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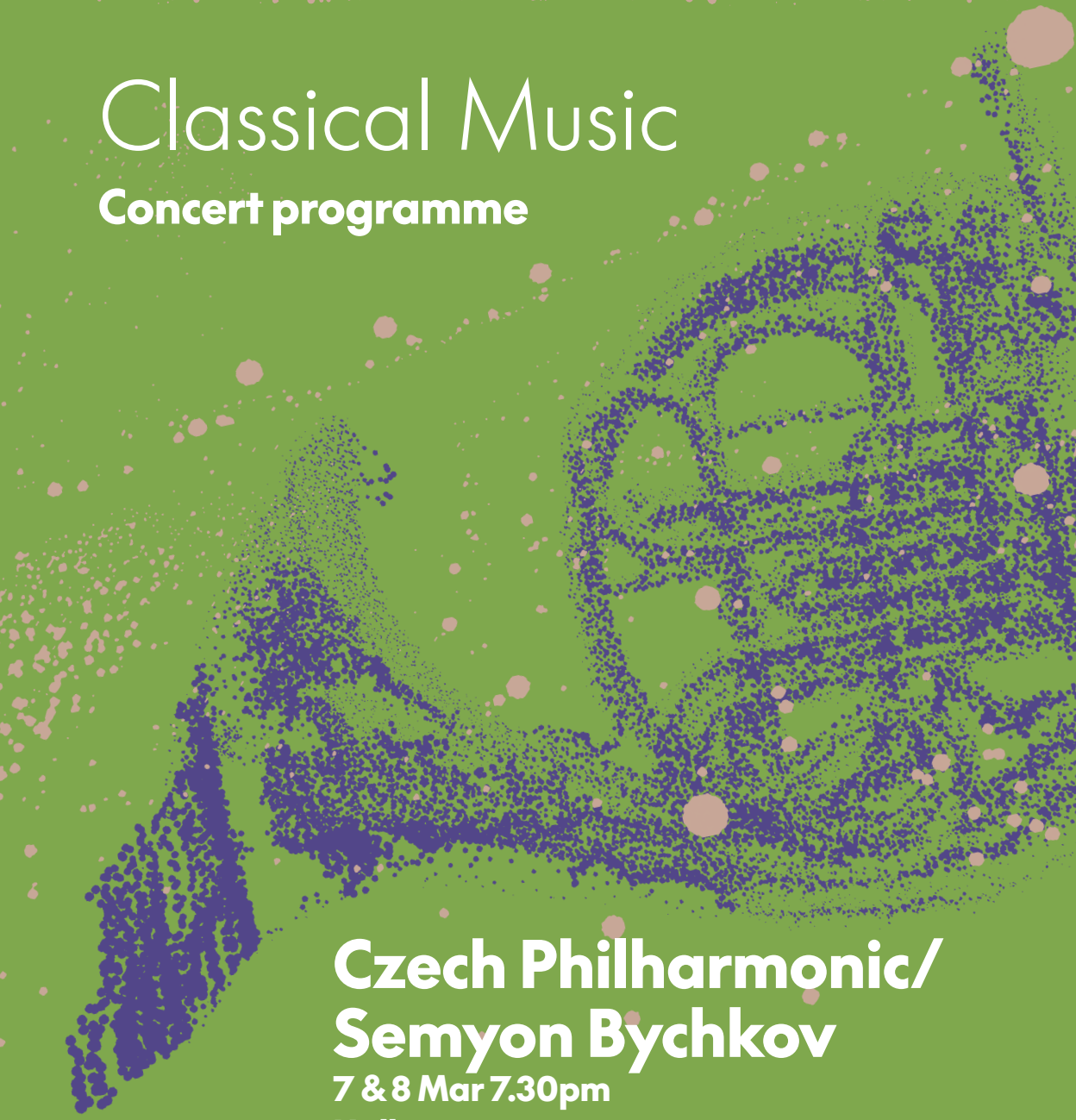
Classical Music

Concert programme



Czech Philharmonic/ Semyon Bychkov

7 & 8 Mar 7.30pm

Hall

Important information

When does the concert start and finish?
The concert begins at 7.30pm and finishes at about 9.30pm, with a 20-minute interval.

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Latecomers will be admitted if there is a suitable break in the performance.

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Drop them off at our free cloak room on Level -1.

Czech Philharmonic/Semyon Bychkov: Shostakovich 5
with Sheku Kanneh-Mason

Fri 7 Mar 7.30pm, Hall

Czech Philharmonic
Semyon Bychkov conductor
Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Dmitri Shostakovich Cello Concerto No 1
1 Allegretto
2 Moderato –
3 Cadenza –
4 Allegro con moto

Interval 20 minutes

Dmitri Shostakovich Symphony No 5
1 Moderato
2 Allegretto
3 Largo
4 Allegro non troppo

Produced by the Barbican

Programme produced by Harriet Smith

All information correct at time of printing

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In the first of two concerts, Semyon Bychkov brings the world-famous Czech Philharmonic to the Barbican for an evening of Shostakovich, as we mark 50 years since the composer's death. They are joined by stellar cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason for the hugely challenging First Cello Concerto, concluding with Shostakovich's powerfully wrought Fifth Symphony.

For cellists, Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto is one of the supreme challenges. Not only is it ferociously difficult from a technical point of view, it's every bit as demanding emotionally as any of his great symphonies and string quartets. It's complex too: sometimes Shostakovich seems to be speaking to a large audience, on the public stage; at other times he addresses us personally, confidentially – as he might one of his closest friends, in the safety of his own room, away from prying official ears. Shostakovich's position was relatively secure in 1959, when he wrote the concerto. Since the death of Stalin in 1953, the USSR had liberalised, up to a point, and Shostakovich was one of its proudest cultural exhibits. But it wasn't that long ago that things had been terribly different – and he was only too aware that they could so easily change again.

Shostakovich wrote the First Cello Concerto for a particularly close and trusted friend, the outstanding virtuoso cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. His playing could be remarkably delicate and subtle, but when it came to sheer power, no one could beat him. Even so, knowing how hard it is for the cello to sound clearly through rich orchestral textures, Shostakovich uses a relatively small orchestra. The only brass

instrument is a single horn, often employed as a second soloist, as if it were the cello's more starkly powerful alter ego. Overall, the orchestral writing is highly economical: every phrase, every detail, counts.

Like so many of Shostakovich's major works, the First Cello Concerto seems to tell a story, though what that story might be is ultimately left to us to decide. The first movement is lively, often abrasive. Its second theme, a high-pitched, impassioned melody for the cello, echoes the Russian Jewish folk music Shostakovich so admired, and in which he found consolation. The Moderato slow movement is in complete contrast: mostly quiet, meditative, probing. After the strenuous climax, the cello brings back its first theme, magically transformed on high harmonics, and answered by the celesta – this instrument's only appearance in the entire concerto. Then the cello begins the unaccompanied Cadenza, at first ruminating slowly on themes from the Moderato, but gradually picking up speed and energy, until at its height strings and then woodwind pile in savagely with the finale's main theme: a grim dance, punctuated by fierce timpani. Eventually the horn loudly calls out the piece's opening theme, and the cello begins the final assault, full of cascading runs and gritty chordal writing. The cello strains its voice to the maximum; then, with an abrupt gesture, the concerto is over.

However settled things may have seemed for Shostakovich in 1959, he still remembered vividly the traumatic ordeal of 1936. Things had been going so well for him: his opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934) had been a huge success across the world and had run for nearly two years in Russia. Then, without any warning, Shostakovich opened his copy of the state newspaper *Pravda* to find vicious denunciation of both the opera and of himself. Many prominent artistic figures had been arrested, or had simply disappeared, during that terrifying period. Shostakovich knew well enough that he might be next.

As so often at periods of crisis, Shostakovich found salvation in work. On one level, he had an impossible balancing act to pull off. The authorities were apparently looking for a gesture of repentance: a sign that Shostakovich had turned his back on the 'anti-people' 'modernist distortions' of *Lady Macbeth*. The new work must be seen to be positive, to affirm the brave new realities of Stalin's Communist Utopia, in an accessible musical language. But Shostakovich had too much integrity simply to sell his soul. Was there some way he could speak the truth to those with ears to hear, while managing to force enough of a smile to convince the officials that he had learned his lesson?

The result was one of his most enduringly successful creations, the Fifth Symphony (1937). Overall, the work does seem to chart a conventional Romantic journey from darkness to light, from minor key anguish, desolation and violence to major key rejoicing, as in Beethoven's famous Fifth Symphony (a gold standard in Soviet aesthetics). But there is pain and heartfelt sadness, and later brutal cathartic violence, in the first movement; while the humour in the following scherzo definitely has an edge to it: mocking militaristic fanfares, and then what sounds like a comically drunken violin solo.

The Largo slow movement sings of profound desolation, in the beautiful string threnody that begins it, and especially in the long, lonely, sparsely accompanied woodwind solos at its heart. This is then brusquely dismissed by the finale's brass-dominated, opening. Eventually a long, effortful crescendo builds to what seems to be an exultant conclusion, with seemingly triumphant fanfares and thudding emphatic drumbeats. The authorities accepted it as a ringing affirmation of their values. But Shostakovich was a master of ambiguity: as so often there's more than one way of reading him, and many in the audience in 1937 heard a dissident message in this music. Whatever you decide, it's shattering.

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Czech Philharmonic/Semyon Bychkov: Mahler 5
with Katia and Marielle Labèque

Sat 8 Mar 7.30pm, Hall

Czech Philharmonic
Semyon Bychkov conductor
Katia and Marielle Labèque piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Concerto for Two Pianos
1 Allegro
2 Andante
3 Rondo: Allegro

Interval 20 minutes

Gustav Mahler Symphony No 5
Part One
1 Funeral March: In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt. [With measured tread. Strict. Like a procession]
2 Sturmisch bewegt. Mit grösster Vehemenz [Stormy. With utmost vehemence]

Part Two
3 Scherzo: Kräftig, nicht zu schnell. [Vigorous, not too fast]

Part Three
4 Adagietto: Sehr langsam [Very slow]
5 Rondo-Finale: Allegro

Produced by the Barbican

Programme produced by Harriet Smith

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For their second concert, Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic are joined by the Labèque sisters for Mozart's only Double Piano Concerto, a work full of ebullience and brilliance to which the sisters are so well suited. They end with Mahler's hugely personal Fifth Symphony, music particularly close to this conductor's heart.

As so often with Mozart's music, the background details are frustratingly vague in this Double Piano Concerto. All we can say is that it was probably written in 1779, probably for Wolfgang and his stunningly talented sister Maria Anna ('Nannerl') to play together. The suggestion that it was conceived as a brother-sister display piece is borne out by the music. In his mature solo piano concertos, Mozart creates a sense of lively dialogue – sometimes dramatic, sometimes deliciously intimate – between the soloist and the orchestra. But here the interplay is mostly between the two soloists. Although the orchestra sets the scene at the beginning of the first movement (as was the custom in Classical era concertos), and to a lesser extent in the following two as well, once the pianos have entered it retreats modestly into the background – or at least for most for the time.

In a letter to his father, Mozart tells how delighted he was when a fellow pianist described his own playing as 'always playful'; and that spirit prevails in this delightful piece – nowhere more so that in the first movement's solo cadenza, near the end of the movement. It's easy to imagine the two young Mozarts' facial expressions as they batted the ideas back and forth like musical shuttlecocks, the volleys accelerating towards the climax. The subtlety and depth of the later concertos may still be some way

off, but Mozart thought enough of this concerto to revive and revise it in 1782 to play with one of his star pupils, Josepha Barbara Auernhammer. 'The Miss is a monster!', Mozart wrote about her, ' – plays delightfully though.'

Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony is such a white-water-ride of a musical journey that it's easy just to let go and carried along by the tidal waves of stirring sounds. But the more you get to know the music, the clearer it becomes that Mahler has some kind of story in mind, and perhaps even a kind of philosophical message. At first, he sent his symphonies into the world with explanatory programme notes, or at least with sung texts. But by the time he came the Fifth, he'd begun to lose faith it such props. So how do we make sense of Mahler's Fifth Symphony as a story, as well as a journey in sound?

As so often with this composer, knowledge of the background helps. In 1901, just before starting work on the Symphony No 5, Mahler had endured a near-fatal haemorrhage and a dangerous operation – no wonder death is such a strong presence in the symphony's First Part. (The first movement is entitled 'Funeral March'.) Mounting anti-Semitism in Vienna had soured his feelings about his adopted home city, hence perhaps the edgy, ultimately manic waltz-parody in the Scherzo (Part Two). But he'd also met the woman who would soon become his, the brilliant and powerfully charismatic Alma Schindler, who is hymned so poignantly in the famous Adagietto: 'a love song without words', as Mahler's conductor-protégé Otto Klemperer called it, for strings and harp alone.

Even if he hadn't called the first movement 'Funeral March', it would brazenly obvious that Death is portrayed here, first in magnificent ghastly pomp, then in lonely lamentation – here Mahler echoes one of his most desolate songs, *Der Tambourg'sell* ('The Drummer Boy'), about a child soldier sentenced to death for desertion. Without doubt the memory of Mahler's recent near-death experience has left a deep imprint on the music, but his mind is also focused outwards, to the suffering of others. The second movement is clearly a life-and-death struggle: the shrill three-note woodwind figure near the start quickly comes to embody the spirit of desperate, heroic strife. The struggle culminates in a radiant hymn-tune on full brass – is faith the answer? But the affirmation is premature, and the movement collapses pathetically.

Then comes a bit of an emotional jolt. Despair at the end of the second movement is followed by a hyped-up, glittering waltz, sometimes wildly escapist, sometimes scornful - though there are stiller moments too, when painful memories seem to peer out from behind the curtain. Then comes the famous Adagietto which, for all its relative brevity, is the Fifth Symphony's spiritual turning-point. Is love, in the old Biblical saying, 'strong as death'? After a moment's teasing uncertainty, this leads to a determinedly joyous Rondo-Finale, full of muscular counterpoint as the various sections of the orchestra seem to jostle with each other for supremacy. Up-tempo memories of the Adagietto theme later on bring memories of Love/Alma, and when, at the Finale's height the brass hymn-tune from Part One returns, now with joyously cascading strings, this could also be identified with the woman Mahler had just married – if the notion of divine love can't help us face death, then perhaps human love can? In the end though, this is a symphony, not a novel, still less a sermon. Mahler was right: programmes are only imperfect props. The real adventure begins when we find the meanings for ourselves.

© Petr Kadlec

Semyon Bychkov

Semyon Bychkov became Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Czech Philharmonic in 2018, and his inaugural season was celebrated with an international tour that took the orchestra from performances at home in Prague to concerts in London, New York and Washington. The following year saw the completion of their Tchaikovsky Project – involving the release of a seven-CD box set devoted to the composer's symphonic repertoire and a series of international residencies. In his first season with the Czech Philharmonic, he also instigated the commissioning of 14 new works which have subsequently been premiered by the orchestra and performed by other ensembles across Europe and in the US.

In recognition of 2024's Year of Czech Music, Semyon Bychkov and the orchestra put Czech composers centre-stage, with concerts at home and on tour in Europe and the US, including three concerts at Carnegie Hall. Additionally, Pentatone released recordings of Smetana's *Má vlast* to mark the bicentenary of the composer's birth, and Dvořák's Symphonies Nos 7, 8 and 9 coupled with his overture cycle, *Nature, Life and Love*. He and the orchestra are currently midway through a Mahler cycle, of which the Third Symphony has just been released.

Semyon Bychkov's repertoire spans four centuries to which he brings a combination of innate musicality and rigorous Russian pedagogy. In addition to guest engagements with the world's major orchestras and opera houses, he holds honorary titles with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Academy of Music, holding an honorary doctorate with the latter. He was named Conductor of the Year at the 2015 *International Opera Awards* and, in 2022, by *Musical America*.

He began his recording career with Philips, releasing albums with the Berlin Philharmonic, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, London Philharmonic and Orchestre de Paris. A series of benchmark recordings with WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne included a Brahms symphony cycle, in addition to works by Richard Strauss, Mahler, Shostakovich, Rachmaninov, Verdi, Glanert and Höller. His 1992 recording of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* was the recommended choice for BBC's Radio 3's *Building a Library* in 2020; Wagner's *Lohengrin* was *BBC Music Magazine*'s Record of the Year in 2010; and Schmidt's Symphony No 2 with the Vienna Philharmonic was *BBC Music Magazine*'s Record of the Month in 2018.

In common with the Czech Philharmonic, Semyon Bychkov has one foot firmly in the culture of the East and the other in the West. Born in St Petersburg in 1952, he emigrated to the United States in 1975 and has lived in Europe since the mid-1980s. He was 22 when he left the former Soviet Union, returning there in 1989 as Principal Guest Conductor of the St Petersburg Philharmonic, the same year he was named Music Director of the Orchestre de Paris. In 1997 he was appointed Chief Conductor of the WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne, and in 1998 was named Chief Conductor of the Dresden Semperoper.

© Ollie Ali

Sheku Kanneh-Mason

Cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason's mission is to make music accessible to all, whether performing for children in a school hall, at an underground club, or at the world's leading concert venues.

Highlights of this season include Artist-in-Residence at the Konzerthaus Berlin; Artiste Étoile at the 2024 Lucerne Festival; tours with the Czech Philharmonic with both Jakub Hrůša and Semyon Bychkov, with Camerata Salzburg and a UK tour with Sinfonia of London and John Wilson; and concerts with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra with Paavo Järvi, WDR Symphony Cologne with Cristian Măcelaru, Orchestre National de Lyon with Leonard Slatkin, SWR Symphony Stuttgart with Christoph Eschenbach, Pittsburgh Symphony with Manfred Honeck, New World Symphony with Stéphane Denève, Philadelphia Orchestra with Yannick Nézet-Séguin and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra with Kazuki Yamada.

With his pianist sister, Isata, he makes his duo recital debut at New York's Carnegie Hall Stern Auditorium in a programme featuring a newly commissioned piece by Natalie Klouda. The pair also appear on tour in Bordeaux, Rome, Cincinnati, Toronto, Philadelphia, Dublin, Munich, Berlin, Antwerp, Haarlem, the Rheingau Festival, and at Wigmore Hall. He also appears with duo partners guitarist Plinio Fernandes and jazz pianist Harry Baker.

Since his debut in 2017, he has performed every summer at the BBC Proms, including as soloist at the 2023 Last Night of the Proms. In 2024 his family-friendly Proms appearances with the Fantasia Orchestra were designed to introduce orchestral classical music to a new generation of music lovers. He also returns to Antigua, where he has family connections, as an ambassador for the Antigua and Barbuda Youth Symphony Orchestra.

He is a Decca Classics recording artist, and his most recent album featured Beethoven's Triple Concerto alongside Nicola Benedetti, Benjamin Grosvenor and the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Santtu-Matias Rouvali. His 2022 album, *Song*, showcases his innately lyrical playing in a wide and varied range of arrangements and collaborations. His 2020 Elgar album reached No 8 in the overall Official UK Album Chart, making him the first ever cellist to reach the UK Top 10.

Sheku Kanneh-Mason is a graduate of London's Royal Academy of Music where he studied with Hannah Roberts; in 2022 he was appointed as the Academy's first Menuhin Visiting Professor of Performance Mentoring. In 2024 he accepted the role as patron of UK Music Masters and remains an ambassador for both Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and Future Talent. He was honoured with an MBE in the 2020 New Year's Honours List. After winning the *BBC Young Musician* competition in 2016, his performance at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex at Windsor Castle in 2018 was watched by two billion people worldwide.

He plays a Matteo Goffriller cello from 1700 which is on indefinite loan to him.

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Katia and Marielle Labèque

Katia and Marielle Labèque are regular guests with the Berlin, London, Los Angeles and Vienna Philharmonic orchestras, the Bavarian Radio, Chicago and London Symphony orchestras, Cleveland Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Orchestre de Paris , Dresden Staatskapelle and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. They have collaborated with leading conductors, including Marin Alsop, Semyon Bychkov, Gustavo Dudamel, Gustavo Gimeno, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Pietari Inkinen, Louis Langrée, Zubin Mehta, Andrés Orozco-Estrada, Seiji Ozawa, Sir Antonio Pappano, Matthias Pintscher, Georges Prêtre, Sir Simon Rattle, Santtu-Matias Rouvali, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Michael Tilson Thomas and Jaap van Zweden.

An audience of more than 33,000 attended a gala concert with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Sir Simon Rattle at Berlin's Waldbühne, now available on DVD (EuroArts). A record audience of more than 100,000 attended the Vienna Summer Night Concert in Schonbrunn (available on Sony as both a CD and DVD).

The Labèques' label KML Recordings joined DG in 2016.

The two sisters have worked with many composers, including Thomas Adès, Louis Andriessen, Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, Bryce Dessner, Philip Glass, Osvaldo Golijov, György Ligeti, and Olivier Messiaen. At Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles they gave the world premiere of Glass's Double Concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel. The year 2019 saw the world premiere of Bryce Dessner's Concerto for two pianos at the Royal Festival Hall with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and John Storgårds.

At the invitation of the Philharmonie in Paris, they presented their albums *Amoria* and *Invocations*, as well as a new project for two guitars and two pianos with David Chalmin and Bryce Dessner, including a piece written for them by Thom Yorke, *Don't fear the Light*, with the composer as special guest.

They premiered a new concerto by Nico Muhly, *In Certain Circles*, with the Orchestre de Paris and Maxim Emelyanichev in 2021, subsequently performing it with the New York Philharmonic and Jaap van Zweden in 2022. Another recent highlight was a tour with the Colombian Youth Philharmonic, under Andrés Orozco-Estrada, to Germany, Austria and Holland.

Katia and Marielle Labèque's other recent and current projects include *Sonic Wires* with Bryce Dessner and David Chalmin; *Electric Fields* with Barbara Hannigan; and a Cocteau/Glass Trilogy that was premiered in Paris before being toured internationally, including here at the Barbican last June.

Czech Philharmonic

The Czech Philharmonic was named Orchestra of the Year at last year's *Gramophone* Awards. It gave its first concert – an all-Dvořák programme conducted by the composer himself – at the Rudolfinum Hall on 4 January 1896. The orchestra is known for its definitive interpretations of Czech composers, as well as a special relationship with the music of Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Mahler (the last of these having conducted the Czech Philharmonic in the world premiere of his Seventh Symphony in 1908). It is currently recording the complete Mahler symphonies with Chief Conductor and Music Director Semyon Bychkov for Pentatone, of which the Third Symphony has just been released.

The Czech Philharmonic's extraordinary heritage reflects both its location at the heart of Europe and the Czech Republic's turbulent political history, for which Smetana's *Má vlast* ('My Country') has become a potent symbol. For the 2024 Year of Czech Music and the 200th anniversary of Smetana's birth, the Czech Philharmonic released a new recording of the work with Semyon Bychkov – which was recently nominated for a 2025 *BBC Music Magazine* Award – as well as giving rare concert performances of *Libuše* at the Prague Spring and Smetana Litomyšl festivals, conducted by the orchestra's Principal Guest Conductor Jakub Hrůša.

The release of *Má vlast* on Pentatone was followed by a set of Dvořák's Symphonies Nos 7, 8 and 9, which was named by *The Times* as one of the 20 Best Classical Albums of 2024. The Year of Czech Music culminated in New York, with the Czech Philharmonic and Bychkov having a three-day residency at Carnegie Hall where they were joined by Yo-Yo Ma, Gil Shaham and the orchestra's Artist-in-Residence Daniil Trifonov.

Throughout the Czech Philharmonic's history, two features have remained at its core: its championing of Czech composers and its belief in music's power to change lives. From as early as the 1920s, Václav Talich (Chief Conductor 1919–41) pioneered concerts for workers, young people and voluntary organisations, a philosophy which is just as important today.

Alongside the Czech Philharmonic's Youth Orchestra, Orchestral Academy and Jiří Bělohlávek Prize for young musicians, a comprehensive education strategy engages with more than 400 schools. An inspirational music and song programme led by singer Ida Kelarová for the extensive Romany communities within the Czech Republic and Slovakia has helped many socially excluded families to find a voice. As part of Czech Week at Carnegie Hall, four members of the Orchestral Academy travelled to New York where they joined forces with four young musicians from Carnegie Hall and four students from London's Royal Academy of Music, with whom the Czech Philharmonic have an annual education exchange programme.

An early champion of the music of Martinů and Janáček, the works of Czech composers, both established and new, remain the lifeblood of the orchestra. At the start of his tenure Semyon Bychkov launched an initiave to commission nine Czech composers and five international ones – Detlev Glanert, Julian Anderson, Thomas Larcher, Bryce Dessner and Thierry Escaich – to write works for the Czech Philharmonic; several of these have received their world premieres in recent seasons.

Czech Philharmonic

violin I
Jan Fišer *leader*
Adam Novák *leader*
Magdaléna Mašlaňová
Otakar Bartoš
Luboš Dudek
Marie Dvorská
Jan Jouza
Bohumil Kotmel
Jiří Kubita
Helena Skopová
Zdeněk Starý
Jindřich Vácha
Miroslav Vilímec
Zdeněk Zelba
Kateřina Vítečková
Marko Čaňo

violin II
Markéta Vokáčová
Milena Kolářová
Martin Balda
Xenie Dohnalová
Zuzana Hájková
Petr Havlín
Pavel Herajn
Jitka Kokšová
Veronika Kozlovská
Vítězslav Ochman
Jiří Ševčík
Helena Šulcová
Markéta Anna Peldová
Tereza Petrová

viola
Pavel Ciprys
Dominik Trávníček
Jaroslav Pondělíček
Pavel Hořejší
Jaroslav Kroft
Ondřej Martinovský
Jiří Poslední
Jiří Řehák
Jan Šimon
René Vácha
Lukáš Valášek
Pavel Kirs

cello
Ivan Vokáč *
Matěj Štěpánek
Adam Klánský
Jan Keller
Marek Novák
Jakub Dvořák
František Host
Tomáš Hostička
Jan Holeňa
Petr Hamerský

double bass
Adam Honzírek
Petr Ries
Tomáš Karpíšek
Ondřej Balcar
Jaromír Černík
Martin Hilský
Pavel Nejtek
Jiří Vopálka

flute/piccolo
Andrea Rysová *
Naoki Sato *
Petr Veverka
Jan Machat
Roman Novotný

oboe
Jana Brožková *
Barbora Trnčíková *
Jiří Zelba
Vojtěch Jouza

clarinet
Jan Mach *
Lukáš Dittrich *
Jan Brabec
Petr Sinkule

bassoon
Ondřej Roskovec *
Jaroslav Kubita *
Tomáš Františ
Alexandr Beták

horn
Jan Vobořil *
Ondřej Vrabec *
Jindřich Kolář
Jan Vobořil
Zdeněk Vašina
Kateřina Javůrková
Petra Čermáková

trumpet
Stanislav Masaryk *
Walter Hofbauer *
Marek Vajo
Martin Chodl
Jaroslav Halíř

trombone
Lukáš Besuch *
Lukáš Moťka
Bohumil Tůma

tuba
Jakub Chmelař

timpani
Michael Kroutil

percussion
Petr Holub
Pavel Polívka
Nana Fukuzato
Anežka Nováková

harp
Jana Bouškova *
Barbara Pazourová

piano/celesta
Karolina Pancernaite

** principal*

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Events coming up we think you might like

Australian Chamber Orchestra
Fri 21 Mar, Hall

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Chamber Orchestra of Europe/Sunwook Kim
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