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Shostakovich x Beethoven

Tuesday 3 February 2026, 7.30pm
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Ustvolskaya The Dream of Stepan Razin 12 mins

Beethoven Piano Concerto No.1 37 mins

Interval: 20 minutes

Shostakovich Symphony No.10 55 mins

Vasily Petrenko Conductor
Yuriy Yurchuk Baritone
Benjamin Grosvenor Piano
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

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Shostakovich x Beethoven

Ustvolskaya The Dream of Stepan Razin

Beethoven Piano Concerto No.1

Shostakovich Symphony No.10

Today's programme is bookended by two giants of Soviet music. While Dmitri Shostakovich may still be the more familiar name, had history taken a different turn, Galina Ustvolskaya might well have become Russia's most famous export. 'I am a talent, you are a phenomenon', Shostakovich once wrote to her, following a spell as her tutor at the Leningrad Conservatory. Together, their music tells a story of political oppression and personal defiance, both refusing to be cowed by a regime that was determined to quash personal expression. And at the centre, a first piano concerto by an equally defiant young Ludwig van Beethoven, hell bent on rewriting the rules of the concerto and reinventing the genre in his own, adventurous image.

The Dream of Stepan Razin (1949)

Galina Ustvolskaya (1919–2006)

Galina Ustvolskaya's life was one of extremes, something which plays out in music of searing intensity, deep spirituality and uncompromising physicality. Known as 'the lady with the hammer', she composed as she lived: on her own terms, defiantly independent, and as free of extraneous influences and obligations as she could afford to be. Asked about the links with the best-known of her various teachers, Dmitri Shostakovich, she retorted: 'There is no link whatsoever between my music and that of any other composer, living or dead.'

Like so many other Soviet composers of the time, Ustvolskaya's output was heavily censored by Stalin's regime and ultimately torn in two. Publicly, she allowed her music meet regime's propagandist requirements, but privately she continued writing in her own voice, consigning these supposedly 'formalist' works to the drawer until the 1960s. Unsurprisingly, then, she was also wary about discussing her work in public ('the best method of talking about music is to be silent about it', she said) and spoke only latterly about the way in which music engulfed her whole being. Aged 79, she gave a rare interview in which she explained: 'I'm always in my thoughts. I spend the nights thinking as well, and therefore do not have time to relax. Thoughts gnaw me. My world possesses me completely.'

While Ustvolskaya turned her back on the Soviet regime in the 1960s and '70s, returning to a form of composition that she considered her own, she spent much of her earlier career writing music 'for the people' and 'for money'. Her tone poem for baritone and orchestra, *The Dream of Stepan Razin*, falls into that period, and was composed to mark the opening of the 1949 season of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. It is based on the story of the legendary Russian folk hero, Stepan 'Stenka' Razin, who singlehandedly launched a revolt against the nobility during the 17th century.

Did you know?

Shostakovich was not just an ardent supporter of Ustvolskaya's music, he also made her a proposal of marriage. Ustvolskaya turned him down and, although they remained friends for many years, she later distanced herself from him, claiming 'he burdened my life and killed my best feelings.'

Using the text from the Russian folksong of the same name, Ustvol'skaya's orchestral setting courses through Razin's eerie dream, which his captain (yesaul) interprets as a premonition of their inevitable defeat. *The Dream* is a far cry from Ustvol'skaya's 'true' style, which is typically characterised by its extreme dynamics, austere harmonies, and brutal and relentless repetition. Instead, its combination of soaring melodies and folk themes ensured it was a hit with the authorities, and it was later nominated for a Stalin Prize.

Text and Translation

Ой, не вечер, толи не вечер,
Мне малым-мало спалось.
Ой, мне малым-мало спалось.
Во сне виделось.
Ой, мне малым-мало спалось.
Во сне виделось.
Будто конь мой вороной
Разыгрался подо мной.

Ой, налетали ветры да буйны
Со восточной стороны.
Ой, сорывали-то чёрну шапку
С моей буйной головы.

Ой, отрывался лук звончатый
Со могучего плеча.
Ой, рассыпались калёные стрелы,
Как по матушке земле.

Да и кто бы мне этот сон
Разгадал его бы он?

Есаулушка был догадлив:
Есаул тот сон всё рассуживал:

— «Степанушка, ты наш, Тимофеевич,
По прозванию Разин сын!
Сопала у тебя шапка чёрна с головы,
Пропадёт твоя буйная головушка. »
Оторвался лук звончатый, —
Быть повешену мне, есаулушке.
Ой, ли, быть повешену!

Ой, ли, Все разбойнички-они
Во побег пойдут!

Ой, не вечер, толи не вечер,
Мне малым-мало спалось.
Ой, мне малым-мало спалось.
Во сне виделось.

*Oh, it was not yet evening, not yet,
But still I slept a little while,
Oh, as I slept a little while,
A dream did come to me.
Oh, as I slept a little while,
A dream did come to me.
As if my horse, raven-black,
Were prancing about beneath me.*

*Unruly tempest winds
Whipped in from the east,
And tore my black Cossack cap
From my unruly head.*

*The well-strung bow was ripped
From my mighty shoulder.
And scattered were the tempered arrows
Upon our dear mother earth.*

*And who, yes who!
Could interpret this dream for me?*

*The yesaul, our captain, was quick,
The yesaul, he saw just what it meant:*

— "You! Our dear Stepan Timofeeyich,
You who all call Razin!
From your head fell your cap of black,
So too shall fall your unruly head!"
And as the well-strung bow fell —
So I, the yesaul, shall be hung.
Oh, so shall I be hung!

*And all our brigand host,
They shall all take flight!*

*Oh, it was not yet evening, not yet,
But still I slept a little while,
Oh, as I slept a little while,
A dream did come to me...*

English translation by Andrew Clarke

Piano Concerto No.1 in C major, Op.15 (1795, rev. 1800)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Allegro con brio

Largo

Rondo: Allegro scherzando

When Ludwig van Beethoven moved from Bonn to Vienna in 1792, he first earned a living not as a composer but as a pianist who performed at private parties and salons, and was described as someone with ‘fire, brilliance and fantasy as well as depth of feeling’. During these performances, Beethoven was often asked to improvise upon a given theme, after which, it is said, Beethoven would return home and write down the music, only to hand it over to his publishers the following day.

Did you know?

The finale of Beethoven's First Piano Concerto was only completed two days before the first performance and even then it required a heroic team effort. According to his friend Franz Wegeler: ‘Four copyists sat in the hallway working from the manuscript sheets he handed over to them one at a time.’

His Piano Concerto No.1 was written in these heady early days of his career, and may well have been the product of one of his improvisatory performance sessions, though little is known about its origins. It appears that he began work on it in 1794 and may have performed it in Vienna in March 1795, but there is no definitive record of it having been performed in public until a 1798 concert in Prague, where Beethoven himself was the soloist in both his First and Second Concertos. Although the work went on to be a success, Beethoven's fiery style was not to everyone's tastes, as the testimony of Jan Václav Tomášek, a composer and one of Beethoven's contemporaries, makes clear: ‘I admired his powerful, brilliant playing, but his frequent daring changes from one melody to another, putting aside the organic, gradual development of ideas, did not escape me. Evils of this nature frequently weaken his greatest compositions, those which sprang from a too exuberant conception.’

Tomášek's comments would have been partly attributed to the shock of the work's design. This is not a concerto that follows in the footsteps of Mozart and Haydn, but rather one which breaks with tradition to explore bold new melodic ideas and daring harmonies, composed as a showcase for Beethoven's equally capricious performance style. In fact, Beethoven's ‘First’ Concerto was actually his third: it was preceded both by a slightly abortive youthful work in E-flat major (not to be confused with the ‘Emperor’ Concerto, No.5) and by the smaller Piano Concerto No.2 in B-flat major, which only became ‘No.2’ when published. While No.2 is a smaller work for a compact orchestra, more befitting the salon, No.1 is composed for the concert hall, with the addition of trumpets and drums ensuring that the Concerto packs a dramatic punch.

The first movement of this showcase is the most complex, a bright *Allegro* that takes both soloist and orchestra on an adventurous journey from the very start. Subsidiary themes in the ‘wrong’ key set out to wrongfoot the listener, and Beethoven seems intent on drifting as far away from the home key of C major as he possibly can, with orchestra and soloist continually interrupting one another and never quite being allowed to finish their sentences.

The second movement, by contrast, displays a deep expressiveness that would have been quite new to audiences of the time. Set in the distant key of A-flat major, and with brass, oboes and flutes all absent, this delicate *Largo* is a world away from the dynamism of the first movement, the intertwining melodies between clarinet and soloist offering a pause for quiet reflection. The finale, however, forces the audience abruptly out of their slumber with a mischievous *Rondo* that draws the Concerto to a vigorous conclusion. Only the soloist seems to run out of steam, sidling away almost unnoticed before the work draws to a close.



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Interval

Symphony No.10 in E minor, Op.93 (1953)

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Moderato

Allegro

Allegretto – Largo – Più mosso

Andante – Allegro – L'istesso tempo

Eight years separate Dmitri Shostakovich's Ninth and Tenth Symphonies, a period of silence enforced by the Soviet authorities, following Shostakovich's condemnation in 1948 by Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's cultural advisor. Unable to compose freely and without fear of persecution, Shostakovich turned his back on the more public genre of the symphony, devoting himself instead to chamber music, film scores and a handful of choral works that were deemed politically acceptable. But when Stalin's death was announced in March 1953, Shostakovich returned almost immediately to symphonic composition, retiring to his retreat in Komarovo to write the Tenth Symphony in a burst of creativity between July and September the same year.

Shostakovich's sketchbooks show that many of the ideas in his Tenth Symphony had been swirling around for several years, but there is a ferocious energy to the score – a personal reckoning that is equal parts terror and liberation – that places the Symphony squarely in this new era. 'I did depict Stalin in my 10th symphony' Shostakovich is said to have explained in his disputed memoirs (*Testimony*). 'It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the scherzo, is a musical portrait of Stalin.'

But the journey that the Symphony traces from darkness to light, from oppression to emancipation, is anything but straightforward.

The sense of fear and foreboding that overshadows the first movement is not easily shifted, the winding lower strings circling again and again, as they search for a glimmer of light and a way out. When a lone clarinet mournfully pierces the gloom, drawing the orchestra upwards with a note of optimism, its melody is continually truncated, the hope quashed just as soon as it has emerged. After the emergence of a wry, mocking waltz, the first movement eventually collapses in upon itself in a series of terror-stricken, violent outbursts, Stalin's legacy not yet forgotten.

As if to emphasise the point, Shostakovich then launches headlong into a fearsome scherzo, his 'portrait of Stalin', which twists Stalin's favourite song *Suliko* into a kind of danse macabre. It is violent, unflinching and merciless, striking blow after blow

The hidden musical code in Shostakovich's Tenth

Visit rpo.co.uk to read our latest blog and discover more about the message of individual defiance against tyranny encoded within Shostakovich's Symphony No.10.



without pause, until it reaches a grotesquely triumphant kind of conclusion. In a symphony fixated upon terror and persecution, only the third movement offers a glimpse into a more intimate, personal world. This elegiac waltz is dominated by the intertwining of two principal themes: one based upon the DSCH motive derived from his own name and the other a motif played by a solo horn and dedicated to his pupil, Elmira Nazirova (E-A-E-D-A, or E-La-Mi-Re-A). But the *Allegretto* is not a moment of respite: more a depiction of the personal suffering and tragedy at the hands of the regime.

After a long and thoughtful introduction, the finale launches headlong into a whirling, exuberant dance full of lightness and hope, that is almost certainly too good to be true. Can life really change overnight? Can the darkness of the recent past be so quickly forgotten? The answer, of course, is a resounding no, but as Shostakovich repeatedly blasts out his DSCH motif in defiance, we get a tantalising glimpse into a brighter future. This is a symphony about the power of the individual, about personal resistance in the face of unimaginable tyranny. 'Even if they chop my hands off,' Shostakovich once said, 'I will continue to compose music – even if I have to hold the pen between my teeth.'

Fancy an encore?

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For a glimpse into **Ustvolskaya's** more extreme, brutal style, try her **Symphony No.2, 'True and Eternal Bliss!'** (1979).



Although **Beethoven** himself told his publisher it was 'not one of my best', his smaller **Piano Concerto No.2**, composed before his Piano Concerto No.1, shows how quickly his concerto style evolved into a more adventurous form of writing.



Shostakovich's String Quartet No.5 (1952), which was composed a year before the Tenth Symphony, and is almost a partner piece in its anticipation of the Symphony's raw, emotional landscape.

Programme notes and listening recommendations by Jo Kirkbride, 2026



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