



The  
Academy of  
St Mary-le-Bow

# Shostakovich

## Symphony No. 9

in E-flat major, Op. 70

# Beethoven

## Symphony No. 8

in F major, Op. 93

### Conductor

Alex Fryer

25 April 2026 – 7:30pm

Christ Church Highbury, N5 1SA

Tickets £18 Adult, £15 Under 30 | [www.academyofstmarylebow.com](http://www.academyofstmarylebow.com)

# Welcome

Welcome to this evening's concert. Tonight, we feature two thrilling symphonies that defied public expectations when they were premiered. In both cases, grand symphonies were expected, but both works arrived as short, lightweight, witty pieces. However, in their modesty lies deliberate artistic choice, compositional economy and political resistance.

Beethoven's symphonies had been gradually growing in ambition. No. 3 greatly developed symphonic form, No. 5 expanded the orchestra, No. 6 added an extra movement and a programmatic narrative, and by No. 7, the symphony had expanded to last over 40 minutes. Naturally, audiences expected the next one to push the boat out even further. Instead came Symphony No. 8, his "little symphony in F", as he called it, no bells or whistles, no extra instruments or narrative, and only 20 minutes long – almost a miniature symphony. Stylistically, the work looked back to the Classical period (reminiscent of his teacher, Haydn), in its sense of fun and light-heartedness. It's unclear why Beethoven reduced the scale of his Eighth Symphony. Perhaps it was a homage to his teacher, maybe a joyous little symphony was a tonic to complicated personal circumstances, or was it a compositional challenge to distil musical ideas? Whatever the reason, the result is a total gem: a work full of wit and joviality, with incredible clarity of ideas and economy of structure, that retains Beethoven's trademark drama.

Similarly, Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony, written in 1945 at the end of the Second World War, arrived under the weight of immense public anticipation. For Shostakovich, however, the stakes were much higher - if his music was not deemed appropriate by Stalin's regime, then a fate worse than a bad review might befall him! His Seventh and Eighth Symphonies were both incredibly powerful, large-scale works, imbued with the turmoil and tragedy of war. Now, in the light of victory, he was widely expected to produce a Ninth Symphony that would serve as a monumental celebration. However, living under the oppression of Stalin, Shostakovich was reluctant to produce such a grand work, and instead wrote one that was comical and light, neo-classical and strikingly concise (only 25 minutes long). Audiences were perplexed. The symphony's enigmatic character helped him walk the tightrope of Stalin's favour a little longer, though it was eventually banned for not being sufficiently pro-regime.

As we have been rehearsing these two works, I have discovered many similarities in their musical humour and neo-classical character. There is no doubt that both of these works were inspired by Haydn (known for his musical mischief), a wonderful example of artists innovating by looking to the past.

Alex Fryer

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

# Programme

## Symphony No. 9

in E-flat major, Op. 70

Dimitri Shostakovich

(1906 - 1975)

- I. Allegro
- II. Moderato
- III. Presto
- IV. Largo
- V. Allegretto – Allegro

*- Interval -*

## Symphony No. 8

in E-flat major, Op. 82

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770 – 1827)

- I. Allegro vivace e con brio
- II. Allegretto scherzando
- III. Tempo di menuetto
- IV. Allegro vivace

# Programme Notes

## Shostakovich

### Symphony No. 9 in E $\flat$ Major, Op.70

Born in Saint Petersburg in 1906, Dimitri Shostakovich came of age alongside the Soviet state, initially benefiting from a period of relative artistic freedom before becoming entangled in the tightening grip of Stalinist cultural control. By the mid-1930s, his music had already been publicly denounced, and he spent much of his career navigating a precarious balance between personal expression and political survival. The doctrine of “Socialist Realism” demanded that composers write music that was accessible, optimistic, and ideologically aligned with the state, an almost impossible constraint for Shostakovich. Many of his compositions are interpreted as being regime-friendly on the surface, but full of coded critiques of Stalinism and totalitarianism for those who knew the composer. Few composers lived under pressures comparable to those faced by Shostakovich. His relationship to Stalin's regime was complex and unstable; he famously slept with a suitcase packed by his door so as not to disturb his family if the Soviet Secret Police came to take him away in the middle of the night – a fate that befell many Soviet artists who fell out of favour.

Shostakovich's Symphony No. 9 stands as one of the most startling acts of artistic defiance in 20th-century music, not because of what it says, but because of what it refused to say. Since Beethoven, the ‘Ninth Symphony’ had carried a special weight: a culmination, a statement, often monumental in scale and ambition. For Shostakovich, composing his own Ninth at the end of the Second World War meant facing not only historic musical expectation but also immense political pressure. During the Second World War, he became an international symbol of resistance through works such as the vast Seventh Symphony (“Leningrad”) and the harrowing Eighth Symphony. These monumental compositions seemed to chart a narrative of suffering and endurance, creating the expectation that his next symphony would crown this trajectory with a triumphant celebration of victory. Now, with Nazi Germany defeated, Soviet authorities and the public anticipated a vast, triumphant apotheosis. Shostakovich himself encouraged this belief, speaking of a grand “victory symphony” with chorus and soloists glorifying the Red Army and the Soviet people. What emerged instead could hardly have been more unexpected.

Rather than a monumental choral work, the Ninth Symphony is brief, almost chamber-like in scale, scored for modest forces and lasting little more than 25 minutes. Its tone is playful, ironic, even mischievous. In place of epic grandeur, we hear a sparkling, almost Haydn-like wit: a bright opening movement in classical sonata form (complete with an exposition repeat - the only time Shostakovich does this in any symphony), cheeky instrumental interjections, and a sense of comedy that borders on parody or musical slapstick.

The symphony's very lightness was its provocation. At a moment when official Soviet culture demanded art that projected strength, unity, and triumph (termed "Socialist Realism"), Shostakovich offered ambiguity. The first movement's breezy humour is undercut by interruptions and false starts, as if the music itself were poking fun at the idea of ceremonial grandeur. A melancholy second movement follows, its halting, waltz-like character suggesting something more introspective, even uneasy beneath the surface.

The final three movements, played without pause, deepen this sense of dislocation. A fleet-footed scherzo dissipates rather than culminates; a stark, almost theatrical Largo pits ominous brass against a solitary bassoon in recitative; and the finale bursts forth in a jaunty, irreverent march that accelerates into a manic, almost grotesque conclusion. Triumph, if it exists here at all, is fleeting and unstable, more circus than ceremony.

This was not the "victory symphony" everyone had been waiting for. Soviet critics soon condemned the work for its "ideological weakness" and failure to reflect the true spirit of the people. The symphony was deemed frivolous, its scale inappropriate, its message unclear. By 1948, amid a renewed crackdown on so-called "formalism," the symphony was effectively suppressed.

And yet, for many listeners, then and now, the ninth's refusal to conform is its most powerful statement. Faced with the choice between writing an empty hymn of praise or a work of unrelieved tragedy, Shostakovich chose a third path: music that evades, deflects, and disguises. Its apparent "childishness" may be a mask - one that conceals satire, resistance, or simply the composer's unwillingness to reduce complex human experience to propaganda. In this sense, the ninth is both deeply enigmatic and profoundly honest. It neither celebrates nor mourns outright, but instead inhabits a space of irony and contradiction. What seemed at first a disappointment or even a betrayal has come to be understood as one of Shostakovich's most subtle creations: a symphony that, in declining to meet expectations, reveals the extraordinary tension between art and power at a defining moment in history.

Programme notes are adapted from notes by Ryan Wigglesworth, Howard Posner, William E. Runyan and Gerard McBurney.

# Beethoven

## Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93

Beethoven's Symphony No. 8 premiered in Vienna on February 27, 1814. The public's initial reaction to the symphony was lukewarm, with the piece overshadowed by its older sibling, Symphony No. 7, which was played alongside it in the concert. When asked by his student, Carl Czerny, why it was not as well received, Beethoven apparently remarked: "Because it is much better."

The shortest of all his symphonies, the Eighth is concise in construction and playful in character. Comparison with the much grander Seventh Symphony and epic choral Ninth, combined with its short length and Classical idiom, means it's often overlooked. However, this is no reflection on its quality; if anything, its reduced scale means its musical ideas are even more clearly distilled. In its compact, mischievous brilliance, the Eighth Symphony demonstrates Beethoven's motivic economy, structural mastery and musical wit – qualities no doubt inherited from his teacher and the 'father of the symphony', Joseph Haydn. In fact, the whole symphony feels like a homage to Haydn and his musical playfulness.

Despite the symphony's apparent lightness, its creation coincided with a turbulent period in Beethoven's personal life. In 1812, he travelled to Linz to address family matters, and during that summer, he was consumed by romantic struggles, writing his infamous "Immortal Beloved" letter in July. Perhaps writing such a light and witty symphony was a distraction from his frustrating personal circumstances. Beethoven was clearly intent on keeping the mood of the whole symphony light. He circumvents the slower sections of symphonic form by removing the slow introduction to the first movement and replacing the traditionally slow second movement with a jaunty Allegro Scherzando.

The symphony opens with a sunny Allegro vivace e con brio. Though much of the movement exudes a buoyant joyousness, during the development section in the middle of the movement, Beethoven explores darker, dramatic moods, using shortened versions of the opening motif. The intensity builds as overlapping phrases are pitted against each other. Heavy accents interrupt the music with increasing harmonic tension until the triumphant return of the opening theme (this time in the cellos and basses). The darkness Beethoven brings to the development makes the return to the light of the F Major tonic all the more magnificent. Unexpectedly, Beethoven resists a further triumphant climax in the final bars; instead, with a Haydn-esque twinkle in his eye, the last 12 bars peter out and evaporate to nothing.

The second movement, Allegretto scherzando, was historically considered a tribute to Beethoven's friend and inventor of the metronome, Johann Nepomuk Maelzel. The staccato winds were said to represent a "ticking" throughout, along with the 'tick-tock, tick-tock' interplay between strings and winds. However, scholars now dispute this theory, stating that the first metronome was not produced until after the symphony was written. The movement feels like a delicate dance, as if from a music box. So delicate, in fact, that it almost feels like a pastiche, as if poking fun at itself. However, the frothy lightness is frequently interrupted by sudden, comical outbursts (again reminiscent of Haydn), bordering on musical slapstick.

The third movement, Tempo di Menuetto, restores tradition with a minuet and trio after the deviation of the replaced slow movement. Beethoven infuses the movement with wit: offbeat entrances and misaligned downbeats. The trio features a gentle dialogue for horns and clarinet, accompanied by a solo cello.

The finale, Allegro vivace, races forward with rhythmic drive. The movement starts with quiet bubbling in the strings, which then erupts into exuberant F major fireworks. Throughout the movement, Beethoven takes us on a journey to distant keys, and through some darker passages, including an ominous fugato and a dramatic minor statement of the initial theme. As in the first movement, these darker sections serve to enhance the euphoric feeling each time we return to the original major motif. In keeping with the rest of the symphony, this final movement is filled

with musical jokes. For example, before each statement of the main theme in the home key, Beethoven throws in a loud and sudden unison C-sharp, which is harmonically totally unexpected and unrelated to what comes before or after - the musical equivalent of blowing a raspberry. The beautiful, lyrical and compact second subject in this final movement harkens back to the delicacy of the second movement, as do the staccato octave jumps in all sections (including the timpani) that sound like ticking. Beethoven draws the whole symphony to a thrilling end with some particularly bombastic timpani and trademark hammering cadential chords.

Programme notes by Alex Fryer

# 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, 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, music from Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet interspersed with excerpts from notable productions/films, a concert inspired by the ocean presented by a marine biologist from the Natural History Museum and a version of A Midsummer Night's Dream for actor, orchestra and voices using Mendelssohn's incidental music.

As a Music Leader/Presenter and educator, Alex has worked on projects alongside the Royal Opera House, Sinfonia Smith Square 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 a Creative Learning Specialist working in primary schools with the Artis Foundation.

# The Academy of St Mary-le-Bow

The Academy of St Mary-le-Bow is a unique ensemble of outstanding musicians. Brought together by their love of high-quality orchestral music-making, members of the orchestra have studied at leading conservatoires or universities, been part of prestigious organisations such as the National Youth Orchestra, or previously worked as professional orchestral players, but now professionally pursue careers outside music. The ensemble provides these players with the opportunity to keep making orchestral music to the highest standard with like-minded players.

The orchestra ensemble performs around six major concerts a year across the city and holds a residency at the historic church of St Mary-le-Bow in the City of London. The ensemble is flexible in number, enjoying a huge variety of repertoire from well-known symphonic masterworks to more intimate concerts of Baroque and Classical repertoire and chamber music. Though the ensemble is regularly directed by its Artistic Director, Alex Fryer, it also frequently engages guest conductors and guest leaders for un-conducted performances. Recent highlights have included Vaughan Williams' A Sea Symphony with a chorus of 150 singers at Smith Square Hall, performances of Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra and Miraculous Mandarin, Beethoven's 6th Symphony directed from the violin by Britten Sinfonia's Alexandra Caldon and Stravinsky's Firebird and Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker performed with newly devised narration.

## 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 or would like to make a donation to the orchestra, 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, Matthew and Anna Jones, Barbara Lynch, Victoria Moore-Gillon, Jonathan Matheson, and Margaret Burr.

# The Orchestra

## **Violin I**

Patrick Bevan  
Alex Dawson  
Hattie Hunter  
Daniel Rainey  
Freya Stewart  
Leon Chakrabarti \*  
Charlotte Strivens  
Tory Sawyer

## **Violin II**

Harri Caddick  
Sergei Batishchev  
Lottie Gullivar  
Sophia Goode  
Camilla Fletcher  
Jim Tse  
James Lynch

## **Viola**

Will Emery  
Sarah McCabe  
Jay Boyd  
Ed Daley  
Anabelle Bainbridge  
Jess Cselko

## **'Cello**

Morgan Jones  
Lewis Hammond  
Natalie Bevan  
Laura Oldfield  
Rachel Bull  
Rossi Callery

## **Double Bass**

James Kiln  
Hettie Burn  
Arthur Stouff \*

## **Flutes**

Ellie Nugent  
Jenny Whitby

## **Piccolo**

Imogen Morrell

## **Oboe**

Sarah Gale  
Kaija Lappi

## **Clarinet**

Latchen Kinghorn-Perry \*  
Alexander Card

## **Bassoon**

Grace Harvey  
Sophie Robertshaw

## **Horn**

Myrddin Rees Davies  
Izzy Wick  
Tom Allard  
Ben Horton

## **Trumpet**

Victor Rosi  
Joe Penaliggon

## **Trombone**

Gordon MacLochlan  
Gabriel Eve

## **Bass Trombone**

Jack Kelly

## **Tuba**

Adam Zadi \*

## **Timpani**

Sami Alsindi

## **Percussion**

Keith Price \*  
Charlie Furber

\* Denotes guest

# Upcoming Concerts

## Queer America

15 June 2026 | St Mary-le-Bow, EC2V 6AU

Conductor: Alex Fryer | Soprano: Ella Taylor

Shaw – Entr'acte

Barber – Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Barber – Adagio for Strings

Menotti – Nocturne, Op. 54, No. 4

## Per amore dell'Italia

2 July 2026 | St Jude on the Hill, NW11 7AH

Conductor: Alex Fryer | Viola: Timothy Ridout

Rossini – The Barber of Seville: Overture

Respighi (arr. Fryer) – Fountains of Rome P 106

Hummel – Potpourri op. 94 (HN 838)

Mendelssohn – Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90 “Italian”