

BBC Radio 3 Concert Record

With the Ulster Orchestra

Townsend - Thursday 12th February, 2pm

JUNPING QIAN, conductor



Junping Qian has been internationally acclaimed for his musical depth, clarity of expression and a strong collaborative spirit. Born in China, leading his school choir at the age of ten, he has since developed a career that spans Europe, North America and Asia.

He received his advanced musical training at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and at the Hanns Eisler School of Music in Berlin, studying with eminent mentors including Otto-Werner Mueller, Daniel Harding, Sir Roger Norrington and Christoph Eschenbach. His artistic development has been further supported by the Bruno Walter Memorial Foundation and the Solti Foundation.

Junping Qian has also received international awards, including First Prize at the Bucharest International Conducting Competition (2017), and prizes at the Lovro von Matačić, the Hans von Bülow and the Princess Astrid International competitions.

From 2018 to 2020, he was Assistant Conductor of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, alongside a teaching appointment at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. In the 2022/23 season, he was Assistant Conductor of the Orchestre de Paris, working closely with leading conductors and soloists on major symphonic projects. He is currently Principal Guest Conductor of the Satu Mare Philharmonic Orchestra ‘Dinu Lipatti’ (2024–2026) and, since last September, Artistic Director of the Chamber Philharmonia ZJCM in Hangzhou, one of China’s foremost professional chamber orchestras.

Junping Qian has conducted a wide range of leading international orchestras, including the Orchestre de Paris and the BBC Symphony, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, Minnesota, China National Symphony and Shanghai Symphony orchestras. His repertoire spans the core symphonic literature, contemporary works and opera, and his performances are noted for their structural clarity, expressive intensity and refined orchestral sound.

This overture provides a powerful curtain-up for this afternoon's sequence of three works which centre around tragic stories. Ludwig van Beethoven wrote *Coriolan* in 1807 – certainly a vintage and productive time for him. That same year he wrote the Razumovsky String Quartets, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Violin Concerto and much of the Fifth Symphony.

The overture was inspired by a tragic drama written by Beethoven's friend Heinrich von Collin based on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. The play was first produced in Vienna in 1802, running for over two years. The long-serving and heroic Roman general Coriolan has been banished from Rome. Now encamped outside Rome, he seeks vengeance leading a rebel army to wreck the city. He is persuaded to withdraw by a group of women, including his wife and his mother. His fate is now in the hands of the Roman mob. Suicide is the only final solution.

Such a tragedy required a powerful emotional statement and an October 1808 review in Leipzig's *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* approved: 'Beethoven's most recent grand overture to Collin's *Coriolan* (in C minor), [is] full of inner, powerful life, original harmonic twists and turns, and with a truly tragic effect (but difficult to perform well).'

Beethoven's overture was written for the play's revival in April 1807, but it was first performed at a subscription concert in Prince Lobkowitz's Palace in Vienna in March that year. It was also chosen to begin the concert which followed the unveiling of the monument to Beethoven's memory in Bonn in 1845.

The key of C minor is also that of the Fifth Symphony, and the overture's restlessness and intensity are established at the outset by a series of chords, full of tragedy and anguish. There is a contrasting lyrical idea but the music pushes ahead with drive and drama. Unexpectedly the overture finishes quietly – surely a nod in the direction of the tragic fate of Coriolanus.

SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975) arr. Barshai

Chamber Symphony, Op.110a

c.22'

Largo – Allegro molto – Allegretto – Largo – Largo

This Chamber Symphony is the first of five arranged for string orchestra by the Russian conductor and viola player Rudolf Barshai (1924-2010) from Dmitry Shostakovich's string quartets. Shostakovich wrote his first string quartet in 1938, after his Fifth Symphony, and he planned to write a total of 24, but only managed 15 by the time of his death. This arrangement of String Quartet No.8 in C minor, Op.110, was written in 1960.

Shostakovich's music (and that of Prokofiev and many others) was denounced by Andrey Zhdanov and a Party decree in 1948 as elitist, formalist, and rejecting the principles of classical music. Music should conform to the ideals of the Party: it should be based on the folk tradition and be affirmative in outlook.

Shostakovich acknowledged his guilt, writing film scores and the like for public consumption, but remaining true to himself in withheld private works including some of his string quartets. The ambiguities, repression and censorship coloured much of his music; even the surface patina of his apparently joyful and good-humoured writing often conceals sardonic, and ominous undertones.

He was stripped of his professorships at the Moscow and Leningrad Conservatoires, but then showered with honours in the 1950s, receiving the Order of Lenin, the USSR's highest honour, on his 50th birthday. With his health failing in 1960, and apparently to his great shame, he was persuaded, with a liberal helping of alcohol, to join Khrushchev's Communist Party, something which fed into his Eighth String Quartet, dedicated 'in memory of the victims of fascism and war'.

He travelled to Dresden in the summer of 1960 to write music for a film, *Five Days, Five Nights*, about the British and American bombing of the city in 1945. He was suicidally depressed and, while there, he poured his soul into this string quartet, written in just three days, reckoning it would be his final piece, a summation of his life's work. The fascism and war in his mind were surely more home-grown than in Dresden.

That July he wrote to his friend Isaak Davidovich Glikman:

‘I began to think that if I die someday, nobody is likely to write a work in my memory, so I’d better write one myself. The title page could carry the dedication: “To the memory of the composer of this quartet”. The main theme is the four notes D natural, E flat, C natural, B natural – that is, my initials D. SCH [in German notation]. The quartet also uses themes from my own works along with [in the fourth movement] the revolutionary song “Tormented by Grievous Bondage” [a favourite of Lenin]. I’ve used themes from my First Symphony, the Eighth Symphony, the Piano Trio, the [First] Cello Concerto, and *Lady Macbeth*. And there are hints of Wagner’s Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung* and the second theme from the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony. And I forgot — there’s also a theme from my Tenth Symphony.

Quite something—this little miscellany! It's a pseudo-tragic quartet, so much so that, while I was composing it, I shed the same amount of tears as I would have to pee after a dozen beers. When I got home, I tried to play it through, but always ended up in tears.'

Despite that 'miscellany', this anguished and deeply felt music is very coherently structured and, indeed, unified. It's cast in five movements played without pause – the second and third seemingly two interpretations of the same scherzo, while the final movement with its fugue provides a new perspective on the opening movement. Appropriately, the Eighth Quartet was played at Shostakovich's funeral.

SIBELIUS (1865 - 1957)

Suite, *King Christian II*, Op. 27 c. 22'

Nocturne; Élégie; Musette; Serenade; Ballad

This music from 1898, written for a friend's play, was the first orchestral work by Jean Sibelius to be published, initially in his native Helsinki, then by the German publisher, Breitkopf and Härtel, beginning an important relationship for the future. Henry Wood introduced the *King Christian II* music to London audiences at a 'Prom' concert in 1901, the start of the love affair between British audiences and Sibelius's music.

The friend, a life-long one, was the Swedish-born novelist and playwright, Adolf Paul (1863–1943). He'd studied piano at the Helsinki Music Institute alongside Sibelius, both of them eventually studying with the composer and pianist Busoni. In September 1889, the two friends moved to Berlin, meeting up again with their teacher Busoni. The following year Sibelius travelled to Vienna for further studies.

While in Vienna, Sibelius planned his first major orchestral work, *Kullervo*, a five-movement ‘symphonic poem for soloists, chorus and orchestra’. It was based on the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic which remained a vital source of inspiration throughout his life. Its success early in 1892 immediately established his position as the leading Finnish composer and a national hero.

Around this same time, Paul, who had permanently settled in Berlin, decided to focus on his writing rather than his music. In 1897, he asked Sibelius to write the incidental music for his new play *King Christian II*. The story, based on historical events, told of the love of Christian II, King of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, for Dyveke, a Dutch girl ‘of common origin’. It ends badly when she is poisoned during the King’s vengeful Stockholm massacre of 1520.

Sibelius, now the composer of the *Lemminkäinen Suite* whose symphonic nature clearly indicated the path that his work would take, began work on his First Symphony just a few months after the play’s successful première in Helsinki in February 1898. Of the seven pieces Sibelius supplied, he chose five of them a year later to make into an orchestral suite.

After the woodwind opening of the atmospheric *Nocturne*, a love scene, the strings inject some intensity and some easy-going forward momentum. There are hints of the First Symphony, still to come, and a slow build-up to the powerful climax, complete with tambourine, before the woodwind opening returns. The *Élégie*, the play’s prelude, scored for strings only, here provides a refreshing change of texture. Apart from a couple of heart-stopping pauses, the music is wonderfully sustained, melancholic and moving.

The rustic *Musette* had provided an interlude between the play's second and third acts. Originally for clarinets and bassoons, Sibelius now added a light string accompaniment. The *Serenade*, a prelude to Act III, offers some elegant dancing for the court ball. Finally, the *Ballade*, again with hints of the First Symphony, is full of intense drama, reflecting the massacre and the story's tragic ending.

Programme notes © David Byers 2026
ByersMusic.com

Ulster Orchestra Players

1st Violin

Julian Azkoul
Beverley Scott
Thomas Jackson
Katherine Sung
Jonathan Griffin
Zuzanna Edmonds
Danny McCann-Williams
Alys Jackson
Krzysztof Rucinski
Ana Vandepoor
Niamh McGowan
Jasmine Morris

2nd Violin

Jaga Klimaszewska
Nick Rippon
Cillian O'Breachain
Sarah White
Aisling Manning
Mafalda Galante
Usman Peguero
Ruta Mazolyte-Aghaunor
Scott Lowry
Kevin Harrell

Viola

Julia Doukakis
Feargal Ó Dornáin
Richard Hadwen
Ralph Tartaglia

Philip Walton
Richard Guthrie
John Murphy
Sasha Buettner

Cello

Morag Stewart
Sarah Shephard
Rosalie Curlett
Elias Rooney
Sian Hetherington
Andrew Nesbitt
Jonathan Few

Double Bass

Ben Burnley
Daniel Ryan
Maitíú Gaffney
Helen Glynn
Gabriel Rodrigues

Flute

Mark Taylor
Andrew Douglas

Oboe

Ewan Millar
Ben Gannon

Clarinet

Katie Lockhart
Ciaran McQuaid

Bassoon

Kristina Hedley
Emily Dore

Horn

Paul Klein
Peter Mullen
Jesse Durkan
Derek Parkins

Trumpet

Donald Creech
Stephen Murphy

Trombone

Neil Gallie
Tony Boorer

Bass Trombone

Richard Ashmore

Timpani

Richard Cartlidge

Percussion

Sam Staunton