

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

28 minutes

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

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.



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