

Víkingur Ólafsson

Sunday, February 1, 2026 at 3pm

This is the 1,496th concert in Koerner Hall

Víkingur Ólafsson, piano

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach: Prelude No. 9 in E Major, BWV 854

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 27 in E Minor, op. 90

- I. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck
- II. Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorzutragen

Johann Sebastian Bach: Partita No. 6 in E Minor, BWV 830

- I. Toccata – [Fugue]
- II. Allemande
- III. Corrente
- IV. Air
- V. Sarabande
- VI. Tempo di Gavotta
- VII. Gigue

Franz Schubert: Piano Sonata in E Minor, D. 566 (Moderato; Allegretto)

- I. Moderato
- II. Allegretto

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, op. 109

- I. Vivace, ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo – Tempo 1 –
- II. Prestissimo
- III. Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

“As I started searching for my next recital program, I was immediately drawn to a set of works where I felt the presence of the *Goldberg Variations* in the most inspiring way: the last three sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven, opp. 109, 110, and 111 ... Placing just one of them at the gravitational centre of a program would allow me the joy of travelling freely in its orbit, discovering new perspectives on it, while also encountering other works within its realm. Beginning with a program focusing on the Sonata op. 109, I could indulge in wondering what path led to this work, what else was happening around the time it was written (1820), and how those developments might have influenced other composers ... the sort of recital I myself would like to listen to.” (Vikingur Ólafsson in an article written for the Oslo Opera House).

Johann Sebastian Bach

Born in Eisenach, Germany, March 21, 1685; died in Leipzig, Germany, July 28, 1750

Prelude No. 9 in E Major, BWV 854 from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1 (c. 1715-22, rev. later)

“The opening work is the Prelude in E Major, BWV 854 from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. With its serene beauty and its bittersweet chromaticism, it feels both like an invitation and a prophecy for the music that lies ahead.”

- Vikingur Ólafsson

Partita No. 6 in E Minor, BWV 830 (publ. 1730)

“In a program that revolves around Beethoven’s op. 109,” writes Vikingur Ólafsson, “it is worth noting how Bach, too, is testing and transcending the limits of his chosen compositional form in his final Partita, taking elements that originated in dance and turning them into formal abstractions, free to travel into uncharted musical territory.” Or, as Johann Forkel, Bach’s first biographer, wrote half a century after the composer’s death, praising all six of Bach’s keyboard Partitas: “This work made in its time a great noise in the musical world.” “Such excellent compositions for the clavier had never before been seen or heard. Anyone who had learnt to perform well some pieces out of them could make his fortune in the world thereby; they are so brilliant, well-sounding, expressive, and always new.”

Bach pushes beyond established convention, seeking stylistic breadth within the collection. The brilliant Toccata of the Sixth Partita opens with a rhetorical flourish, followed by sweeping, improvisatory passages and a poised central fugue. In the ensuing dance movements, Bach surveys the principal instrumental styles of his day. A refined French Allemande gives way to an invigorating Corrente – a teasing dialogue between the hands in the progressive Italian manner.

The Sarabande, here far more than a slow, sustained and serious dance, reaches inward in one of Bach’s greatest elaborations of a dance movement. Its improvisatory freedom and French decoration echo the Toccata’s style, yet its minor-key meditations and rare glimpses of the major bring deep emotional contrast. A jaunty Tempo di Gavotta follows, playing wittily with the gavotte’s traditional grace by mixing duple and triple metres and hinting at an Italianate giga. The closing Gigue crowns the suite with intellectual and musical brilliance, its intricate counterpoint not only weaving lines together but dancing in the process.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born in Bonn, Germany, baptised December 17, 1770; died in Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827

Piano Sonata No. 27 in E Minor, op. 90 (1814)

Beethoven composed this E Minor Sonata while living under occupation in Vienna, as total deafness drew relentlessly closer. His first piano sonata in five years is a study in contrasts and compression, its two movements anticipating the concentrated expression of his final period. Like the last Piano Sonata, op. 111, it balances a minor-key first movement with a major-key second. Beethoven marks the opening movement “with liveliness and with feeling and expression throughout.” It revolves around a single theme, heard at once, built on a descending semitone (G to F sharp). These two notes drive the entire movement, generating an astonishing range of emotion – now yearning, now assertive, at times rhetorical or combative. The second movement opens with a smile. Beethoven inverts the same terse motif, transforming it into an ascending, major-key melody of disarming simplicity. Again, his heading is not a tempo but an interpretive instruction: “To be performed not too quickly and very songfully.” Schubert greatly admired this movement and modelled his own A Major Rondo for Piano Duet, D. 951 (1828), on its structure.

Vikingur Ólafsson writes: “The deceptively compact but richly imaginative two-movement Sonata op. 90 feels in many ways like a precursor to op. 109. Many have noted the contrasting elements at play in this subtly

experimental work, variously portrayed as a battle between head and heart, prose and poetry, or speech and song. The first of the sonata's two movements is fragmentary and ruminative in structure, full of unexpected twists and sharp changes in affect. But what drew me to this work more than anything else is the second movement, the rondo in E major, where all the preceding storms are stilled by a gloriously sonorous, tender melody. In my mind, this music belongs to the same amiable and warm side of Beethoven as the outer movements of op. 109, written in the same key."

Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, op. 109 (1820)

Beethoven's three magnificent final piano sonatas form a trilogy, conceived and written in close succession. "Their wild inventiveness and transcendence of traditional form is rooted in a deep engagement with Baroque elements," says Víkingur Ólafsson. "They are the music of the future, and yet they are fuelled by the music of the past – the music of Bach."

All three late sonatas – together with the mighty "Diabelli Variations" – were written between 1819 and 1822, the same four-year period Beethoven devoted to the *Missa solemnis*. Working on the sonatas alongside the mass brought a remarkable late-period renewal after a time of personal and creative crisis. Past achievements no longer seemed to open new paths, and only through spiritual struggle did the astonishing revival of his final years emerge.

Op. 109, the first of the trilogy, occupies a sound world entirely its own. Two movements in a highly compressed, utterly personal sonata form precede a lyrically expansive set of variations. A brief opening theme floats calmly and guilelessly through a gentle melodic sequence only to be abruptly interrupted by an impassioned *Adagio espressivo* – harmonically shifting, almost improvisatory. Instead of opposing themes and keys in the classical manner, Beethoven intertwines them, distilling their essence into a compact movement that arrives at simple, hymn-like chords.

An angular, explosive *Prestissimo* follows, erupting from the dying notes of the first movement and driving ahead with relentless, often contrapuntal energy. After this quasi-scherzo, Beethoven unfolds a sublime slow movement – a structurally fulfilling set of variations and finale in one. This becomes the emotional heart of the work. Its theme, drawn from the sonata's opening, is now a song of luminous simplicity, marked *Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung* ("to be sung with the deepest feeling"). Each variation reveals new expressive depth and contrapuntal brilliance, yet the music remains anchored to its theme and home key throughout. Beethoven reconciles the human and the spiritual with music that feels both deeply personal and timeless.

Franz Schubert

Born in Vienna, Austria, January 31, 1797; died there, November 19, 1828

Piano Sonata in E Minor, D. 566 (1817)

Víkingur Ólafsson writes: "Playing Beethoven's op. 90 again and again in my studio and revelling in its lights and shades, a faint memory from my teenage music school days in Reykjavík emerged in my mind – of a friend playing the first movement of an early piano sonata by Franz Schubert I had never since heard – or seen in a concert program. This, I summed up, was Schubert's Piano Sonata in E Minor, D. 566, written by the 20-year-old composer in 1817, two years after Beethoven's op. 90 was published in their mutual home city of Vienna. Playing through Schubert's sonata for the first time felt like a revelation. Here was a strikingly beautiful but generally overlooked Schubert sonata that seemed to have been hiding in plain sight: a small gem that, for all its brevity, contained both the contemplative depth and the songful, timeless expanse of the composer's later piano sonatas.

"The reason it has been largely absent from the concert hall is its perceived status as unfinished: ever since its earliest, posthumous editions, scholars have sought to supplement its two fully completed movements, in E minor and E major, with additional music to complete a four-movement structure, with what I consider wholly unsatisfactory results. But playing it alongside Beethoven's op. 90 – and comparing the wonderfully mellifluous second movements in both works – I became convinced that Schubert's D. 566 did not have to be treated as a fragment, but rather as a perfect and assuredly sculpted two-movement sonata in the mould of Beethoven's."

- Program notes by Víkingur Ólafsson. And by Keith Horner, copyright © 2026

Víkingur Ólafsson

Piano

Víkingur Ólafsson is one of the most celebrated classical artists of our time; a unique and visionary musician who brings his profound originality to some of the greatest works in music history. His recordings resonate deeply with audiences around the world, reaching over one billion streams and winning numerous awards, including the 2025 Grammy for Best Classical Instrumental Solo for his album of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, *BBC Music Magazine* Album of the Year, and Opus Klassik Solo Recording of the Year (twice). Other notable honours include the Rolf Schock Music Prize, *Gramophone's* Artist of the Year, Musical America's Instrumentalist of the Year, the Order of the Falcon (Iceland's order of chivalry), as well as the Icelandic Export Award, given by the President of Iceland.

November 2025 saw Ólafsson present his latest album, *Opus 109*, which places Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30, op. 109 at its heart. In an illuminating and thrilling musical dialogue with Schubert, J.S. Bach, and other works by Beethoven, it traces the lineages that converge on this masterpiece of the piano literature. He tours the anticipated new program widely, bringing it to the greatest concert halls across Europe and North America, including this afternoon at Koerner Hall.

In 2025-26, Ólafsson opens the season and tours the US with Philharmonia Orchestra as Featured Artist, as well as returns to the Berlin Philharmonic with Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic with Sir Antonio Pappano. He also reunites with John Adams and the LA Philharmonic for performances of *After the Fall*, the piano concerto written expressly for him. Ólafsson will mark the Kurtág centenary celebrations in 2026 and appear as artist in residence at Cal Performances in Berkeley, California and at MUPA, Budapest.

Víkingur Ólafsson made his Conservatory debut on February 24, 2022, and this is his sixth performance in Koerner Hall.