

Seascapes, Reconciliation, and a Descent into Madness

Thursday, February 26, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Tugan Sokhiev, conductor · Noah Bendix-Balgley, violin · Bruno Delepelaire, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	MENDELSSOHN 1809–1847 <i>The Hebrides, Overture in B minor, Op. 26 ("Fingal's Cave")</i>	10'
2	BRAHMS 1833–1897 <i>Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 102 ("Double Concerto")</i>	33'
3	BERLIOZ 1803–1869 <i>Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14</i>	50'
TOTAL MUSIC		93'

Felix Mendelssohn

10 minutes

1809–1847

The Hebrides, Overture in B minor, Op. 26 ("Fingal's Cave")

THE COMPOSER

Felix Mendelssohn was born into one of the most cultivated families in Europe. His grandfather Moses was a celebrated philosopher of the Enlightenment; his father Abraham was a prosperous banker; his sister Fanny was a gifted composer in her own right. Baptized a Protestant in 1816, the young Felix received an extraordinary education in languages, art, philosophy, and music, studying piano with Ludwig Berger and composition with Carl Friedrich Zelter.

A child prodigy who gave his first public performance at age nine, Mendelssohn composed his miraculous overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at seventeen. But he was equally important as a conductor and cultural advocate: his 1829 Berlin performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a landmark event, was instrumental in reviving interest in Bach's music. As music director in Leipzig from 1835, he built the Gewandhaus Orchestra into one of Europe's finest ensembles and founded the Leipzig Conservatory in 1843.

Mendelssohn's music combines Classical clarity with Romantic expressiveness. His essentially conservative tastes set him apart from more radical contemporaries like Liszt, Wagner, and Berlioz, yet his orchestral writing, particularly his handling of color and atmosphere, was highly influential.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the summer of 1829, the twenty-year-old Mendelssohn embarked on a walking tour of Scotland with his friend Karl Klingemann. Having just made a successful London debut, he was free to indulge his passion for landscape painting and to absorb the wild scenery that had inspired Walter Scott and Ossian.

The two travelers crossed to the uninhabited Isle of Staffa to visit Fingal's Cave, a spectacular sea cave with hexagonal basalt columns and extraordinary acoustics. The Hebrides overwhelmed the composer. He wrote to his sister Fanny, enclosing the opening bars of an orchestral work: "In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, I send you the following, which came into my head there."

But Mendelssohn was a perfectionist, and the overture went through multiple revisions before he was satisfied. He completed the score in Rome in December 1830, but continued to revise it before its premiere. The premiere took place in London on May 14, 1832, on the same program as his other famous overture, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The work's title has caused confusion from the beginning. Mendelssohn originally called it "The Lonely Island," then "The Hebrides," but in 1834 the publisher Breitkopf & Härtel issued it as "Fingal's Cave," and both names stuck.

What to listen for tonight:

- **The opening theme:** The famous melody that came to Mendelssohn in the Hebrides: a gently rolling figure in the violas, cellos, and bassoons that immediately conjures the swell and surge of northern seas.
- **Orchestral color:** Though Mendelssohn uses a modest orchestra, his handling of instrumental texture is masterly. Listen for the way wind and string choirs alternate and combine, painting the cave's echoing spaces and the crash of waves against rock.
- **Atmosphere over narrative:** Unlike Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* later on this program, the Hebrides Overture tells no story. Instead, Mendelssohn aims to capture a mood, a place, a moment: the lonely grandeur of the Scottish coast.

Johannes Brahms

1833–1897

Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 102 (*"Double Concerto"*)

THE COMPOSER

Johannes Brahms was born on May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, into a family of modest means. His father, a jobbing musician who played horn and double bass in taverns and dance halls, gave him his first lessons; later, the talented boy studied with the distinguished teacher Eduard Marxsen. Stories that the young Brahms played piano in Hamburg's waterfront bars to help support his family are persistent, but they rest on anecdote, and many modern scholars doubt them.

Brahms's life changed dramatically in 1853 when, at age twenty, he met the violinist Joseph Joachim, who introduced him to Robert and Clara Schumann. Robert, recognizing genius, hailed Brahms in print in his article "Neue Bahnen" (New Paths) as the composer the age had been waiting for. When Robert's mental collapse led to his institutionalization and death, Brahms became devoted to Clara, remaining close to her for the rest of his life, though the exact nature of their relationship remains one of music history's enduring mysteries.

In 1863, Brahms settled in Vienna, which would be his home until his death. A lifelong bachelor, gruff and sometimes tactless but capable of great tenderness, he became the acknowledged master of symphonic and chamber music in the second half of the nineteenth century. His four symphonies, two piano concertos, this violin concerto, and vast quantities of chamber music and songs represent the culmination of the Classical-Romantic tradition. He died of cancer on April 3, 1897, just weeks after attending a performance of his Fourth Symphony.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Double Concerto, completed in 1887, was Brahms's final orchestral work and carried a private purpose beyond its musical aims. For more than thirty years, the violinist Joseph Joachim had been one of Brahms's closest friends and most important musical collaborators. But their relationship had ruptured in the early 1880s when Joachim's marriage to the mezzo-soprano Amalie collapsed. Brahms, fond of Amalie, sided with her, and the wounded violinist broke off contact.

Years of estrangement passed. Then Brahms saw an opportunity: he would write a concerto for both violin and cello, with the cello part for Robert Hausmann, as a peace offering to Joachim. The concerto even incorporates the musical motif A–E–F, a permutation of F–A–E (*Frei aber einsam*, "free but lonely"), Joachim's personal motto.

The gesture worked. The premiere took place in Cologne on October 18, 1887, with Joachim and Hausmann as soloists and Brahms conducting. The friendship was restored. Clara Schumann wrote in her journal: “This concerto is a work of reconciliation; Joachim and Brahms have spoken to each other again for the first time in years.”

Tonight two principals of the Berliner Philharmoniker, First Concertmaster Noah Bendix-Balgley and First Principal Cello Bruno Delepelaire, bring their own musical partnership to this profound and intimate work.

What to listen for tonight:

- **First movement (Allegro):** An orchestral introduction leads to an extended solo passage for the cello, almost a cadenza before the movement has properly begun. The violin joins, and the two instruments establish their dialogue. Throughout the movement, notice how Brahms gives both soloists equally important material, neither dominating.
- **Second movement (Andante):** A serene, song-like slow movement in D major. The two soloists intertwine in what has been described as one of Brahms’s most beautiful creations: intimate chamber music expanded to orchestral scale.
- **Third movement (Vivace non troppo):** A spirited finale in the Hungarian style Brahms loved. Listen for the rhythmic drive and the increasingly virtuosic interplay between the two soloists as the concerto builds to its exhilarating close.

Hector Berlioz

1803–1869

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14

THE COMPOSER

Hector Berlioz was music’s great revolutionary. Born in 1803 near Grenoble, he was expected to follow his father, a physician, into medicine and dutifully enrolled at the School of Medicine in Paris. But the lure of music proved irresistible.

Berlioz’s path was never easy. His independent mind and refusal to follow traditional rules put him at odds with the conservative Parisian musical establishment. He won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1830. Throughout his life his music was more appreciated abroad, in Germany, Britain and Russia, than at home. Yet his innovations in orchestration, program music, and musical narrative transformed the art form.

50 minutes

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Berlioz never studied the piano and played it haltingly at best. The orchestra was his instrument, and he expanded its expressive possibilities in ways no one had imagined.

ABOUT THE WORK

In September 1827, the twenty-three-year-old Berlioz attended a Paris performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and fell catastrophically in love. The object of his obsession was the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, playing Ophelia. He pursued her relentlessly, writing love letters that went unanswered. She refused even to meet him.

The *Symphonie fantastique*, composed in 1830, was nothing less than Berlioz's extravagant attempt to attract Harriet's attention. The full title, "Episode in the Life of an Artist: Fantastic Symphony in Five Parts," announces its autobiographical nature. The program, distributed to the audience, describes a young artist who, in the depths of despair over unrequited love, has poisoned himself with opium. The symphony depicts his hallucinations.

The premiere took place on December 5, 1830, at the Paris Conservatoire under François-Antoine Habeneck. Harriet heard a revised version in 1832, along with its sequel *Lélio*, and at last appreciated the strength of his feelings. The two met shortly afterward and married the following year. (The marriage proved unhappy; they separated in 1844.)

What to listen for tonight:

- **The idée fixe:** A single melody represents the beloved throughout all five movements, one of the first uses of a recurring theme to unify a symphony. Berlioz transforms it to match each movement's mood: tender in the first, glittering in the second, distorted into a vulgar dance tune in the fifth.
- **First movement (Rêveries, Passions):** The artist first sees the woman of his dreams. After a slow introduction depicting his restless melancholy, the *idée fixe* appears in full: elegant, yearning, consuming.
- **Second movement (Un bal):** A waltz at a ball. Harps lend the dance its glitter as the artist catches glimpses of his beloved in the crowd. The *idée fixe* floats through the whirling music.
- **Third movement (Scène aux champs):** A pastoral scene in the countryside. Two shepherds' pipes call and answer: an English horn on stage responds to an offstage oboe. Distant thunder rumbles at the close; the artist's solitude is unrelieved.

- **Fourth movement (Marche au supplice):** The artist dreams he has murdered his beloved and is marched to the scaffold for execution. The *idée fixe* appears briefly in the clarinet, a last thought of her, before the guillotine falls with a thunderous chord. The severed head drops into the basket.
- **Fifth movement (Songe d'une nuit du sabbat):** The most shocking movement in symphonic music up to that time. The artist finds himself at a witches' sabbath, surrounded by monsters and sorcerers gathered for his funeral. The beloved appears, but now transformed into a grotesque witch, her once-noble theme shrieking and cackling. Church bells toll; bassoons and tubas bray out the *Dies irae*, the medieval chant of the dead, in blasphemous parody. A demonic fugue whips the music into frenzy. Listen for the extraordinary orchestral effects: *col legno* (striking the strings with the wood of the bow) to evoke rattling bones; *sul ponticello* (bowing near the bridge) for an eerie, glassy tone.

Tonight's artists

Noah Bendix-Balgley *violin*

First Concertmaster

Bruno Delepelaire *cello*

First Principal Cello

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz**

Hector Berlioz, translated by David Cairns, Alfred A. Knopf 2002

Berlioz's own account of his life, as vivid as his music, including his obsession with the actress Harriet Smithson that fed the *Symphonie fantastique*.

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Berlioz**

Peter Bloom, Cambridge University Press 1998

A short, clear biography in the Cambridge Musical Lives series, a good first step before the *Symphonie fantastique* and the rest of Berlioz's work.

DEEPER **Berlioz, Volume One: The Making of an Artist**

David Cairns, University of California Press 2000

The first volume of David Cairns's two-volume biography, which follows Berlioz to 1832 and so covers the writing and first performance of the *Symphonie fantastique* in 1830.

SOURCES

1. Tugan Sokhiev conducts Berlioz' "Symphonie fantastique", Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/56397/>
2. Tugan Sokhiev conducts Berlioz's "Symphonie fantastique", Digital Concert Hall. <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/56397>
3. The Hebrides (overture), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hebrides_\(overture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hebrides_(overture))
4. Felix Mendelssohn, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Mendelssohn
5. Double Concerto (Brahms), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Concerto_\(Brahms\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Concerto_(Brahms))
6. Johannes Brahms, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Brahms
7. Programme Note: Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique* op. 14, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/hector-berlioz-symphonie-fantastique-op-14>
8. *Symphonie fantastique*, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphonie_fantastique
9. Hector Berlioz, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hector_Berlioz
10. The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780375413919>
11. The Life of Berlioz, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521485487>
12. Berlioz, Volume One: The Making of an Artist, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520221994>



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