

A Classical Joke, a Birthday Present, and Fate

Thursday, January 14, 2027 · 19:30 · Musikverein
Lahav Shani, conductor · Lahav Shani, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 25, 'Classical'</i>	15'
2	SHOSTAKOVICH 1906–1975 <i>Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major, Op. 102</i>	20'
3	TCHAIKOVSKY 1840–1893 <i>Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64</i>	48'
TOTAL MUSIC		83'

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 25, 'Classical'

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.

15 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Sergei Prokofiev began his first numbered symphony in 1916 and finished the score on 10 September 1917, in the months between Russia's two revolutions. He spent that summer in the countryside outside Petrograd, away from the street fighting in the city, and set himself an experiment. Until then he had always composed at the piano. This time he decided to write without one, working the music out in his head, on the theory that orchestral colours imagined directly would come out cleaner and more transparent.

The model was Haydn. Prokofiev was not attempting a pastiche: the idea was to write the kind of symphony Haydn might have written had he been alive in 1917, keeping the proportions, the small orchestra and the wit of the eighteenth century while letting his own harmonic habits slip in. Themes that begin innocently in one key sidestep into a neighbouring one and come back as if nothing had happened. The name 'Classical' was his own choice, and programme writers have generally heard the piece as an affectionate tribute rather than a parody.

One movement gave him trouble. In June 1917 he threw out his first finale as too heavy and wrote a new one, setting himself the rule that it should avoid minor chords altogether. He conducted the first performance himself in Petrograd in April 1918.

The symphony is scored for the orchestra of Haydn's late years: pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, with timpani and strings. It lasts about fifteen minutes, which makes it the shortest of his seven symphonies.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro. A rising flourish and the first theme is off, in D major, and within a few bars has already jumped to a key where it has no business being. Notice how light the textures are: nothing is doubled that does not need to be.

II. Larghetto. In A major, a long, high violin melody floats over a gently ticking accompaniment. It is the one place where the symphony stops joking.

III. Gavotte: Non troppo allegro. Where Haydn would have put a minuet, Prokofiev puts an older, heavier-footed court dance. It is over in little more than a minute. Listen for the wide octave leaps in the tune and the way the harmony lurches sideways before landing back in D.

IV. Finale: Molto vivace. The replacement finale, built almost entirely from major chords, races along with scales and repeated notes passed between strings and woodwind. The flutes and the violins have the hardest time of it.

Dmitri Shostakovich

1906–1975

20 minutes

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major, Op. 102

THE COMPOSER

Dmitri Shostakovich was born on September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg (then still the Russian capital) into a cultured family. His father was an engineer, and it was his mother who gave him his first piano lessons. The young Dmitri showed exceptional talent, entering the Petrograd Conservatory at thirteen and graduating at nineteen with his First Symphony, whose triumphant premiere in 1926 soon brought him international fame.

Shostakovich's life thereafter became inseparable from the tortured history of the Soviet Union. His 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was initially a sensation, but in 1936 a devastating Pravda editorial, widely taken to reflect Stalin's own displeasure, condemned it as "muddle instead of music." Shostakovich lived for years in fear of arrest, at one point waiting at night on the landing outside his flat so that his family would not be disturbed if the knock came.

Yet under this shadow, Shostakovich composed a stream of masterpieces. His fifteen symphonies and fifteen string quartets constitute one of the twentieth century's greatest artistic achievements: music that bears witness to its era's terrors while transcending them through its humanity and craft. He died in Moscow on August 9, 1975.

ABOUT THE WORK

Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his Second Piano Concerto at the beginning of 1957 as a nineteenth-birthday present for his son Maxim, who was then a student pianist. Maxim gave the first performance on 10 May 1957 at the Moscow Conservatory. The piece is short, about twenty minutes, in three movements, and its solo part is brilliant without being forbidding: it was made for a young player to shine in.

The composer was dismissive about it. In a letter to his pupil Edison Denisov, written shortly after he finished the score, he said the concerto had no artistic merit to speak of. Writers have never agreed on how seriously to take that. It may be modesty, or a private joke at the expense of official language, or a way of getting his retaliation in first. Audiences have ignored the verdict.

What makes the piece unusual in his output is its mood. There is very little of the bitterness or double meaning that listeners expect from him. The outer movements are quick, bright and full of family humour, and the slow movement between them is one of the most openly tender things he wrote.

The orchestra is modest: piccolo, pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, timpani, snare drum and strings. There are no trumpets or trombones.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Allegro. The bassoons set off with a perky march that could accompany toy soldiers, and the piano joins a few bars later with a simple tune in bare octaves, both hands playing the same notes. The movement is in sonata form, and the march keeps returning, louder each time. There is a full solo cadenza before the close.

II. Andante. Muted strings begin alone in C minor with something close to a chorale. Then the piano enters and the key turns to C major: a slow, descending melody over rolling triplets in the left hand. Listen for the gentle rub of two notes in the melody against three in the accompaniment.

III. Allegro. The finale follows without a break. Its first theme is a quick dance in two, and its second is in 7/8 time, with plucked strings that sound a little like a balalaika. Later come pages of scales and patterns in the style of the Hanon finger exercises that piano students are made to practise, a joke between father and son. The ending is a dash for the line in F major.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840–1893

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

THE COMPOSER

Tchaikovsky was Russia's first truly international composer and, in his own lifetime, one of the most beloved figures in European music. Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained as a civil servant before turning to music in his early twenties, studying composition at the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began teaching harmony at the newly opened Moscow Conservatory in 1866, and over the following twenty-five years produced six symphonies, three ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*), a string of operas, numerous concertos, and a wealth of chamber and song repertoire that has never left the international stage.

48 minutes

Tchaikovsky was a man of intense feeling, much of it conflicted. Homosexual in an unforgiving Russian society, often paralysed by depression and self-doubt, he poured the full weight of his emotional life into his music. He died in St. Petersburg in 1893, days after conducting the premiere of his Sixth Symphony. The official cause was cholera, though the precise circumstances of his death have been debated ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed his Fifth Symphony between May and August 1888, a decade after the Fourth, and conducted the first performance himself in St Petersburg on 17 November of that year. He had begun the work unsure whether he still had a symphony in him, and his opinion of it swung back and forth for months afterwards. After the early performances he decided it was a failure and wondered whether he was written out. Later he warmed to it again. The public never shared his doubts, and the Fifth has been a fixture of the repertoire ever since.

A page in one of his notebooks, written shortly before he started, shows what he had in mind at the outset. The introduction is headed with the words ‘complete resignation before Fate, or, which is the same, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence’. For the Allegro he jotted down ‘murmurs, doubts, complaints, reproaches’, and then a question about throwing himself into the embrace of faith. He did not publish this plan and seems to have dropped most of it, but the idea of a fate theme survived. The sombre tune heard at the very beginning returns in every one of the four movements, a device he had first tried in the Manfred Symphony three years earlier.

The interest of the piece lies in what happens to that theme. It starts in E minor, low and funereal. By the finale it has been turned into E major and marches in triumph. Whether the triumph convinces is an old argument. Tchaikovsky himself came to feel that the ending was overdone, and some commentators have agreed with him. Others hear exactly the hard-won victory that the notebook seems to promise.

The scoring is for three flutes (the third doubling piccolo), pairs of oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings. A performance takes about three quarters of an hour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Andante. Allegro con anima. Two clarinets in their lowest register play the fate theme over dark strings. The Allegro that follows grows out of a quiet, dance-like tune for clarinet and bassoon and builds to several climaxes before sinking back into the depths where it began.

II. Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza. After a few bars of low string chords, a solo horn sings one of the most famous melodies Tchaikovsky wrote. Oboe and clarinet answer it. Twice the fate theme breaks in at full volume and stops the love song in its tracks.

III. Valse: Allegro moderato. In place of a scherzo there is a waltz in A major, graceful and a little uneasy, with a faster, scurrying middle section. Just before the end the fate theme creeps in quietly on clarinets and bassoons.

IV. Finale: Andante maestoso. Allegro vivace. The fate theme opens the movement, now in the major and with the tread of a solemn march. A turbulent Allegro follows. Near the end the orchestra arrives on a big chord and pauses. The theme then returns in full brass for the final march, and in the closing bars the trumpets and horns blaze out the main tune of the first movement, also turned to the major.

Tonight's artists

Lahav Shani *piano*

Shani trained as a pianist before he turned to conducting, and the orchestra lists him as both conductor and soloist for the Shostakovich concerto, a piece written for a young pianist at the start of his career.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music**

David Brown, Faber and Faber 2007

Brown takes the life and the works in turn, with a clear account of the Fifth Symphony and of the doubts that surrounded it.

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

A readable life of Prokofiev that covers the summer of 1917 and the making of the Classical Symphony.

DEEPER **Shostakovich: A Life**

Laurel E. Fay, Oxford University Press 2005

A documentary biography of Shostakovich, careful about dates and sources, covering the years around the Second Piano Concerto.

SOURCES

1. 5th Subscription Concert, 16 January 2027, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/5th-subscription-concert/10864/>
2. Concert in the Wiener Konzerthaus, 19 January 2027, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-the-wiener-konzerthaus/10915/>
3. Lahav Shani, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lahav_Shani
4. Symphony No. 1 (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._1_(Prokofiev))
5. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 1, Classical, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/symphony-no-1-classical>
6. Piano Concerto No. 2 (Shostakovich), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._2_\(Shostakovich\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._2_(Shostakovich))
7. Shostakovich: Piano Concerto No. 2, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/piano-concerto-no-2-shostakovich>
8. Symphony No. 5 (Tchaikovsky), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Tchaikovsky\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Tchaikovsky))
9. Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/tchaikovsky-symphony-no-5>
10. Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.laphil.com/works/symphony-no-5-in-e-minor-op-64>
11. Tchaikovsky: The Man and His Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571231959>
12. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
13. Shostakovich: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195182514>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2027-01-14-shani>

Version 1, 7 October 2026