

Knights Errant: From Wagner's Pilgrims to Strauss's Windmills

Thursday, March 5, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Daniel Harding, conductor · Diyang Mei, viola · Ludwig Quandt, cello

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	WAGNER 1813–1883 <i>Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg: Overture</i>	15'
2	HENZE 1926–2012 <i>Barcarola für großes Orchester</i>	20'
3	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Don Quixote, Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character, Op. 35</i>	42'
	TOTAL MUSIC	77'

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

15 minutes

Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg: Overture

THE COMPOSER

Richard Wagner transformed opera more radically than any composer before or since. Born in Leipzig in 1813, he grew up in a family steeped in theater and from an early age was drawn to the dramatic rather than the purely musical. Apart from a spell of lessons with the Leipzig cantor Theodor Weinlig, he was largely self-directed as a composer, absorbing Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller alongside Beethoven, developing a vision of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a “total work of art” synthesizing poetry, drama, music, and visual spectacle.

Wagner’s path was turbulent. An active participant in the 1849 Dresden uprising, he spent years in political exile, fleeing creditors and nursing turbulent love affairs. Yet his genius attracted patrons, most notably the eccentric King Ludwig II of Bavaria, whose financial support made possible Wagner’s ultimate achievement: the construction of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth, a theater designed specifically for his works. There, in 1876, his monumental four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* received its first complete performance.

Wagner's musical innovations (the seamless orchestral flow, the system of *leitmotifs* or recurring themes associated with characters, objects, or ideas, and the extreme chromaticism that strained the boundaries of tonality) influenced virtually every composer who followed, from Strauss and Mahler to Schoenberg and beyond.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tannhäuser, Wagner's fifth opera, premiered in Dresden on October 19, 1845, with the composer conducting. The work draws on three medieval legends: the story of the minnesinger knight Tannhäuser, ensnared by the goddess Venus; the historical Wartburg singing contest; and the life of St. Elisabeth of Hungary.

The opera tells of a knight torn between sacred and profane love, between the pure Elisabeth and the sensual Venus, who has kept him captive in her underground realm. The famous overture was written last; Wagner completed the full score in April 1845. The Venusberg music cost him dearly: by his own account he was "very much troubled by excitability" while sketching it.

The overture functions as a complete tone poem, presenting the opera's central conflict in purely musical terms. In broad terms, the opening Pilgrims' Chorus represents the path of redemption through faith and repentance; the Venusberg music that follows evokes the seductive, forbidden pleasures that tempt Tannhäuser; the triumphant return of the Pilgrims' theme at the close signals the victory of the sacred over the profane.

Wagner remained dissatisfied with *Tannhäuser* throughout his life. He revised it repeatedly, most substantially for the 1861 Paris production, and three weeks before his death Cosima noted in her diary that he said he still owed the world *Tannhäuser*.

What to listen for tonight:

- **The Pilgrims' Chorus:** The overture opens with this solemn, chorale-like theme in the brass and woodwinds, evoking medieval pilgrims on their journey to Rome. It approaches, swells to a mighty outpouring, then recedes into the distance.
- **The Venusberg music:** As the pilgrims fade, seductive, chromatic music emerges: flickering strings and sinuous woodwinds. This is the realm of dangerous pleasure, of Tannhäuser's captivity.
- **Tannhäuser's hymn:** Rising out of the Venusberg music, a passionate melody represents the knight's own voice: his rapturous praise of Venus that will later damn him.

- **The triumphant return:** After the Venusberg music reaches its frenzied climax, the Pilgrims' Chorus returns in overwhelming glory, the full orchestra proclaiming the ultimate triumph of redemption.

Hans Werner Henze

20 minutes

1926–2012

Barcarola für großes Orchester

THE COMPOSER

Hans Werner Henze was one of the most significant and prolific composers of the late twentieth century. Born in Gütersloh, Westphalia, in 1926, he came of age in Nazi Germany: enrolled in the Hitler Youth as a boy, conscripted in 1944, and taken prisoner by the British before the war's end. These experiences, combined with his homosexuality (then criminalized in Germany), drove him into permanent exile in Italy from 1953, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Henze's music defies easy categorization. Having studied briefly with the serialists at Darmstadt, he rejected their dogmatism in favor of a freely eclectic style drawing on serialism, tonality, Stravinsky, Italian opera, Arabic music, and jazz. His vast output includes ten symphonies, numerous operas and ballets, concertos, and chamber works. Major successes came at the Salzburg Festival with *Die Bassariden* (1966) and *L'Upupa* (2003).

In the 1960s, Henze became politically radicalized, joining the Italian Communist Party and spending 1969–70 teaching in Cuba. Yet his political convictions never simplified his music, which remained as rich and complex as his own contradictory life. He died in Dresden in 2012, aged eighty-six.

The Berliner Philharmoniker first played his *Barcarola* in 1982 under the composer's own baton.

ABOUT THE WORK

Henze wrote the *Barcarola* in the summer of 1979 on a commission from the Tonhalle-Gesellschaft Zürich, and Gerd Albrecht conducted the premiere in Zurich on April 22, 1980. It came out of a difficult period in the composer's life, overshadowed by illness and by the deaths of close friends, among them the film director Luchino Visconti and the composer Paul Dessau. The low D-flat (in German, *Des*) on which the piece begins is a musical nod to Dessau's name.

A barcarole is traditionally a Venetian boat song, rocking gently in 6/8 time, and Henze's work is indeed "water music", but of a dark and mysterious kind. The boat here belongs to Charon, the ferryman who in Greek mythology carries the souls of the dead across the river Styx.

Henze described how the “musical material is transformed, altered and developed in a way one might compare to the mental processes in the mind of a dying person.”

The musical language draws on twelve-tone technique and sharp dissonance, yet the piece stays direct and expressive. Henze also plants familiar landmarks, which he called “bridges of communication” for the listener: the *Eton Boating Song* surfaces in the harps, and there is an allusion to the prelude of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*.

The Berliner Philharmoniker first performed the work in March 1982, with Henze himself conducting.

What to listen for tonight:

- **The opening:** The deep D-flat at the start, Henze’s greeting to his late friend Paul Dessau.
- **The boat song:** Listen for the gentle, rocking rhythm of the barcarole as it surfaces, is transformed, and sinks again.
- **Familiar echoes:** The *Eton Boating Song* in the harps and a glimpse of Wagner’s *Tristan*, moments of recognition in an otherwise dark landscape.
- **Fragments of memory:** Musical ideas flare up and disappear like memories glimpsed by a dying traveler, colorful phenomena on the horizon of consciousness.
- **The crossing:** Follow the long arc of the journey as the music moves toward the far shore.

Richard Strauss

42 minutes

1864–1949

Don Quixote, Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character, Op. 35

THE COMPOSER

Richard Strauss was the heir to Wagner and Liszt, the composer who carried the late Romantic tradition into the twentieth century. Born in Munich in 1864, the son of the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, he received a conservative musical education before an encounter with Alexander Ritter, a violinist married to one of Wagner’s nieces, converted him to the “music of the future.”

Between 1889 and 1898, Strauss composed a series of tone poems that made him the most famous composer in Germany: *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. Each pushed the orchestra to new extremes of virtuosity and expres-

sion. Then he turned to opera, creating the scandalous *Salome* (1905), the shattering *Elektra* (1909), and the nostalgic masterpiece *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Strauss lived long: through two world wars, the Nazi era, and the destruction of the German musical culture he had embodied. His late works, including the *Metamorphosen* for strings and the *Four Last Songs*, are elegies for a lost world. He died in 1949, shortly after completing those final songs.

ABOUT THE WORK

Don Quixote was composed in Munich in 1897 and premiered in Cologne on March 8, 1898. It is often paired with *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life), which followed a year later. Where *Heldenleben* presents heroism straight, *Don Quixote* offers heroism tilted: the heroism of delusion, of magnificent folly, of a madman who believes himself a knight.

The literary source is Cervantes's novel, published in 1605 and 1615. Don Quixote de la Mancha is a Spanish gentleman who has read so many chivalric romances that he loses his wits and sets out to right wrongs and defend the helpless, accompanied by his earthy squire Sancho Panza. The adventures that follow are tragicomic: the knight attacks windmills he believes to be giants, mistakes a herd of sheep for an enemy army, and is repeatedly beaten and humiliated, yet never loses his faith in his mission.

Strauss represents Don Quixote with the solo cello, whose themes are noble and rueful; Sancho Panza is depicted by the solo viola, bass clarinet, and tenor tuba, in earthier, more comic music. The work is structured as a theme and ten variations, each depicting an episode from the novel, framed by an introduction and finale.

Tonight, two principals of the Berliner Philharmoniker take the solo roles: First Principal Cello Ludwig Quandt as the deluded knight, and First Principal Viola Diyang Mei as his pragmatic squire.

What to listen for tonight:

- **Introduction:** Don Quixote's mind clouds over in strange harmonies and muted colors. We hear his theme (noble, melancholy) and Sancho's (earthy, bumbling).
- **Variation I (The Windmills):** The most famous episode. Quixote charges the windmills he believes to be giants. Listen for the sails turning, and for the knight's tumble.

- **Variation II (The Sheep):** Quixote mistakes a flock of sheep for an enemy army. Dissonant flutter-tonguing in the brass imitates the bleating, an early instance of this extended technique and a vivid depiction of the knight's delusion.
- **Variation III (Dialogue):** A conversation between knight and squire, the cello and viola trading phrases almost like an opera without words.
- **Variation VII (The Flight):** Blindfolded and mounted on a wooden hobby horse, Quixote and Sancho believe they are flying through the air. An offstage wind machine creates the illusion.
- **Variation X (The Defeat):** A neighbor disguised as "The Knight of the White Moon" defeats Quixote in a duel, breaking the spell of his madness.
- **Finale (The Death of Don Quixote):** Restored to sanity, the knight returns home to die. The cello plays his theme one last time, then slides slowly downward, a last quiver and a final breath, and disappears into silence.

DANIEL HARDING, CONDUCTOR

Daniel Harding was born in Oxford in 1975 and has enjoyed one of the most remarkable conducting careers of his generation. His path to the podium was unconventional: at seventeen he assembled musicians to perform Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and sent a recording to Simon Rattle. So impressed was Rattle that he hired the teenager as his assistant at the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra for the 1993-94 season. Harding has said that he has never had formal conducting lessons.

His relationship with the Berliner Philharmoniker stretches back nearly three decades; he first conducted the orchestra at twenty-one, and in 1996 he became the youngest conductor ever to appear at the BBC Proms. Harding was Chief Conductor of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra from 2007 to 2025 and was appointed Music Director of the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia beginning with the 2024–2025 season. He was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 2021.

Perhaps most remarkably, Harding leads a dual life as a commercial airline pilot: since 2022 he has flown Airbus aircraft on medium-haul routes for Air France for about one week a month.

DIYANG MEI, VIOLA

Diyang Mei was born in Hunan, China, and began playing the violin at five, thanks to his grandfather's love of music. At ten, on the suggestion of his teacher Shaowu Wang at Beijing's Central Conservatory, he switched to the viola, drawn to the instrument's "dark and mysterious sound." As a boy he also watched a television documentary about Herbert von Karajan and the Berliner Philharmoniker, and from that moment dreamed of one day joining this legendary orchestra.

That childhood dream became reality in October 2022, when Mei was appointed 1st Principal Viola of the Berliner Philharmoniker after three years as principal viola of the Munich Philharmonic. His path there included studies in Beijing, in Munich with Hariolf Schlichtig, and at the Kronberg Academy with Nobuko Imai, along with a spectacular competition career: First Prizes at the ARD International Music Competition (2018), the Berlin International Max Rostal Competition (2015), and the International Johannes Brahms Competition (2012).

Mei performs on an Antonio Mariani viola from 1646, on loan from a private collection. Tonight he takes on the role of Sancho Panza in Strauss's *Don Quixote*.

LUDWIG QUANDT, CELLO

Ludwig Quandt was born in Ulm and grew up in a musical household. When he was six, Schubert's *Trout Quintet* captivated him, and he went on to choose the cello. He studied in Lübeck with Arthur Troester, first principal cellist of the Berliner Philharmoniker from 1935 to 1945, creating a direct link to the orchestra's storied past.

Quandt joined the Berliner Philharmoniker in April 1991 and later became 1st Principal Cellist, the very position his teacher had once held. His awards include prizes at the ARD Competition, the Brahms Competition in Hamburg, and the "Premio Stradivari" competition in Cremona.

He performs on a 1675 Francesco Ruggieri cello from Cremona, on loan from Deutsche Bank since 1993. Away from music, Quandt pursues interests in astronomy and dragonflies, and enjoys walking, cycling, and kayaking, though most of all he likes to spend time with his family.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Richard Strauss**

Bryan Gilliam, Cambridge University Press 1999

A concise biography in the Cambridge Musical Lives series that follows Strauss through his tone poems of the 1890s, Don Quixote among them.

ACCESSIBLE **Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music**

Alex Ross, Picador 2021

Alex Ross traces Wagner's influence on writers, artists and politics, starting from the French poets, Baudelaire first, who were captivated by Tannhäuser.

DEEPER **Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma**

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2006

A full-length biography of Strauss drawing on his letters and diaries, with discussion of Don Quixote and the other tone poems.

SOURCES

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4. Richard Wagner, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Wagner
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6. Hans Werner Henze, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Werner_Henze
7. Programme Note: Richard Strauss, Don Quixote, Symphonic Poem op. 35, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/richard-strauss-don-quixote-symphonic-poem-op-35>
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9. Richard Strauss, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Strauss
10. Daniel Harding, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Harding
11. Diyang Mei, 1st Principal Viola, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/about-us/orchestra/musicians/diyang-mei/>
12. Ludwig Quandt, 1st Principal Cello, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/about-us/orchestra/musicians/ludwig-quandt/>
13. The Life of Richard Strauss, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521570190>
14. Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781250800084>
15. Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521027748>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-03-05-harding>

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