

An Argument at the Piano and a Child's Heaven

Saturday, February 13, 2027 · 15:30 · Musikverein
Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor · Yuja Wang, piano · Christiane Karg, soprano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26</i>	28'
2	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 4 in G major</i>	60'
TOTAL MUSIC		88'

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26

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.

ABOUT THE WORK

Sergei Prokofiev carried the ideas for his Third Piano Concerto around for years before he wrote it down. The earliest sketches go back to 1913, when he wrote a theme with variations and put it aside, and he returned to the material in 1916 and 1917. By the time he fin-

28 minutes

ished the piece he had left Russia and was living between the United States and western Europe. The concerto was finally put together in the summer of 1921 at Saint-Brevin-les-Pins, a village on the coast of Brittany.

Staying nearby that summer was the Russian poet Konstantin Balmont, whose verses Prokofiev set in the same year as his five songs, Op. 36. Balmont heard the composer play parts of the concerto and answered with a sonnet. The score is dedicated to him.

Prokofiev was the soloist at the first performance, on 16 December 1921 in Chicago, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Frederick Stock, a conductor who had taken up his music early. Early American audiences were more puzzled than delighted, and it was in Europe, beginning with a performance in Paris under Serge Koussevitzky in 1922, that the piece caught on. It became one of the works Prokofiev relied on for his own concert tours, and in 1932 he recorded it in London with the London Symphony Orchestra.

Of his five piano concertos, the Third is the most often played. It lasts a little under half an hour, has three movements of similar length, and keeps the brilliant keyboard writing of the two earlier concertos while giving the orchestra a fuller share of the argument.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The concerto opens quietly. A solo clarinet plays a long, unhurried melody, the orchestra joins in, and then the strings start to scurry upwards until the piano bursts in at full speed. A second idea arrives with a drier, more sarcastic edge, with dissonances and a strutting rhythm. Midway through, the opening clarinet melody returns in the full orchestra, and the piano decorates it before the fast music takes over again and races to the end.

The middle movement is a theme with five variations, unusual in a concerto. The orchestra alone states the theme, a prim little dance in the manner of a gavotte. The piano's first variation begins with a long trill and a run up the keyboard. The second and third are fast and rhythmically spiky, with accents pushed off the beat. The fourth is the still centre of the piece, a slow, dreamlike exchange between piano and orchestra. The fifth is energetic, and at the end the theme comes back at its original pace in the orchestra while the piano skitters around it.

Prokofiev called the finale an argument between piano and orchestra. Bassoons and plucked strings propose a theme, the piano cuts in with its own, and the two keep contradicting each other. Then the woodwinds bring a broad, lyrical melody, which the piano at first seems to mock and then takes up at full volume. The closing pages are the hardest in the work, a contest of speed that ends on a loud chord of C major.

Gustav Mahler

60 minutes

1860–1911

Symphony No. 4 in G major

THE COMPOSER

Gustav Mahler was born on July 7, 1860, in the Bohemian village of Kaliště (now in the Czech Republic), the second of fourteen children in a Jewish family. Death was a constant presence in his childhood: many of his siblings died in infancy. This early acquaintance with mortality would permeate his music throughout his life.

Mahler's prodigious musical talent emerged early: at four he discovered his grandparents' piano and took to it at once. At fifteen he entered the Vienna Conservatory, and he later turned to conducting to earn his living, reserving composition for summer holidays. His conducting career was meteoric: by 1897, at age thirty-seven, he had become artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera, where his innovative productions and exacting standards made him one of the most celebrated opera conductors of his era.

As a composer, Mahler worked on a monumental scale. His nine completed symphonies (plus an unfinished tenth) and five song cycles represent a titanic achievement, bridging nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century modernism. Yet during his lifetime, his conducting reputation far outstripped his recognition as a composer. It was only after his death in 1911, and particularly after 1945, that Mahler's compositions gained the worldwide acclaim they enjoy today.

ABOUT THE WORK

Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony grew backwards from its ending. In 1892 he wrote a song for voice and orchestra, "Das himmlische Leben" ("The Heavenly Life"), on a text from Des Knaben Wunderhorn, the collection of German folk poetry that fed much of his early music. The poem is a child's picture of heaven: there is dancing and singing, the saints look after the kitchen, and nobody goes hungry. For a time Mahler meant the song to close his enormous Third Symphony. He took it out again, although traces of it remain in that work, and kept it for something else.

That something else came in the summers of 1899 and 1900. Mahler had been director of the Vienna Court Opera since 1897, and the summer holidays were the only time he had to compose. He began the new symphony in July 1899 at Bad Aussee and finished it in August 1900 at Maiernigg on the Wörthersee, a few weeks after his fortieth birthday. He wrote three movements that lead towards the song, so that fragments of it are heard along the way and the finale sounds like a destination reached. He thought of the song as both the source of the symphony and its goal.

The Fourth is the last of the three symphonies that draw on the Wunderhorn songs, and it is much the smallest of them. It lasts under an hour, and the orchestra has no trombones and no tuba. Mahler uses a large ensemble for colour and almost never all at once.

He conducted the first performance in Munich on 25 November 1901 with the Kaim Orchestra and the soprano Margarete Michalek. The audience, which had expected something like the monumental Second Symphony, did not know what to make of it, and the press in the German cities where it was played that winter was largely hostile. Mahler went on retouching the orchestration for years afterwards.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony begins with sleigh bells and flutes and then relaxes into an easy-going melody for the violins. The first movement keeps to a classical outline, and the tunes come one after another, light on their feet. The sleigh bells return several times as a kind of marker, and they will come back in the finale.

The second movement is a scherzo that Mahler first headed “Freund Hein spielt auf”: Friend Hein, a folk-tale name for Death, strikes up on his fiddle. The leader of the orchestra plays a second violin tuned a whole tone higher than normal, which gives it a thin, harsh edge, like a village fiddle. Alma Mahler connected the idea with Arnold Böcklin’s self-portrait, in which Death plays the violin at the painter’s ear. The effect is more uncanny than frightening, and twice a gentler trio pushes the fiddler aside.

The slow movement, which Mahler thought the best he had written, is a set of variations on a calm melody, interrupted twice by a lament in the minor. The variations get shorter and more restless until, near the end, the whole orchestra bursts out in a blaze of E major, as if a door had been thrown open. Then the music settles again.

The finale follows quietly. The soprano sings the Wunderhorn song with the simplicity of a child telling a story, and between the verses the sleigh bells rush in again, now with some bite. The last verse, about the music of heaven, turns to E major, and the symphony ends there, very quietly.

Tonight's artists

Yuja Wang *piano*

Wang is the soloist in the Prokofiev at both Musikverein concerts, on 13 and 14 February, and again when the orchestra takes this programme to Carnegie Hall in New York on 27 February.

Yuja Wang, born in Beijing in 1987, is one of the most dazzling and charismatic pianists in the world. Trained at the Central Conservatory in Beijing and the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, she had her breakthrough in 2007 when, aged twenty, she stepped in for Martha Argerich with the Boston Symphony, and she has been a star of the concert platform ever since. An exclusive Deutsche Grammophon artist and a Grammy winner, she is celebrated for a phenomenal, seemingly effortless technique, electrifying stage presence and fearless musicianship across a vast repertoire, with the great virtuoso Russian concertos among her specialities.

Christiane Karg *soprano*

Karg sings the song that closes Mahler's Fourth, a part she has also performed with the Munich Philharmonic and the Concertgebouw Orchestra. A week later she returns as the soprano soloist in the orchestra's performances of the Second Symphony.

Christiane Karg is a German soprano, born in Feuchtwangen in Bavaria in 1980. She studied at the Mozarteum in Salzburg and made her Salzburg Festival debut in 2006 while still a student, in two early Mozart works. From 2008 she was a member of the Frankfurt Opera ensemble, where her roles included Susanna, Pamina, Zdenka in *Arabella* and Debussy's *Mélisande*. She has since sung lyric soprano parts at houses including the Royal Opera House, La Scala and the Bavarian State Opera, and she is equally active as a concert and Lieder singer. She is artistic director of the KunstKlang festival in her home town.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World**

Norman Lebrecht, Anchor 2011

Lebrecht goes through the symphonies one by one, and his chapter on the Fourth is a good way in to its child's view of heaven and the unease underneath.

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

A readable life of Prokofiev that follows him through the American years and the summer in Brittany when the Third Concerto was finished.

DEEPER **Mahler's Fourth Symphony**

James L. Zychowicz, Oxford University Press 2005

A full-length study of the Fourth Symphony, tracing how the song *Das himmlische Leben* shaped the three movements written to precede it.

SOURCES

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3. Concert in New York, 27 February 2027, Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-new-york/10963/>
4. Yannick will conduct Mahler's complete symphonies cycle in 2026-2027, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. <https://yannicknezetseguin.com/en/news/detail/yannick-will-conduct-mahler-s-complete-symphonies-cycle-in-2026-2027/>
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6. Program Notes: Conrad Tao Plays Prokofiev, Jacksonville Symphony. <https://www.jaxsymphony.org/conrad-cao-plays-prokofiev/>
7. Piano Concerto No. 3, Orchestre Métropolitain. <https://orchestremetropolitain.com/?p=3749>
8. Prokofiev S. Concerto No 3 for piano and orchestra, Compozitor Publishing House, St Petersburg. <https://compozitor.spb.ru/eng/catalog/piano/prokofiev-s-concerto-no-3-for-piano-and-orchestra/>
9. Symphony No. 4 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Mahler))
10. Mahler: Symphony No. 4, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/mahler-symphony-no-4>
11. The Heavenly Life: A Guide to Mahler's Symphony No. 4, Houston Symphony. <https://houston-symphony.org/guide-mahler-symphony-no-4/>
12. Gustav Mahler, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Mahler
13. Christiane Karg, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christiane_Karg
14. Christiane Karg, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/christiane-karg>
15. Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781400096572>
16. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
17. Mahler's Fourth Symphony, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195181654>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2027-02-13-nezet-seguin>

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