

Wednesday 5 November 2025
7pm
Barbican Hall



Guildhall Symphony Orchestra

Joshua Weilerstein conductor

Xu Peng piano

Barbican

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Programme

Jessie Montgomery *Coincident Dances*

Maurice Ravel *Piano Concerto in G major*

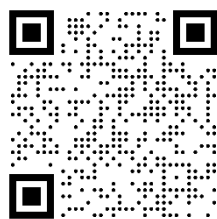
Interval (20 minutes)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky *Symphony No 4 in F minor, Op 36*

**The performance duration is approximately
1 hour and 50 minutes, including a 20-minute interval.**

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Welcome

Welcome to our Guildhall Symphony Orchestra (GSO) concert. You are in for a treat with this evening's programme. The music is rapturous, cacophonous, menacing and melancholy. It includes some of the most ominous passages in the orchestral repertoire and some of the most exquisite. It evokes modern city life with its confluence of sounds and cultures, and it harkens back to another time with references to folksong and the Classical style.

The first half has an American flair, opening with Jessie Montgomery's *Coincident Dances*, a tribute to the melting pot that is New York City, and continuing with Maurice Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major, a piece infused with the composer's experiences of jazz from a US tour. The concerto demands dazzling virtuosity from the soloist in its outer movements and the capacity to entrance us in the slow second movement; we are delighted to present Guildhall piano student Xu Peng to perform this glorious piece with GSO this evening.

After the interval, the 'fate' motif that opens Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Symphony No 4 in F minor sets the scene for a monumental symphonic tussle of pain and joy; this is music that lays bare the extremes of human emotion and here it is the whole orchestra that demonstrates its range, from the virtuoso to the elegiac.

Guiding the players through this evening's concert is conductor Joshua Weilerstein, making his GSO debut but well established at Guildhall School, having directed our chamber orchestra on numerous occasions. It's a pleasure to welcome him back. Off the podium, Joshua hosts a celebrated classical music podcast called *Sticky Notes*; if tonight's Tchaikovsky performance inspires you to learn more, let me recommend the 11 May 2023 episode dedicated to this symphony.

I wish you a wonderful musical evening.



Armin Zanner FGS
Vice-Principal & Director of Music

Jessie Montgomery (b. 1981)

Coincident Dances (2017)

12 minutes

From the cries of 17th-century street-sellers in Gibbons and Dowland, through Vaughan Williams' *A London Symphony* and Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, to Varèse's rowdy *Amériques* and beyond, composers have long translated the noise and rhythm of city life into music. Having grown up in Manhattan's Lower East Side, it's no surprise that Jessie Montgomery has done so too. Unlike its predecessors, though, the focus in Montgomery's urban soundscape is New York City's cultural diversity, and so a colourful variety of voices come and go – including English consort music, samba, South African mbira music, swing and techno – to create a rich, energetic layering that is the soundtrack of a city. “Working in this mode,” Montgomery says, “the orchestra takes on the role of a DJ of a multicultural dance track.”

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Piano Concerto in G major (1929–31)

- I. Allegramente
- II. Adagio assai
- III. Presto

23 minutes

Xu Peng piano

“Do you mind if it ends *pianissimo* and with trills?” Ravel asked the pianist Marguerite Long after announcing he was writing a concerto for her. Years later Long was surprised to see that the completed work in fact concluded with tartly percussive *fortissimo* chords, but she would soon have noticed that the promised quiet trills had shifted to conclude the second movement, where they drift off, to mesmerising effect.

Ravel himself claimed he conceived the Piano Concerto in G major as a “bright and brilliant” piece, “in the spirit of (the concertos) of Mozart and Saint-Saëns”, and he originally intended to call it a “Divertissement”. He worked on it alongside his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm in the First World War. The two concertos are contrasting and complementary, the Piano Concerto in G major being sunnier and more cleanly Classical than its darker sibling. That said, both concertos bear the influence of jazz – a sound re-awakened to Ravel during his American tour in 1928, when he met Gershwin and heard music in Harlem's jazz clubs.

The first movement opens with what could be a sparkling parade of clockwork toys (of which Ravel was fond) but its sections of fast angular, geometric patterning contrast with slower episodes – in particular a sultry tune introduced by the piano (then taken up by high bassoon) and also a solo for harp, accompanying itself with a web of scintillating glissandos. The piano's cadenza floats with the help of hovering right-hand trills that give the ethereal impression of a musical saw, or a flexatone.

Ravel sweated over the slow movement, assembling its effortlessly slow-unravelling tune bar by bar. He extracted even more beauty from the tune by gifting it to the cor anglais at the close, while the piano adorns it with decorative semiquavers.

We're rudely awoken from the second movement's soothing close with a drum roll and four spicy wind chords, which set off the fizzing, motoric finale – suggesting the motion of a toccata, with the piano in perpetual motion. Hectic, brazen and spiked with solo bursts – could this even be another New York cityscape? – it is both a race and chase, a display of virtuosity for all players and an emblem both of Ravel's cheeky humour and of the much-revered precision of his writing.

Interval (20 minutes)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–93)

Symphony No 4 in F minor, Op 36 (1877–78)

I. Andante sostenuto

II. Andantino in modo di canzone

III. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato – Allegro

IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco

44 minutes

Like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony before it, Tchaikovsky's Fourth traces a darkness-to-light scenario over its four movements, in which personal struggle overcomes Fate.

Tchaikovsky was going through a personal crisis at the time of composing this work. In July 1877 he entered into a hasty marriage with an ardent admirer, Antonina Milyukova, probably as a cover (or perhaps an intended 'cure') for his homosexuality. Within weeks the relationship failed and, according to a friend of the composer, he tried to contract pneumonia by wading into the cold Moscow River. He then fled to Europe to recover from apparent nervous collapse.

Tchaikovsky offered a notional narrative of the symphony in a letter to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck. The widow of a wealthy railway industrialist, she bankrolled the composer for 13 years. They never met face-to-face but they wrote incessantly – over 750 letters from Tchaikovsky to von Meck have survived – often expressing their innermost thoughts. Tchaikovsky dedicated the symphony to von Meck and in his letters referred to it as "*our* symphony".

Opening with an imposing fanfare – Fate incarnate in music – the first movement is by some way the longest of the four and reflects a struggle Tchaikovsky summed up as "an unbroken alternation of hard reality with swiftly passing dreams and visions of happiness". The second main idea is an unsettled theme on first violins and cellos, accompanied with insistent interjections, all the while descending – increasingly more overtly in despair – and picking itself up. Later the mood changes with a more relaxed, skipping theme (first heard on solo clarinet), joined by an intertwining idea led by cellos. An apologetically heroic theme seems as if it will lead us to triumph but instead the Fate motif leaps back in. The movement concludes with a panting, almost manic coda.

After this tempest, the second movement describes the bittersweet act of looking back over one's life, "the melancholy that comes in the evening," Tchaikovsky explained, "when, weary from labour, you are sitting alone. You take a book – it falls from your hand. There comes a whole host of memories." Not surprisingly the main theme, though songful, is also tinged with melancholy. The middle section opens with a jauntier theme on clarinets and bassoons that soon takes flight. When the first section returns it is with the addition of upward-sliding decorations.

The third movement explores “the elusive images that rush past in the imagination when you have drunk a little wine”. The opening dance for pizzicato (plucked) strings is followed by a rustic tune on oboe with drone bassoon, and then by a distant military parade. It’s a series of characterful vignettes worthy of the composer of the ballet *Swan Lake*, whose premiere took place the year Tchaikovsky began this symphony, with *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker* to follow.

The finale bristles with energy and the spirit of celebration. There could hardly be anything more ebullient, irrepressible – and Russian – than the opening dance, which follows in the tradition of Glinka’s *Ruslan and Lyudmila* overture from over 40 years earlier. Throughout the movement the dance alternates with a tune based on the folk song ‘In the meadow stood a birch tree’, opening with a falling five-note scale. The movement reaches its climax with a shattering return of the Fate fanfare from the first movement, but this is slowly extinguished, like the demise of an operatic villain. From amid the ashes (rumbling timpani) the horns bounce in, leading a build-up back to the opening festive music. Now the celebrations are uncontested and the symphony – whose moods have ranged from despair and uncertainty to innocent charm – ends in unalloyed exuberance.

Programme notes © Edward Bhesania

Joshua Weilerstein

conductor

Joshua Weilerstein is Music Director of the Orchestre National de Lille and Chief Conductor of the Aalborg Symphony Orchestra. Acclaimed for performances that balance clarity, energy and emotional depth, he is a compelling advocate for the classical canon, the music of today and forgotten composers of the past.

In his second season in Lille, Weilerstein leads a wide-ranging series of concerts, with a particular focus on French music, performing works of Ravel, Franck, Lili Boulanger, Barraine, Dutilleux, Saint-Saëns, Tailleferre and Offenbach. He also welcomes Noah Bendix-Balgley, first concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic, in a programme that pairs Bendix-Balgley's Klezmer-inspired concerto *Fidl Fantasy* with Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony. In Aalborg, Weilerstein completes his two-year long exploration of the Brahms symphonies and focuses on other late Romantic giants such as Mahler and Zemlinsky. Elsewhere in 2025/26, he returns to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in their subscription season, to the BBC Proms and Bridgewater Hall with the BBC Philharmonic, and returns to the Vancouver, Gothenburg and City of Birmingham Symphony orchestras. He also makes his debut with the Israel Philharmonic.

Weilerstein has conducted many of the world's top orchestras, including in more recent seasons the Staatskapelle Dresden, Bavarian Radio Symphony, London Philharmonic, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, National Symphony and New York Philharmonic orchestras. He regularly collaborates with leading soloists such as Emanuel Ax, Yo-Yo Ma, Vilde Frang and Matthias Goerne. From 2015–2021, he was Artistic Director of the Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne with whom he recorded the complete Beethoven symphonies and a disc of 20th and 21st-century works by Ives, Ethel Smyth, William Grant Still and Caroline Shaw.

Born into a musical family, Weilerstein's commitment to classical music was inspired by his experience on a youth orchestra tour to Central America, during which he performed for audiences that had never heard a live orchestra. He studied violin and conducting at the New England Conservatory, and in 2009 won both the First and Audience Prizes at the Malko Competition in Copenhagen. He later served as Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic from 2012–2015.

In 2017, inspired by Leonard Bernstein's passion for making classical music accessible, Weilerstein launched the podcast *Sticky Notes*, which now reaches listeners in 190 countries and has been downloaded over seven million times.

Xu Peng

piano

Xu Peng began playing piano aged four. In 2008, Xu entered the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, where he studied with Zhang Zhiwei. He received his Master and Bachelor of Music degrees from the class of Jon Kimura Parker at Rice University in Houston, Texas, where he also graduated with a Minor in French Studies and a Special Distinction in Creative Research. Xu completed his Artist Diploma at Guildhall School studying with Noriko Ogawa and Ronan O'Hora, and is currently pursuing a Research Degree with a thesis on Debussy and Jankélévitch.

Xu has won the Tunbridge Wells International Music Competition and the Macau-Asia International Piano Competition. Recently, he was also awarded the Golden Hand Prize with Special Jury Mention at the Carles & Sofia International Piano Competition, and Second Prize at the William Knabe Piano Concerto Competition.

Xu has performed recitals at notable venues, including the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, the Stude Concert Hall in Houston and the Stoller Hall in Manchester. His interest in contemporary music has led to collaborations with composers and visual artists, presenting new compositions in thematic recitals and interdisciplinary productions at the Moody Center for the Visual Art in Houston. Xu made his concerto debut in 2019 with Aram Khachaturian's Piano Concerto in D-flat minor.

Guildhall Symphony Orchestra

Montgomery & Ravel

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Elena Toledo*
Giulia Pianini Mazzucchetti
Lewis Lee
Ludwika Borowska
Daisy Elliott
Helen Rutledge
Caroline Durham
Colby Chu
Grace Powell
Argyro Meleniou
Joana Vila Chã Ribeiro
Gabriella Pedditzi
Gwyneth Nelmes^
Camille Said^

Violin II

Helena Thomas*
Julie Piggott
Ola Lenkiewicz
Lichen Cai
George Lawson
Tanya Perez Jovetic
Michelle Kolesnikov
Kayla Nicol
Isabelle Allan
Laura Hussey
Julieanne Forrest
Dominic Drutac

Viola

Emily Clark*
Mat Lee
Sirma Baramova
Jake Montgomery-Smith
Waverly Long
Connor Quigley
Isobel Neary-Adams
Andrei Gheorghe
Shane Quinn
Josh Law

Cello

William Lui*
Rowena Taylor
Caleb Curtis
Josh Lucas
Mat Roberts
Chiara Dozza López
Weilai Gu
Jack Moyer

Double Bass

Strahinja Mitrović*
Caetano Oliveira
Izzy Nisbett
Aaron Aguayo Juarez
Cynthia Giarduno^
Becca Whitehouse

Flute

Lara Ali*
Jessie-May Wilson (piccolo)

Oboe

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Clarinet

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Timpani

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Kia Lares
Ali Ayaz
Cláudia Gonçalves

Harp

Grace Ng

** Section principal*

^ Guest Alumni player

Guildhall Symphony Orchestra

Tchaikovsky

Violin I

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Ola Lenkiewicz
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Caetano Oliveira
Izzy Nisbett
Aaron Aguayo Juarez
Cynthia Giarduno^
Becca Whitehouse

Flute

Cyrus Lam*
Laura Jastrzebska

Piccolo

Rachel Howie

Oboe

Lidia Moscoso*
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Clarinet

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Kevin Ng

** Section principal*

^ Guest Alumni player

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Orchestra Librarian

Anthony Wilson

Music Stage, Logistics & Instrument Manager

Kevin Elwick

Music Stage Supervisor

Louis Bailly

Thanks

Special thanks to conductor **Antoine Veillerette** for helping to prepare the orchestra and to each of the following sectional tutors provided by the **London Symphony Orchestra**:

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Julián Gil Rodríguez violin II
Steve Doman viola
David Cohen cello
Joe Melvin double bass

Joost Bosdijk woodwind
Adam Wright brass, timpani & percussion
Simon Carrington brass, timpani & percussion
Rachel Gledhill timpani & percussion
Bryn Lewis harp

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Forthcoming events

Cantata Project with Academy of Ancient Music

13 November 2025

Milton Court Concert Hall

Harpsichordist James Johnstone leads Guildhall Historical Performance students in an intimate programme of music for voice and continuo from around the turn of the eighteenth century, joined by vocalists from the Academy of Ancient Music.

Free, no tickets required

Adrian Dunbar with Guildhall Session Orchestra: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

19 November 2025

Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall, Belvedere Road
SE1 8XX

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is widely regarded as one of the most important poems of the 20th century. Directed by Guildhall alumnus and fellow Adrian Dunbar, with a score by Nick Roth, the Unreal Cities setting of the poem is composed for four actors, film and jazz quintet, and is expanded for this performance with a full orchestral treatment in collaboration with the Guildhall Session Orchestra.

Tickets: from £27

50 Years of Bohemian Rhapsody

28 November 2025

Milton Court Concert Hall

Marking 50 years to the day since the release of the album *A Night at the Opera*, and the eve of this iconic song reaching UK No. 1 in 1975, this very special performance presents brand-new orchestral arrangements of *Bohemian Rhapsody* and other much-loved Queen tracks reimagined for a thrilling euphonic experience, performed by the professional musicians of Guildhall Session Orchestra.

Tickets: £30 (£15 concessions)

Junior Guildhall Symphony Orchestra

6 December 2025

Milton Court Concert Hall

Julian Clayton conducts a richly varied programme spanning impressionistic colour, sparkling virtuosity and symphonic power, including Shostakovich's monumental Symphony No 11 and Ibert's Flute Concerto featuring prize-winning Junior Guildhall flautist Kendra Barron.

Tickets: £12 (£8 concessions)

Dedication

This performance is dedicated to Mr Ron Peet CBE, who graciously included the Guildhall School Trust in his Will. Thanks to his remarkable foresight and generosity, our students will benefit from scholarship support for the next ten years.

His legacy supports the School's work across music, drama and production arts – helping gifted students train at the highest level. At a time when public funding is under pressure, such support ensures that talent and ambition can flourish, regardless of background.

This incredible act of kindness demonstrates the profound difference one person can make, leaving a positive and enduring legacy that will shape the future for years to come.

We celebrate the generosity of all who inform us of their intention to support Guildhall School in their Will by inviting them to join the 1880 Society. Please visit gsmd.ac.uk/legacies or contact Meg Ryan at meg.ryan@gsmd.ac.uk / 020 3834 1561 to discuss leaving a gift in your Will or to arrange a visit to see how you could make a difference to our students.

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