



Tuesday | April 29, 2025 | 8pm
Symphony Hall

Evgeny Kissin piano

J. S. Bach

Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826

- I. Sinfonia
- II. Allemande
- III. Courante
- IV. Sarabande
- V. Rondeau
- VI. Capriccio

Frédéric Chopin

Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, no. 1

Nocturne in A-flat Major, Op. 32, no. 2

Scherzo No. 4 in E Major, Op. 54

INTERMISSION

Dmitri Shostakovich

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B minor, Op. 61

- I. Allegretto
- II. Largo
- III. Moderato (con moto) – Allegretto con moto –
Adagio – Moderato

Shostakovich

Selected Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87

No. 15 in D-flat Major

No. 24 in D minor

This evening's program will run approximately one hour and 45 minutes,
including intermission.

Mr. Kissin appears by arrangement with IMG Artists, New York.
Mr. Kissin records for Deutsche Grammophon.

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826

After serving several contentious years as Kapellmeister in the small city of Cöthen, in 1723 Bach successfully applied for the position of Cantor at the prestigious Thomasschule in Leipzig. Though the position became closely associated with Bach, he almost failed to get the job. He was ambivalent about the title, which he saw as a step down, and the interviewing council found him underwhelming. The council reluctantly offered Bach the post after several applicants dropped out.

His many duties, including overseeing music for Leipzig's largest churches, left him little time to compose secular works. Bach's solo keyboard output sharply declined but he eventually returned to the form. In the late 1720s he composed and self-published several collections of dance suites for keyboard, including several partitas, or suites. These were Bach's first publications of keyboard music and among the last keyboard suites he composed.

The C-minor Partita opens with a *Sinfonia*, a three-part work containing counterpoint. The first section, a weighty slow introduction, gives way to a middle with a florid upper line and a walking bass accompaniment. The *Sinfonia* closes with an urgent fugue. Next are a graceful, ornamented Allemande and a brief but unusually fiery Courante.

Bach composed more *Sarabandes* than any other dance type. The dance originated in Latin America and moved to Spain, where it was banned for its obscenity; one Jesuit priest called the sarabande "a dance and song so loose in its words and so ugly in its motions that it is enough to excite bad emotions in even very decent people." Baroque composers like Bach defanged the sarabande, recasting it as a slow, courtly dance. Following a spritely *Rondeau*, the partita concludes with a fugal *Capriccio*.

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 1

Nocturne in A-flat Major, Op. 32, no. 2

Scherzo No. 4 in E Major, Op. 54

Left stateless after the failed Polish revolt against the Russian Empire, Chopin built a new life in Paris. There his reputation as a teacher and a performer grew. Yet he eschewed public concerts, choosing instead to give intimate performances in the exclusive Parisian salons. He became so renowned among the upper-crust that fellow composer Hector Berlioz complained, “Unless you are a prince, a minister, or an ambassador, you might as well give up hope of hearing him.” As a composer, Chopin turned away from flashy concert hall genres like variations and concertos. Instead, he wrote small character pieces like the mazurka, the étude, and the nocturne.

As Chopin scholar Jim Samson writes, “The genre title ‘nocturne’ was fairly commonplace in early nineteenth-century piano music, influenced no doubt by the enhanced cultural status of the night..., and also by the growing importance of the salon as a site of pianism. In the hands of [Irish composer and father of the nocturne] John Field and Chopin it came to be associated with a pianistic style shaped by vocal imitation.”

Both nocturnes on tonight’s program open with the typical “nocturne sound”: a songlike melody supported by arpeggios in the left hand. The C-sharp minor Nocturne contains two melodic lines in the right hand, a quasi-operatic duet for soprano and contralto. Not to be outdone, the A-flat major Nocturne opens with a filigreed cantabile melody. The second themes of both nocturnes are, by contrast, faster and more agitated.

While he worked to build a career in Paris, Chopin also set his sights on marriage. In 1836—sandwiched between the composition of the Opus 27 and 32 nocturnes—he proposed to Maria Wodzińska, the daughter of a Polish count. Their engagement was short-lived: Maria’s overbearing mother, concerned by Chopin’s chronic illness, called the engagement off within a year. After the rupture, Chopin placed their letters into an envelope, labeled it “My sorrow,” and hid them in his desk.

A short time later, Chopin met the woman who would become his final lover and later caregiver. The writer Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin (pen name George Sand) made a decidedly unfavorable impression when they met in one of the salons. “What an unattractive person La Sand is,” Chopin wrote. “Is she really a woman?” But when the pair reconnected a year later, they began an intense affair. In the summers she offered a respite from the Parisian heat at her summer home in Nohant. Here Chopin composed some of his greatest late works, including the Scherzo No. 4, written in 1842.

Of Chopin’s four scherzos, only the Fourth is predominantly in a major key. The work opens with a sunny melody played in block chords. Interspersed between sprightly, virtuosic sections are gloomy, nocturnesque passages: wistful melodies float above left-hand arpeggios. In the end, sunshine triumphs over rain. The spirited coda concludes with an ebullient upward flourish.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
Piano Sonata No. 2 in B minor, Op. 61

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched its invasion of the Soviet Union, Operation Barbarossa. Shostakovich attempted to enlist in the Red Army, but poor eyesight disqualified him from service. Later that year, the government evacuated Shostakovich and his family from Leningrad. Along with other artists and Communist Party officials, they fled southeast to Kuybyshev, hundreds of miles from the front. Kuybyshev served as the USSR's alternate capital in case Moscow fell; an unused bunker built for Stalin now houses a museum. The invasion spurred Shostakovich to complete his monumental Seventh Symphony. Its nickname, "Leningrad," honored the bravery of those trapped in the city's twenty-eight-month-long siege. Audiences immediately took up the symphony as a symbol of global resistance to tyranny and fascism. The day after its American premiere under the baton of Arturo Toscanini in July 1942, *Time* magazine featured an illustration of Shostakovich on its cover.

Despite the overwhelming success of the Seventh, Shostakovich grew dispirited in the backwater of Kuybyshev. He was bored by the lack of musical life and longed to see his friends. "Life, on the whole," he wrote, "is grey and joyless." That autumn, he was devastated to learn of the death of a former piano teacher, Leonid Nikolayev, from typhoid fever. Shostakovich contracted the illness soon after, but by January he felt well enough to begin composing the Second Piano Sonata. He left Kuybyshev to recover in a sanatorium near Moscow, where he completed the sonata in March. He dedicated the work to Nikolayev, his beloved teacher.

The sonata's first movement is fleet and restless. In the first section, cascades of sixteenth notes swirl around a dotted, lyrical melody. A passage of staccato chords announces a second, march-like theme with an obsessive left-hand accompaniment. Most of the movement is sparsely textured; even the rich, triumphant climax quickly fades away. The dizzying sixteenth-note figures return before an abrupt conclusion.

Shostakovich casts the second movement, a meditative lamentation, in A-B-A form. The A section is dissonant and thinly textured, with a solemn right-hand melody. Slow, abrupt chords in the left hand initiate the B section. The spartan orchestration foreshadows the chamber works of Shostakovich's final decade when a series of strokes left him barely able to hold a pen. Much of his music from that period is similarly gloomy and austere.

The sonata concludes with a set of nine variations on a descending theme. Its moods and textures are wide-ranging, from the restless staccato third variation and the clanging, dissonant fourth to the soft, high-flying seventh. In the final bars, the themes from the first and second movements reappear, now absorbed within the finale's theme.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)
from Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues, Op. 87
No. 15 in D-flat Major
No. 24 in D minor

Like many Soviet artists of his era, Shostakovich had an uneasy, volatile relationship with the Stalinist government. In the twenty years before Stalin's death, Shostakovich was lauded as the great hope of Soviet opera; celebrated and subsequently condemned for his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*; hailed as a patriotic hero for the "Leningrad" Symphony; condemned again, this time in the infamous Zhdanov Decree of 1948; awarded money, a country home, and two Stalin Prizes; and sent abroad as a cultural ambassador. One of these trips took him to Leipzig, where he served as a judge in a Bach bicentennial festival. This festival and a performance of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* inspired Shostakovich to compose his own set of Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues.

Shostakovich completed the cycle, his largest work for solo piano, in February 1951. A month later, he performed half of it before a large audience of the Soviet Composers' Union. The cultural repression of the period was on full display: "We must decisively warn Shostakovich," an official admonished after the performance, "and all those other composers who have not yet broken with all traces of the modernistic past, from indulging in these extremely undesirable relapses."

The union of prelude and fugue into a dualistic genre occurred in the second half of the Baroque era; the *Well-Tempered Clavier* further entrenched this juxtaposition. In the nineteenth century, composers including Chopin separated the two forms again, writing discrete preludes (Shostakovich wrote a set of twenty-four preludes just after completing *Lady Macbeth*). The lively prelude in D-flat major is a carnivalesque waltz typical of the composer. The D-minor fugue, by contrast, opens in hushed austerity. At first resolutely monochromatic, it grows increasingly dissonant as it soldiers on at a steady walking tempo. Shostakovich borrows a rocking eighth-note figure from Jewish folk music for the second subject. He had long been interested in Jewish music, particularly its mood of "laughter through tears." Forced to compose outwardly triumphant propaganda pieces for a regime he despised, Shostakovich likely empathized with this sentiment. As the subject develops, it grows agitated, rising into the top of the piano's range. A thundering climax follows, yet the music seems robbed of any triumph.

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From the Celebrity Series of Boston archives...

Pianist Evgeny Kissin made his Celebrity Series debut in recital in October 1991, and appeared most recently in April 2023. Today marks his eleventh engagement on the Series, including collaborative performances with violinist Itzhak Perlman and the Emerson String Quartet, along with solo recitals.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Evgeny Kissin piano

Evgeny Kissin's musicality, the depth and poetic quality of his interpretations, and his extraordinary virtuosity have earned him the veneration and admiration deserved only by one of the most gifted classical pianists of his generation and, arguably, generations past. He is in demand all over the world and has appeared with many of the world's great conductors, including Abbado, Ashkenazy, Barenboim, Dohnanyi, Giulini, Karajan, Levine, Maazel, Muti, and Ozawa, as well as all the great orchestras of the world.

Mr. Kissin was born in Moscow in October 1971 and began to play by ear and improvise on the piano at age two. At six years old, he entered a special school for gifted children, the Moscow Gnessin School of Music, where he was a student of Anna Pavlovna Kantor, his only teacher. At age ten, he made his concerto debut playing Mozart's Piano Concerto, K. 466, and gave his first solo recital in Moscow one year later. He came to international attention in March 1984 when, at age twelve, he performed Chopin's Piano Concertos 1 and 2 in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory with the Moscow State Philharmonic under Dmitri Kitayenko. This concert was recorded live by Melodia, and a two-LP album was released the following year. Given this recording's astounding success, Melodia released five more LPs of live performances in Moscow over the next two years.

Mr. Kissin's first appearances outside Russia were in 1985 in Eastern Europe; his first tour of Japan in 1986; and in December 1988, he performed with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic in a New Year's concert broadcast internationally. In 1990, Mr. Kissin made his first appearance at the BBC Promenade Concerts in London and, in the same year, made his North American debut, performing both Chopin piano concertos with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Zubin Mehta. The following week he opened Carnegie Hall's Centennial season with a spectacular debut recital, recorded live by BMG Classics. (His Boston debut in 1993 was presented by Celebrity Series.) This season, Mr. Kissin returns to tour North America, Europe, and Asia in a recital program featuring works by Bach, Chopin, and Shostakovich. In the fall, he visits Taipei, Seoul, and major cities across Japan. His spring tour of North America takes him to Vancouver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington DC, Cleveland, Chicago, and New York. The tour culminates with three performances at Carnegie Hall commemorating the 50th anniversary of Shostakovich's death. Besides a solo recital, he will perform the violin, viola, and cello sonatas with Gidon Kremer, Maxim Rysanov, and Gautier Capuçon, respectively. The third program will present a selection of Shostakovich's chamber works, featuring the Four Verses of Captain Lebyadkin, and From Jewish Folk Poetry song cycles, along with the Piano Quintet, and Piano Trio No. 2

Musical awards and tributes from around the world have been showered upon Evgeny Kissin. He received the Crystal Prize of the Osaka Symphony Hall for the Best Performance of the Year in 1986 (his first performance in Japan). In 1991, he received the Musician of the Year Prize from the Chigiana Academy of Music in Siena, Italy. He was special guest at the 1992 Grammy Awards Ceremony, broadcast live to an audience estimated at over one billion, and three years later became *Musical America's* youngest Instrumentalist of the Year. In 1997, he received the prestigious Triumph Award for his outstanding contribution to Russia's culture, one of the highest cultural honors to be awarded in the Russian Republic, the youngest-ever awardee. Mr. Kissin has been awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Music by the Manhattan School of Music; the Shostakovich Award, one of Russia's highest musical honors; an Honorary Membership of the Royal Academy of Music in London; and an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the Hong Kong University.

Mr. Kissin's newest release is an album featuring Beethoven Sonatas on the Deutsche Grammophon label. His previous recordings have received numerous awards and accolades, having contributed significantly to the library of masterpieces recorded by the world's greatest performers. Past awards have included the Edison Klassiek in The Netherlands, and the Diapason d'Or and the Grand Prix of La Nouvelle Academie du Disque in France. His recording of works by Scriabin, Medtner, and Stravinsky (RCA Red Seal) won him a Grammy in 2006 for Best Instrumental Soloist. In 2002, Mr. Kissin was named Echo Klassik Soloist of the Year. His most recent Grammy for Best Instrumental Soloist Performance (with orchestra) was awarded in 2010 for his recording of Prokofiev's Piano Concertos nos. 2 and 3 with the Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy (EMI Classics). Mr. Kissin's extraordinary talent inspired Christopher Nupen's documentary film, *Evgeny Kissin: The Gift of Music*, which was released in 2000 on video and DVD by RCA Red Seal.

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