaboles* is at once a study in metamorphosis and a celebration of the modern orchestra's capacity for colour, and it sits naturally on a programme that asks, throughout, what an orchestra can be made to sound like.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The five movements run together without pause, so the most rewarding way to listen is to follow how the music changes colour and character as it passes from one to the next, and to notice that each section spotlights a different part of the orchestra.

Incantatoire opens the work with the woodwinds to the fore, weaving a hushed, ritual, spell-like music, incantatory in the literal sense, as if summoning something into being. Listen for the small thematic cell introduced here, because it will be handed on and transformed throughout.

Linéaire turns to the strings, spinning a long, sustained, singing line of great expressive warmth, the most lyrical and flowing of the five. Obsessionnel then shifts the spotlight to the brass, with an insistent, driving, repetitive figure that lives up to its name: a fixed idea hammered and circled obsessively.

Torpide ('torpid', sluggish) is the strange, brooding heart of the piece, dominated by percussion and dark, slow-moving sonorities: heavy, drowsy, faintly menacing. Out of this torpor bursts Flamboyant, the dazzling finale for full orchestra: fast, brilliant, and ablaze with colour, it gathers the work's transformed material and drives it to a glittering climax, recalling the very opening before the final, incandescent close.

Maurice Ravel

15 minutes

1875–1937

Boléro

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

Boléro is the most famous thing Maurice Ravel ever wrote, and the work he liked least to be remembered by. He composed it in 1928 not as a concert piece but as a ballet, on a commission from the dancer Ida Rubinstein, who wanted a Spanish-flavoured number for her company. Ravel, ever the meticulous craftsman, set himself a deliberately austere problem: to write a piece consisting of one idea, repeated without variation, sustained for a quarter of an hour by orchestration and a single, unbroken crescendo. He described it, with characteristic dryness, as 'orchestral tissue without music', an experiment in pure sound and colour rather than thematic development. To his own surprise, and somewhat to his irritation, it became the runaway popular hit of his career, played far more often than the subtler works he prized.

The structure could hardly be simpler. A single rhythmic pattern, laid down at the start by the snare drum, runs unchanged from the first bar to the last, repeated, by the end, several hundred times. Over it, two related melodic phrases (one major-ish, one with a Spanish, Moorish inflection) alternate, also without variation, passed from instrument to instrument. The harmony stays anchored, almost obsessively, on a single chord of C major. Nothing 'happens' in the conventional sense: there is no development, no contrast, no second subject. Everything that changes is a matter of colour and of volume: the music grows louder and more thickly scored by infinitesimal degrees, drawing in more and more of the orchestra until the whole ensemble is blazing.

This is why Boléro is, despite Ravel's disclaimers, a supreme feat of orchestration and of nerve. The fascination lies entirely in the slow accumulation: in the way a solo flute at the opening becomes, fifteen minutes later, the full weight of the orchestra; in the daring solo turns Ravel hands to instruments rarely given the limelight (a soprano saxophone, a high E-flat clarinet); and in the extraordinary discipline required of conductor and players to hold the tempo dead steady and ration the crescendo so that there is somewhere left to go. After the relentless build, Ravel permits himself a single, electrifying coup: in the very last bars the music suddenly wrenches sideways into a foreign key (the only harmonic event in the entire piece) before

crashing to its close. On a programme devoted to the colours of the orchestra, Boléro is the ultimate demonstration: an entire work conjured from rhythm, repetition, and the art of orchestration alone.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first for the snare drum. From the very opening it taps out the rhythmic pattern that will continue, utterly unchanged, for the whole piece, quiet at first, almost subliminal, and inexorably more present as the music grows. It is the spine of the entire work; once you hear it, you will never lose it.

Over that rhythm, follow the melody as it is handed from instrument to instrument. It begins on a solo flute, low and soft, then passes to clarinet, bassoon, and onward through the orchestra, including unusual soloists like the soprano saxophone and the high, piercing E-flat clarinet. The tune never changes; what changes is who plays it, and in what combination. Notice how Ravel adds instruments in ever-richer layers, doubling the melody in startling colours.

The single great event is the crescendo. Resist the urge to wait for a 'theme' to develop; there isn't one. Instead, attend to the slow, almost imperceptible swell from near-silence to overwhelming force, and to the discipline with which the conductor holds the tempo steady so the build never lurches. Then, in the final bars, comes the one surprise Ravel allows himself: the music lurches abruptly into a new key, a sudden harmonic swerve after fifteen minutes of unwavering C major, before three hammered chords bring the whole hypnotic machine crashing to its end.

Tonight's artists

Rudolf Buchbinder *piano*

There is something deliciously unexpected about hearing Rudolf Buchbinder, the quintessential Viennese Classicist and a pianist whose name is almost synonymous with Beethoven, turn to the jazz-tinged swagger of Gershwin's Concerto in F. The pairing invites us to listen freshly: to hear what a master of structure and long line makes of the blues and the Charleston, and to enjoy the meeting of old-world Vienna and 1920s New York in a single pair of hands.

Rudolf Buchbinder, born in 1946 in Litoměřice (then Czechoslovakia) and raised in Vienna, is one of the senior statesmen of Austrian pianism and a fixture of the city's musical life for more than half a century. He entered the Vienna Academy of Music at the age of five, its youngest-ever student, and has long been regarded as a leading interpreter of the Viennese Classical repertoire, above all Beethoven, whose complete piano sonatas and concertos he has performed and recorded many times over, and whose music he has championed in marathon cycles around the world. A scholar as well as a player, Buchbinder owns a large collection of historical editions and writings on the works he plays, and brings to them a combination of structural clarity, unfussy directness, and deep idiomatic authority. He appears regularly with the Vienna Philharmonic and the great orchestras of Europe and is closely associated with the Musikverein, where Viennese audiences have followed his playing across generations.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Summertime: George Gershwin's Life in Music**

Richard Crawford, W. W. Norton 2020

A life of Gershwin told through his music, including the Concerto in F, written for Carnegie Hall in 1925.

ACCESSIBLE **Ravel**

Roger Nichols, Yale University Press 2013

Nichols's Ravel biography covers the making of Boléro in 1928 and Ravel's own modest view of the piece that became his most famous.

DEEPER **George Gershwin: His Life and Work**

Howard Pollack, University of California Press 2007

Pollack's large study of Gershwin examines each major work in depth, with a full account of the Concerto in F and how it was received.

SOURCES

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