

## Viktoria Mullova

A look at a fascinating life...



Henry Fair

The story of tonight's soloist Viktoria Mullova, her early life and defection from Soviet Russia, is the stuff of spy movies. Mullova was an exceptionally talented young violinist in Moscow, where she studied with the formidable Leonid Kogan. In 1980 she won the International Jean Sibelius Violin Competition in Helsinki, Finland – a sure sign that she had a major career ahead of her. Two years later, she won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow.

The authorities kept a close eye on Mullova, but allowed her occasional visits to Soviet Estonia and even through the Iron Curtain to Finland. In 1983, Mullova conspired with her then boyfriend and a Finnish journalist to slip the KGB officers who were accompanying her during a concert

tour in Finland. She was driven from the town of Kuusamo over the border to Sweden, where she stayed for two nights in a safe house with her boyfriend and sought political asylum in the USA. She had left her Soviet-owned Stradivarius violin in her bedroom at the Kuusamo hotel.

Mullova, who now lives in Holland Park, London, has since pursued a distinguished international career, playing concertos with orchestras throughout Europe and America and also drilling deep into Baroque and Classical music. Echoing her lunge for freedom in 1983, she has always tried to break out of the standard repertoire associated with virtuoso soloists. She is fascinated by music of the Hungarian gypsy tradition and by South American street music. She has been a frequent visitor to Brazil, including one trip deep into the rainforest where she stayed with indigenous tribes. For her third non-classical album, *Stradivarius in Rio*, she joined local musicians in the Brazilian capital for performances of popular songs and dances.

But Mullova still feels close to those countries in which, as a child, she fleetingly glimpsed life outside Russia. Her first trip, under supervision, was to the Estonia of Arvo Pärt and its capital Tallinn. "I actually wonder if I have any Baltic blood in me", she told me in Tallinn in the summer of 2017, where she was recording music by Arvo Pärt in the presence of the composer. It was her first return to Estonia since before her defection.

The music of the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea means a great deal to Mullova. She describes the Finland of Jean Sibelius as "a country I feel very connected to" and is soon to add *Distant Light* – the Violin Concerto by the Latvian Pēteris Vasks – to her repertoire. "The people might seem cold and cool but underneath they are very, very emotional," she says; "they cry easily."

## LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770–1827)

**Overture, *Egmont*, Op. 84 (1810)**  
(9mins)

Ludwig van Beethoven is probably the greatest musical revolutionary of all time. He was the first genuinely freelance composer who wrested musical expression from the grip of the aristocracy. His music was born of turbulent times, when new impulses were surging through Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

Amid that turbulence, Beethoven's Vienna found itself occupied by the French. The city's Hoftheater attempted to rekindle spirits in 1810 by reviving Goethe's play based on the story of Count Egmont, the Flemish leader who defied the occupying Spanish by calling for a revolution (he was then beheaded in a Brussels square). The story chimed with Beethoven, a huge Goethe fan, who wrote nine musical numbers for the production, which opened on 15 June 1810.

The opera *Fidelio* and the Fifth and Sixth symphonies had recently demonstrated Beethoven's fast-developing ability to wed striking intensity of feeling to exceptional technique. His Overture to *Egmont* – the only movement to have remained in currency – does the same. It presents the drama in microcosm, from rumbling dissatisfaction (*Egmont* in prison), through a Spanish dance towards a furious battle, *Egmont's* execution (marked by a sudden silence) and his posthumous legacy.

## JEAN SIBELIUS

(1865–1957)

**Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47**  
(1903; rev. 1905)  
(31mins)

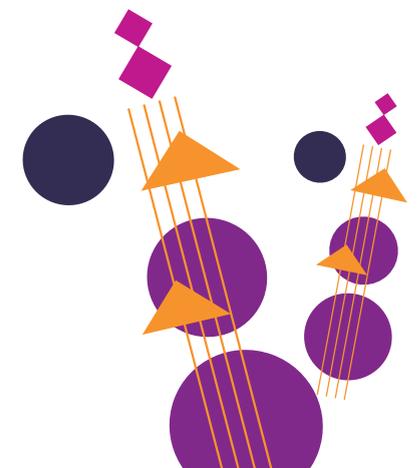
*Allegro moderato*  
*Adagio di molto*  
*Allegro, ma non tanto*

Jean Sibelius came to music via the violin and dreamed of becoming a soloist. But he lacked the co-ordination and temperament of a first-rate virtuoso and his dream remained unfulfilled.

A better violinist, concertmaster of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra Willy Burmester, suggested the composer write the Violin Concerto. But after Sibelius offered the concerto to two other violinists to perform – including Karl Halil, who gave the first performance of the revised version of the piece in October 1905 – Burmester never got to play the piece in public.

The score demonstrates Sibelius's complete understanding of the violin from the inside. "He conceived the entire first movement from the point of view of a broken-hearted, thwarted violinist longing for the virtuoso career that would never be," wrote the musicologist Glenda Dawn Goss.

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The soloist plays relentlessly in that movement, right from the opening bars, which emerge as if from a cool mist. The lone violin develops some of its own thematic material (notably in the cadenza, the frolicking, unaccompanied solo) while the orchestral tectonics shift starkly underneath. The stormy secondary idea is based on a theme introduced by the cellos; the orchestra launches into it *en masse* at the movement's most obvious turning point.

In the slow movement, the violin offers a song-like theme against a clear woodwind sky before the colours turn dark. In this stern 'Adagio di molto', the violin claws its way up from the depths, through cross-rhythms and double-stopping (two notes bowed across two strings at once), urging the orchestra into the same display of fortitude.

The finale – once memorably described by British musician and writer Donald Tovey as “a polonaise for polar bears” – is launched by timpani (tuned drums) and low strings, before the violin introduces a skipping theme. Challenges for the soloist come thick and fast, as if the concerto's thrilling virtuosity is a surrogate for Sibelius's lost career.

Interval (20 mins)



## PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)

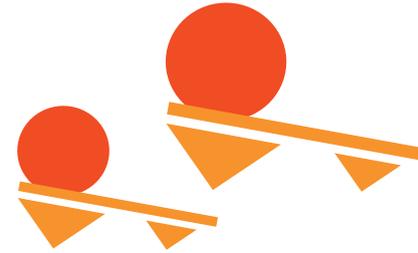
### Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, *Pathétique* (1893) (45 mins)

*Adagio – Allegro non troppo*  
*Allegro con grazia*  
*Allegro molto vivace*  
*Finale. Adagio lamentoso*

Tchaikovsky always poured out his heart in his works. But in his last symphony, premiered just nine days before he died, he did rather more. For decades now, musicologists have been debating whether that death was by Tchaikovsky's own hand, and if the symphony could be the composer's suicide note.

There is some consensus around the idea that Tchaikovsky, a gay man, was shortly to be hounded and prosecuted for indulging in sexual relations with a member of the Imperial Court. He drank a glass of unboiled water four days after conducting the symphony's premiere – an unthinkable act given the cholera epidemic in Russia at the time, and an unnecessary one considering Tchaikovsky's celebrity status. It's not difficult to conclude that the tortured composer knew exactly what he was doing.

Whether or not Tchaikovsky was reflecting that predicament in a symphony that he freely acknowledged told a story (he stopped short of specific details), he certainly used the Sixth to give expression to new ideas about symphonic design and



music itself. The composer's biographer David Brown has suggested that a previously aborted attempt at a symphony to follow the Fifth proves that “something far greater was germinating” inside Tchaikovsky, and that it was “a concept so novel that it could not be crushed”. Eventually, that novel concept flowed out of Tchaikovsky with exhilarating speed in the summer of 1893. The symphony's power, fluency and originality remain astonishing, and its first audience was left bewildered by a work whose final pages sank into silence rather than proclaiming a traditional symphonic victory. Earlier in his cycle of symphonies, Tchaikovsky had explored fate. Now, he was exploring mortality.

The Sixth Symphony would have felt different from the start. First there was its title, expressing passionate suffering (rather than the ‘ineptitude’ of the English word ‘pathetic’). It begins with a low bassoon, picking out a four-note figure above murky strings. Soon the strings hijack that bassoon figure, imbuing it with scorching

power for use in the powerful ‘Allegro’ that carries the first movement's principal arguments. Time and again, the music tries to haul itself upwards only to slip back down. There are few better musical metaphors for Tchaikovsky's sense of isolation than the movement that follows. The second movement has all the feeling of a waltz – a dance of etiquette, tradition and social order – but is impaired by a five-beat structure that makes dancing to it impossible. It is followed by a frantic march, its forced smile ultimately unable to conceal dark thoughts as it hurtles towards oblivion.

When the third movement throttles towards its end point, it can feel like the end of the symphony. But it isn't. After a silence, the final movement begins in despair. We are introduced to the pain-filled first theme, and after yet another silence, a theme of notable breadth; David Brown describes these respectively as “the active side of grief – shock and despair” and “the inner apprehension of adversity”. In the end, the music can only cling to the latter, before sinking into silence for the last time.

Feature and programme notes by Andrew Mellor  
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