FRI 6 NOV 2026 | 7.30PM

Shostakovich Symphony No 5:
RNCM Symphony Orchestra

Programme


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FRI 6 NOV 2026 | 7.30PM
RNCM Concert Hall

Shostakovich Symphony No 5:
RNCM Symphony Orchestra

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Programme

Amit Manna All That Hurtling, and Then: Aureole (world premiere) (8')

Richard Strauss Four Last Songs (24') *

Interval

Dmitri Shostakovich Symphony No 5 in D minor Op 47 (50')

PERFORMERS

Kahchun Wong, Juan José Muñoz Borja *conductors**
Esther Shea *soprano**


RNCM
FRI 5 MAR 2027, 7.30PM
Prokofiev Symphony No 5:
RNCM Symphony Orchestra
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Welcome to the RNCM Symphony Orchestra

Thank you for joining us tonight in the RNCM Concert Hall for an outstanding programme of orchestral masterpieces and a new work from one of our own young composers. Whether you've visited the RNCM before or you're new to our theatres, we'd like to invite you to settle in for a wonderful evening of live music.

This evening, we're gathered to hear a performance from the RNCM Symphony Orchestra that includes Shostakovich Symphony No 5 – a work about '*the making of a man. I saw man with all his experiences in the centre of the composition, which is lyrical in form from beginning to end. In the finale, the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movement are resolved in optimism and joy of living*', its composer wrote. But the Fifth Symphony was also the sound of a '*proudly avant garde Shostakovich*' saving his own skin from the threat of the Great Purge – '*a Soviet artist's creative reply to just criticism*' following a scandalous review of an earlier work in a Communist Party newspaper. Premiered in 1937 by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, it reportedly reduced its first audience to tears and was followed by a 40-minute '*vociferous*' ovation; in the eyes of the Soviet government (led by Joseph Stalin), it was also proof they could transform a denounced composer into a patriotic artist. Undoubtedly, it restored Shostakovich in Stalin's esteem at a time when approval was the only safe option, although later the composer's biographers claimed Shostakovich confessed to the deep discontent that had motivated the work and to the conceit behind its rousing sound. In any case, it remains his most celebrated symphony, and our orchestra presents it in the 120th anniversary year of the composer's birth.

The RNCM Symphony Orchestra is one of the College's flagship ensembles, formed in 1973 with the opening of our world-class conservatoire and central to both our public performance programme and our training mission as we support close to 1,000 students to become the musicians of the future. To prepare for tonight's performance, our students have dedicated many hours to 1-2-1 study and group rehearsals – including sectionals with players from leading orchestras – and are proud to be led this evening by the Hallé's Principal Conductor, Kahchun Wong.

Since its foundation, the RNCM Symphony Orchestra has performed a vast repertoire, blending historical masterpieces with bold contemporary composition in seamless and exciting ways. Traditionally, these programmes explore the evolving lineage of orchestral music, inviting audiences to enjoy the diverse soundscape and dialogue between past and present, as well as the silences between the movements, before sharing in applause at the end of the final piece.

We hope you enjoy the concert, and that we have the pleasure of welcoming you back in the weeks and months ahead.

AMIT MANNA
All That Hurtling, and Then:
Aureole (world premiere)

I have learnt that there are times when life seems to gather its own momentum without much input required from me. One thing becomes another, which becomes another, which, in turn, becomes another...and for 18 months, my life seemed to move according to its own momentum. I lived a life kept so full that there was very little room left over for anything else, and I think I needed it that way.

Some things are easier to carry when you are moving. You can keep them just behind you, out of sight but never quite gone, and perhaps that's part of what all that hurtling was – an attempt to not stop anywhere for too long.

But then, one day, it did all stop.

What came afterwards is difficult to explain. It was the feeling of becoming aware of everything that had been there while I was busy looking elsewhere. The good things, the hard things, the parts of myself I had neglected, and the life that had accumulated around me without me knowing about all of it. And somewhere in that, there was a kind of awe that I now think of as an aureole.

An aureole is related to a halo, though it can suggest something broader: a radiance surrounding an object, revealed as light catches its edges. Nothing in the middle has to change for it to appear; the light simply has to fall differently. There is something extraordinary in being able to see the world around you and, for once, letting yourself wonder at the fact that you are here to experience it. That has stayed with me.

I am still moving, and I don't think that will change any time soon, but I no longer feel the need to keep everything behind me. I still don't fully know what to do with all of it, but I can look at it now. And maybe that's enough.

Programme notes by Amit Manna.

RICHARD STRAUSS
Four Last Songs

The *Vier letzte Lieder* (Four Last Songs) were composed in 1948, when the composer was 84 years old. He had enjoyed a great career as the leading composer of modern operas, literally pushing the limits of subject matter (remember *Salome*, among others) and, for that matter, operatic musical style, with increasing dissonance in his music. Later, his reputation was somewhat sullied by a putative collaboration with the Nazi government when he served as head of the *Reichsmusikkammer*, the official government bureaucracy overseeing music. After World War II, there was a brief period of reconsideration of his reputation, but he was soon cleared of complicity. And, as he approached the end of his life these four marvellous songs literally became his swan

songs. In them he returned to the lush romantic style of his youth, now not so fashionable in the ultra modern year of 1948, but absolutely perfect for an old man completing the circle of his life.

They all treat the subject of death, not in heroic resistance, but in a mood of calm acceptance of a natural transmigration of the soul. The two poets – Joseph Eichendorff (1788-1857) and Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) – treat the subject eloquently through metaphors such as rest, night, autumn, and rebirth in spring. While most *Lieder* are composed with piano accompaniment, the subcategory with orchestral accompaniment is an important one. With Mahler's work as a model, and his own virtuoso mastery of orchestration at his command, Strauss contributed masterpieces to the genre – but none so beloved as this set of the four last ones. Each of the songs is distinctive. Listen for the bird songs in the flute in *Frühling* (Spring), the magnificent long and soaring melodic line in September, and the gorgeous violin and horn solos in *Beim Schlafengehen* (Going to Sleep). In the latter song, Strauss, ever the word painter, cleverly accompanies the words, '*Hands leave off your deeds*,' with a fugue-like passage – the most academic, and (hand) crafted of textures. Finally, in the fourth song, *Im Abendrot* (In the Glow of Evening), the last word of the last song finally utters the word only thus far alluded to: death. And at that exact, transfixing moment, from the depths of the orchestra, comes a solo horn, beautifully and serenely quoting the theme from Strauss's tone poem of his youth, *Death and Transfiguration*.

These songs are without equal in their perfection of unity of word and tone, and in their personal meaning for Strauss – and all of the rest of us, for that matter.

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DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
Symphony No 5 in D minor Op 47

There are few major musical compositions in all the repertoire that so profoundly speak, not only to the question of independence, integrity, and honesty of the artist himself, but also to the fundamentals of life, death, freedom, and sufferings of peoples. Written in 1937 and given its premiere about a year after the ill-fated Symphony No 4, Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was in a new, more conservative style, and was famously, disingenuously referred to by the composer as '*a Soviet artist's creative response to just criticism*.' All true – except for the '*just*.' It was an immediate success, and for a variety of reasons, depending upon the respective perspectives of individual listeners.

The first movement opens with a jagged up-and-down motive, followed by a little, hesitating stepwise descent. These elements will dominate the entire movement, and accompany a variety of other ideas, but will always

be discernible, no matter what their guise. The second main idea is a lyrical, soaring tune, but just as melancholy as the first ones. Throughout, the movement's pace is somewhat slow, even plodding, as it seems to start and stop with an innate fitfulness. Nothing seems to be resolved, even at the end. Later a repetitive '*tum-ta-ta*' accompaniment brings some motion to the dark lyricism, followed in the middle section by an absolutely malevolent, threatening march, begun by a staccato thumping low in the piano, and a low descending line in the unison brass – sounding about as evil and foreboding as brass possibly can. It all just reeks of an overweening, suffocating totalitarian oppression. The climax of this jackboot march is huge, followed by a recapitulation that covers the material from the opening, somewhat in reverse order. The unison strings make a last impassioned outcry that is almost human in its vocal quality, rather like a desperate recitative. The low brass and timpani literally hammer out the opening motive, followed by a brief phony moment of putative happiness in the woodwinds. But truth dispels it, and the whole affair ends ominously with the trumpets playing a key, unifying interval over an incongruous little scale in the celesta. Whatever Shostakovich had in mind as '*response to just criticism*', this surely is not it, and totters closely to spitting on it. If the symphony had ended here, so probably would have the composer's life.

The second movement is no closer to what the Soviet censors surely had in mind, for it is a raucous parody for certain. Remember, the composer had lots of experience writing for the circus, ballets, and the movies, and it all comes out, here. It's a grotesque waltz in the best tradition of Gustav Mahler, who had become an important influence on Shostakovich. And, as in the first movement, the meaning here is not clear at all. '*Cheeky*' is perhaps the best descriptor – it's certainly not a celebration of new tractors on the collective farm.

The slow movement is epic. The premiere saw the audience literally in tears; so immediate was the music to the tragedies that almost every family was enduring, as Stalin's purges relentlessly murdered millions of Soviet citizens in a mindless massacre. No brasses intrude here, the movement being carried mainly by a lush, subdivided string section, with a few poignant woodwind moments from time to time. Occasionally, a very special sound is heard, one that everyone in the Russian audience would recognise, and that is the imitation of the deep basso choral voices of the Russian Orthodox Church. The sadness is palpable, and yet, still no sign from the composer of '*conciliatory*' thoughts about the oppressive regime.

So where does this leave us? Shostakovich has one more movement left in which to make major amends to the thought police, and posterity

has generally conceded that he did so, but only in terms of that specific time and place. Otherwise, posterity has wrangled endless what the true meaning of the end of the symphony is, and what was in the composer's mind at the conclusion.

It all starts as a foreboding, dramatic march that is not at all cheerful. The stentorian brass accompanied by hammering timpani announce a main tune, which is thoroughly worked through, section after section relentlessly, gradually increasing in tempo. At the quickest tempo the trumpet announces a somewhat happier melody and the whole briefly turns to the major, before a dramatic slowing and softening accompanies a noble, lyric solo in the horn. After some tranquil ruminations with woodwind solos, a high, very soft ostinato in the violins leads to a winding, sensuous line in the high violins, doubled an octave below by the low strings. That sets up a return to the dynamic, opening march theme, but now it '*sneaks*' in, in a contrapuntal texture. It builds to a thunderous stack of increasing dissonant harmonies until the huge chord dissipates, and the ultimate triumphal moment arrives: clear, tonal, happy, D major. The brass exult, accompanied by fortissimo timpani, like a hammer driving nails. But, as the splendid trumpets ascend in their triumph, there is one very loud Parthian shot. They land on a very loud, high Bb–a note '*borrowed*' from the parallel minor key. Most everyone has interpreted this dramatic touch as Shostakovich's very personal way of making totally ambiguous the '*triumph*' of the symphony and of the regime. A brutal fortissimo unison and even louder hammering from the timpani ends it all. So...what was the composer's intent? Did he capitulate, finally, in the last movement, and this a true move to a more positive world, OR is the offending Bb just typical Shostakovichian pungency?

At the time the censors were happy, the audience was happy, and so apparently was Shostakovich – only openly, though. A great work of art is like an onion, layered with meaning.

Shostakovich's symphony offers a plethora of individual interpretations; take away your own.

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KAHCHUN WONG (CONDUCTOR)

Singaporean conductor Kahchun Wong is Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor of the Hallé and Chief Conductor of Japan Philharmonic Orchestra. Acclaimed for the breadth and intensity of his symphonic interpretations, he is recognised for projects bringing Asian and European musical traditions into conversation.

Since taking up his Hallé position in September 2024, Wong has established an ambitious partnership in concert, on tour, and on record, and their debut recording, Britten's *The Prince of the Pagodas*, won the 2025 Limelight Recording of the Year and Orchestral Recording of the Year. It was followed by Bruckner's Symphony No 9, hailed by Gramophone as '*a must-hear for all Brucknerians*', and a live recording of Mahler's Symphony No 2, ranked by MusicWeb International among the finest recorded accounts of the work.

Wong made his BBC Proms debut with the Hallé in 2025, conducting the same symphony to critical acclaim. He returned in 2026 with Rachmaninov's Symphony No 2 and the Proms premiere of Nadia Boulanger's *Fantaisie variée*, with Alexandra Dariescu. In November 2025, he led the Hallé on its first China tour in nine years, giving seven concerts across six cities, including two in Beijing.

His Hallé programmes place symphonic landmarks alongside contemporary and neglected voices. In February 2026, he conducted the world premiere of Unsuk Chin's revised *Le Chant des Enfants des Étoiles* with the Hallé choirs. He opens the 2026/27 season with the world premiere of Sir James MacMillan's Symphony No 6, commissioned by the orchestra to mark the 30th anniversary of The Bridgewater Hall.

With Japan Philharmonic, Wong combines major projects with its commitment to communities. In 2025, he conducted its nine-city Kyushu tour, marking the 50th anniversary of a community-led initiative. In June 2026, he led Suntory Hall concerts commemorating the orchestra's 70th anniversary, culminating in Mahler's Symphony No 8.

Winner of the Mahler Competition in 2016, Wong has conducted The Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, and Hong Kong Philharmonic. His 2026/27 season includes returns to London Philharmonic, Bergen Philharmonic, Osaka Philharmonic, and Düsseldorf Symphony, alongside debuts

with the Minnesota Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra.

His orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* for five Chinese instruments and orchestra was first heard before 75,000 people at Nuremberg's Klassik Open Air and has since travelled to Manchester, Singapore, and Hong Kong, receiving its Japanese premiere in October 2026.

In 2019, Wong became the first Singaporean artist to receive the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, recognising his contribution to Singapore–German cultural relations.

JUAN JOSÉ MUÑOZ BORJA (CONDUCTOR)

Juan José Muñoz Borja is a Colombian conductor who has worked with a wide range of orchestras, spanning both professional and youth ensembles. He has participated in masterclasses with distinguished conductors including Sir Mark Elder, Marin Alsop, Nicolás Pasquet, Andrés Orozco-Estrada, and Alpesh Chauhan. In the 2026/27 season, Juan José begins his collaboration with Chineke! Orchestra as Assistant Conductor.

Juan José is deeply committed to music as a force for social change, collaborating with many organisations centred on community engagement and inclusion through music. Most recently, he was part of the team at Iberacademy Foundation, where he coordinated community engagement strategies through its In Crescendo programme.

Juan José completed his undergraduate studies in orchestral conducting with Maestro Alejandro Posada, supported by the ANDI–EAFIT scholarship. He is currently pursuing a Master of Music in Orchestral Conducting at the RNCM, studying with Mark Heron and Clark Rundell. His studies are supported by COLFUTURO, the Hilti Foundation, Iberacademy Foundation, the Ian Scott Award, and the Mills Williams Foundation.

ESTHER SHEA (SOPRANO)

Esther Shea is a soprano from Jersey in the Channel Islands. She is currently based in London and is working professionally after graduating from the RNCM in the summer.

Her recent operatic roles include Nella in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (Kleine Opera), The Fox in Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen* (RNCM),

Ninette in Prokofiev's *L'amour des trois oranges* (RNCM), Mrs Coyle in Britten's *Owen Wingrave* (RNCM), Youka in Chabrier's *L'étoile* (RNCM), and Dido in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (Bedfordshire Youth Opera). She has also sung the roles of Elisabetta (*Maria Stuarda*), La Contessa (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Mimì (*La bohème*) and Ilia (*Idomeneo*) in excerpts. This summer she performed as part of the chorus in British Youth Opera's production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*.

She looks forward to performing the roles of Mimì in Puccini's *La bohème* (Kleine Opera) and Donna Elvira in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (St Albans Chamber Opera) early next year.

Esther graduated with Distinction from her Master of Music at the RNCM, where she studied with Mary Plazas. During her time here, she won the RNCM Concerto Competition with her performance of Strauss' *Vier letzte Lieder* (*Four Last Songs*), the Joyce and Michael Kennedy Award for the Singing of Strauss, and the Williams Howard Award. Her studies were generously supported by the Sybil Tutton Opera Award, the Dame Eva Turner Award, the LHR Foundation, and the Riga Heesom Award.

AMIT MANNA (COMPOSER)

Amit is a composer currently studying at the RNCM with Emily Howard and Steven Daverson. His music often starts with something personal, like a memory or a question he can't quite answer, and he really enjoys working closely with performers. He has a particular love for singers, open harmonies and, more recently, live electronics. Amit also loves programme notes. Recent works include *A Quiet Smile From Far Away*, premiered by the Berkshire Youth Symphony Orchestra at the 2026 Newbury Spring Festival, and *I Am Safe*, a chamber opera written for Sophia Brown.

Orchestra List

FIRST VIOLINS
Amit Ilan Segev
(leading 1st half)
Emily Harpley Gebbels
(leading 2nd half) ^
Olivia Trezise
Esther Clay
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Bronagh Lee
Elana Kenyon-Gewirtz ^
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Charlie Roberts
Gabby Kohler ^
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Sally Lee
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Weihan Peng
Annie Meaden
Sophie Wu
Grace Hughes
Peiran Zhong

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Kezia Elliot ^
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Sophie Combes
Xiaoyan Zhang
Peter Whitehead

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Abigail Webb
Shiney Zhou
Teresa De La Espada
Elizabeth Rayner ^
Cillian Hennessy
Immie Harpin
Hazel Lattimore ^

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Saulo Da Silva ^
Thomas Judge
André Chilio
Joana Moura
Aron Jonasson

PICCOLO
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FLUTES
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Constance Froment
(piccolo)
Matt Jones (piccolo)

OBOES
Theo Chapple
Tommy Vereker

COR ANGLAIS
Katy Brear ^

Eb CLARINET
Nathan Kenworthy ^

CLARINETS
Alfie Ward
Jake Stevens

BASS CLARINET
Miles Santner

BASSOONS
Rob Kearley
Ella Coleman ^

CONTRA BASSOON
Bia Carvalho

HORNS
Toby Johnson-Jones ^
Leo Penny
Lily Tabb ^
Sami Pang
Ross Donaldson ^

TRUMPETS
Lewis Barton
Phoebe Mallinson
Darcie Dewhurst
Tilly Crutchley

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