

# Bartók

## Concerto for Orchestra

Sz. 116

# Sibelius

## Symphony No.5

in E-flat major, Op. 82

### Conductor

Alex Fryer

**16 November 2025 – 6pm**

Duke's Hall, Marylebone Rd NW1 5HT

Tickets £22 Adult, £15 Under 30 | [www.academyofstmarylebow.com](http://www.academyofstmarylebow.com)

# Welcome

Hello and welcome to our concert this evening. What better way to fight away the 'Sunday scaries' in a dreary November than with this programme of Sibelius and Bartók. The orchestra are delighted to be here in Duke's Hall at the Royal Academy of Music. For many of our players, it will bring back memories of studying here at either the senior or junior departments. Tonight, I'm feeling particularly lucky to be standing on the same podium as some of the world's greatest conductors and hoping I might magically gain some of their musical insight!

We open our programme with Sibelius. His music has one of the most unique sound worlds of any composer; dark, earthy and in places hauntingly empty - a teacher once described the music of Sibelius to me as the sound of a giant fungus growing on the trees of a murky forest. However, after stretches of searching through harmonic uncertainty, his music arrives at moments of complete euphoria. In his Fifth Symphony this happens in the last movement, with the 'swan theme', where the declamatory horns represent the composer's overwhelming awe at a flock of 16 swans flying over him.

Although the opening of the Bartók concerto presents similar uncertainty, the work is much more musically tangible. Thrilling in its virtuosity, the *Concerto for Orchestra* is a vividly colourful work. The ingenious orchestration conjures unique, bizarre and sometimes comical sounds from the orchestra - listen out for the harpist playing with spoons!

On the surface, these two pieces by giants of the 20th century couldn't sound more different. The Bartók is angular and jagged, while the Sibelius is mysterious and organic. However, as I've been getting to know the two works, I've noticed some fascinating similarities in their construction that make them an interesting pairing. Both composers use very short musical ideas (sometimes only a few notes) as a basis for entire sections or movements. They often morph small musical cells to become unrecognizable through inversion (flipping it upside down) or alter the rhythm or metre. Both build much of their thematic material around the interval of a fourth. Bartók often uses an augmented 4th (once called the devil's interval), to add an uncomfortable edge - notable at the start of the *Intermezzo*. Another charming link is Sibelius' trademark use of woodwind playing in pairs, which we hear in the opening of the symphony. This is echoed by Bartók, who dedicates the whole second movement ('Presentation of the couples') to duetting wind instruments.

I hope you enjoy this wonderful programme; we have certainly enjoyed putting it together. Do take a look at what we have coming up, including a particularly exciting exploration of pieces inspired by *Romeo and Juliet* in February, with music by Prokofiev, Bernstein and Tchaikovsky.

Alex Fryer

(Academy of St Mary-le-Bow, Principal Conductor and Artistic Director)

# Programme

Symphony No. 5  
in E-flat major, Op. 82

Jean Sibelius  
(1865–1957)

- I. Tempo molto moderato – Allegro moderato
- II. Andante mosso, quasi allegretto
- III. Allegro molto – Misterioso

*- Interval -*

Concerto for Orchestra  
Sz. 116, BB 123

Béla Bartók  
(1881–1945)

- I. Introduzione
- II. Presentando le coppie
- III. Elegia
- IV. Intermezzo interrotto
- V. Finale

*We kindly ask that audience members refrain from filming or photographing the performance.*

# Programme Notes

## Sibelius

### Symphony No. 5 in Eb Major, Op. 82

When Sibelius began work on his Fifth Symphony in 1914, he was at a crossroads. Internationally acclaimed after the success of his early symphonies and tone poems, he nonetheless faced pressure to adapt to the rising tide of modernism in symphonic writing, leading to creative exhaustion, and mounting self-doubt. He was also struggling with the after-effects of several operations for a throat tumour, and the outbreak of World War I had cut off his European royalties.

Despite these hardships, the Finnish government commissioned a new symphony to celebrate Sibelius' 50th birthday in December 1915, which had been declared a national holiday. Sibelius conducted the premiere himself in Helsinki on 8 December 1915, but he was dissatisfied with the result. Over the next four years he subjected the work to two major revisions - the final version premiered on 24 November 1919, again under his direction. What emerged was not a mere refinement but a total reimagining, fusing the original four movements into three. He described his struggle to perfect the symphony in his diary, stating: "It is as if God had thrown down pieces of a mosaic from heaven's floor and asked me to put them together."

The symphony opens with a mystical horn call over murmuring strings, which provides much of the thematic material for the movement. From tentative beginnings the movement grows into a sweeping Allegro, propelled by bright brass and vigorous rhythms. The sense of organic growth, of music unfolding and evolving naturally, is typical of Sibelius' compositional style.

A more relaxed interlude, the second movement unfolds as a set of variations on a gentle theme introduced by the woodwinds. There is a sense of rustic grace here, tinged with melancholy and dark undercurrents.

The finale features one of the most well-known and re-quoted passages in 20th-century symphonic writing. It was born from a vision Sibelius recorded in his diary: "Today at ten to eleven I saw sixteen swans. One of the greatest experiences of my life! Oh God, what beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the solar haze like a gleaming silver ribbon."

The 'swan theme' - a broad, ascending melody announced by the horns - forms the spiritual heart of the symphony, symbolising transcendence and freedom. Around it, Sibelius constructs a complex arch of motion, culminating in the extraordinary conclusion: six monumental, isolated chords, separated by silence. The effect is both mysterious and inevitable, like the closing of a vast natural cycle.

# Bartók

## Concerto for Orchestra, Sz. 116, BB

When Béla Bartók composed his Concerto for Orchestra in 1943, he was living in exile in the United States - ill, impoverished, and disheartened. Having fled Hungary in 1940 as the shadow of fascism spread across Europe, Bartók found himself cut off from his homeland, his folk-music research, and much of his musical identity. Yet from this dark period emerged one of the most life-affirming and masterful works of his career: a symphonic celebration of colour, rhythm, and vitality.

By the early 1940s, Bartók's health was failing, he was struggling financially, and his music was little performed in America. His fortunes changed through the intervention of Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who, at the suggestion of two of Bartók's fellow Hungarian musicians (violinist Joseph Szigeti and conductor Fritz Reiner), visited Bartók in hospital and commissioned a new orchestral work in memory of his late wife, Natalie. The commission provided Bartók not only with much-needed income but also with a renewed creative purpose.

Bartók composed the Concerto for Orchestra at the sanatorium in Saranac Lake, New York, completing it in just two months during the Autumn of 1943. The premiere took place on December 1, 1944, in Boston, conducted by Koussevitzky, and was met with immediate critical and public acclaim. Following the premiere, Bartók wrote: "We went there for the rehearsals and performances - after having obtained the grudgingly granted permission of my doctor for this trip.... The performance was excellent. Koussevitzky says it is the 'best orchestra piece of the last 25 years' (including the works of his idol, Shostakovich!)."

Bartók himself wrote that "The title 'Concerto' is explained by its tendency to treat the single instruments or instrumental groups in a 'concertant' or soloistic manner." Indeed, the piece blurs the traditional boundary between symphony and concerto. While symphonic in structure and scope, it continually spotlights different instrumental sections and soloists, turning the orchestra itself into a virtuoso instrument. Consisting of five movements, the piece is arranged in an 'arch' or 'palindromic' form, where the outer movements balance each other, and the central slow movement serves as a keystone.

The Concerto opens with a mysterious, brooding introduction that gradually awakens into a vigorous, energetic Allegro featuring fugato passages and innovative melodic ideas. The second movement showcases pairs of wind instruments playing in characteristic intervals (bassoons in sixths, oboes in thirds, clarinets in sevenths, flutes in fifths, and muted trumpets in seconds). The central movement is an introspective nocturne, which revisits the sombre, night-music idiom found throughout Bartók's works. Its eerie atmosphere and chromatic lyricism suggest both personal melancholy and a lament for a world at war. Full of irony and wit, the fourth movement juxtaposes a tender folk-like melody with a sudden, mocking interruption - an allusion to the 'invasion' theme from Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony. The exhilarating finale brims with rhythmic vitality and folkloric energy. Themes are passed between sections in dazzling contrapuntal displays, culminating in a triumphant affirmation of life and resilience.

# Alex Fryer

## Conductor

Alex is a versatile musician enjoying a varied freelance career as a conductor, oboist, singer and educator. Alex studied at The Royal College of Music, London where he graduated with a Master's in oboe performance with distinction, having previously been awarded a First-Class degree in Music from the University of Southampton. In 2019 he joined Sinfonia Smith Square (formerly Southbank Sinfonia) as an oboist for a year-long orchestral fellowship, which included performances at the BBC Proms and broadcasts on BBC Radio 3.

As a conductor, Alex is the Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Academy of St Mary-le-Bow, as well as a regular guest conductor with the Hertfordshire Chamber Orchestra. He has worked with many other ensembles including Southbank Sinfonia, Southern Sinfonia, the Cantus Ensemble and Cambridge Youth Opera, the New Cambridge Symphony Orchestra as well as both the University Symphony and Chamber Orchestras at Southampton. Alex enjoys devising interesting and original programmes and finding new ways of presenting traditional repertoire. Recent projects have included Stravinsky's Firebird and Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker with newly devised narration, a version of A Midsummer Night's Dream for actor, orchestra and voices using Mendelssohn's incidental music and a concert inspired by the sea (including Debussy's La Mer) presented by a marine biologist from the Natural History Museum.

Alex is a freelance Music Leader/Presenter and a passionate music educator. He has worked on education projects alongside the Royal Opera House, Southbank Sinfonia and The Bridge at Waterloo. Alex trained in education and participation work on the Pathway Scheme with Wigmore Hall Learning and on the Trainee Music Leader Scheme with Spitalfields Music. Alex currently coaches young musicians with the Music in Secondary Schools Trust and is an Artis Creative Learning Specialist working in primary schools.

## The Academy of St Mary-le-Bow

The Academy of St Mary-le-Bow is an orchestra made up of outstanding non-professional musicians, many of whom have studied at leading conservatoires or universities, previously worked as professional players or were part of prestigious organisations such as the National Youth Orchestra. Our mission is to provide players with the opportunity to take part in high-quality orchestral concerts with like-minded musicians. The ensemble performs around six major concerts a year across London and holds a residency at the historic church of St Mary-le-Bow in the City. The ensemble is flexible in size, undertaking projects from chamber music to large-scale symphonic works. Though the ensemble is regularly directed by its Principal Conductor and Artistic Director, Alex Fryer, it also frequently engages guest conductors and guest leaders for un-conducted performances.

# The Orchestra

## Violin I

Makoto Nakata  
Ellen Dunn  
Alex Dawkins  
Sean Choi  
Tory Sawyer  
Nick Bacon  
Anahita Falaki  
Ermos Chrysochos  
Freya Stewart  
James Lynch  
Yin Shan Ho  
Cameron Millar  
Sergei Batishchev

## Violin II

Sean Dunn  
Chloe Rush  
Claudia Moore-Gillon  
Bethany Thomas  
Lottie Gullivar  
Gemma Cselko  
Camilla Nelson  
Inés Chung-Halpern  
Jim Tse  
Yosi Philip-McKenzie  
Hattie Hunter  
Aamir Walwyn  
Orlando Grant  
Jonathan McNaught

## Viola

Ed Daley  
Jess Cselko  
Clare Everson  
Harri Caddick  
Annabel Bainbridge  
John Hinchliffe  
Sophia Goode

## 'Cello

Jaeho Bae  
Morgan Jones  
George Delfas  
Laura Oldfield  
Lewis Hammond  
Clara Neather  
Sarah Hughes  
Hei Chit Wong\*

## Double Bass

Will Priest\*  
Hettie Burn  
Danny Cleave\*  
Manuel dell'Oglio\*

## Flutes

Ellie Nugent  
Imogen Morrell  
Rebecca Pozzuto

## Piccolo

Imogen Morrell

## Oboe

Charlotte Evans  
Sarah Gale  
Toby King-Cline

## Cor Anglais

Toby King-Cline

## Clarinet

Steph Bissell  
Alexander Card  
Yang Song

## Bass Clarinet

Yang Song

## Bassoon

Grace Harvey  
Emily Ambrose\*  
Patrick Kearney\*

## Contra Bassoon

Patrick Kearney\*

## Horn

Myrddin Rees Davies  
Izzy Wick  
Moritz Grimm  
Tom Allard

## Trumpet

Toby Pringle\*  
Victor Rosi  
Matt Harraghy

## Trombone

James Richardson  
Jack Kelly

## Bass Trombone

Gordon MacLochlan

## Tuba

Sean Linton\*

## Harp

Aisha Palmer\*  
Bonnie Scott\*

## Timpani

Sana Abu-Jabir\*

## Percussion

Charlie Furber  
Shesh Abu-Jabir\*

\* Denotes guest

# Become a Friend

Joining the Academy of St Mary-le-Bow Friends Scheme costs just £50 a year. All funds go towards the running of the orchestra which allows us to put on an exciting and varied programme of events. In return, Friends receive a number of benefits including:

- Entrance into a prize draw to win free concert tickets
- 2 discounted tickets per concert (if you don't win the draw)
- A free drink per concert
- A special acknowledgement in our programme
- Reserved seating (upon request)

If you're interested in becoming a friend, please visit our website or email [friends@academyofstmarylebow.com](mailto:friends@academyofstmarylebow.com).

Many thanks to our current friends: Martine and Paul Allard, Julia Caddick, Charles Durose, Stephen and Jackie Fryer, Anne Harvey, Janet High, Steve and Nandita Nelson, Tom Walford, Geraldine Evans, Angela Pozzuto, James and Rachel Minch, Anna Bajur and Albert Thommen, Neil Collins, Matthew and Anna Jones

## Upcoming Concerts

### 11 February 2025

Sinfonia Smith Square | Conductor: Alex Fryer

Prokofiev – Excerpts from Romeo and Juliet Suites 1, 2 and 3

Tchaikovsky – Romeo and Juliet 'Fantasy Overture'

Bernstein – Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

### 25 April 2025

Christ Church, Highbury | Conductor: Alex Fryer

Beethoven – Symphony No. 8 in F major

Shostakovich – Symphony No. 9 in E-flat major