

François-Xavier Roth conducts Strauss, Berlioz and Boulanger

Thursday, January 21, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

François-Xavier Roth, conductor · Véronique Gens, soprano · Julien Behr, tenor · Jean-Sébastien Bou, baritone

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Metamorphosen for 23 solo strings</i>	26'
2	BERLIOZ 1803–1869 <i>Roméo et Juliette, Op. 17: Roméo seul</i>	
3	BERLIOZ 1803–1869 <i>Roméo et Juliette, Op. 17: La Reine Mab, ou la Fée des Songes</i>	
4	BOULANGER 1893–1918 <i>Faust et Hélène</i>	30'
TOTAL MUSIC		56'

Richard Strauss

26 minutes

1864–1949

Metamorphosen for 23 solo strings

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 expression. 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

Richard Strauss was eighty when he wrote *Metamorphosen*, and the world he had lived in was being destroyed around him. In October 1943 the National Theatre in Munich was burned out in an air raid. It was the house where his father had played first horn for nearly half a century, and where Strauss himself had first heard an opera as a child. He wrote to his friend and biographer Willi Schuh that this was “the greatest catastrophe which has ever been brought into my life, for which there can be no consolation”. Soon afterwards he sketched a few bars of music under the heading “Mourning for Munich”.

Those sketches found a purpose when the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher commissioned a piece for strings. Strauss wrote out the score in a single month, beginning on 13 March 1945, the day after the Vienna State Opera was destroyed, and finishing on 12 April, a few weeks before the end of the war in Europe. Sacher conducted the first performance in Zurich on 25 January 1946, with the composer present.

The subtitle is “study for 23 solo strings”, and it is meant literally. There are ten violins, five violas, five cellos and three double basses, and each player has an individual part. The title comes from Goethe, whom Strauss was rereading at the time and who used the word for the slow transformation of living things. It describes the method as well: a handful of short themes are turned over, combined and changed across an unbroken span of about 25 minutes.

Strauss never said in so many words what the piece mourns, and listeners have argued about it since. The score itself offers one clue. In the final bars the lowest strings play the opening of the funeral march from Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony, and beneath it Strauss wrote two words: “IN MEMORIAM!”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece opens in the depths, with cellos and basses moving through a slow sequence of dark chords. Then the violas introduce the idea that haunts the whole work: a few repeated notes followed by a falling phrase in a halting, dotted rhythm. If it sounds half familiar, that is because it is very close to Beethoven’s funeral march, though Strauss keeps the full quotation back until the end.

The overall shape is slow, faster, slow. From the dark opening the music gradually gathers speed and warmth. New melodies appear in major keys and the texture grows more and more intricate, until all 23 lines are in motion at once. Listen for how often a solo violin or cello rises out of the web and sinks back into it. These brighter passages sound like memories, and each time the falling theme pulls the music back.

At the height of the fast central section the momentum breaks, and the opening tempo returns with full weight. The last pages are a long descent. When the cellos and basses finally state Beethoven's march plainly, under the theme that has been shadowing it all along, the connection is made, and the piece ends in C minor, very quietly.

Hector Berlioz

1803–1869

Roméo et Juliette, Op. 17: *Roméo seul*

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.

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

Hector Berlioz first saw *Romeo and Juliet* at the Odéon theatre in Paris in September 1827, given by a visiting English company. He knew almost no English, but the play overwhelmed him, and so did the Juliet, the actress Harriet Smithson, whom he later married. The idea of setting the story to music stayed with him for twelve years. The means to do it came at the end of 1838, when the violinist Nicolò Paganini, having heard *Harold en Italie*, sent him a gift of 20,000 francs. The money cleared his debts and bought him time to compose. Berlioz

wrote *Roméo et Juliette* in 1839 and conducted the first performance at the Paris Conservatoire on 24 November that year. The score is dedicated to Paganini.

He called the work a *symphonie dramatique*. It lasts about an hour and a half and uses solo singers and chorus, but they only narrate and comment. The lovers themselves never sing: Berlioz gives their scenes to the orchestra alone, arguing in his preface that instrumental music could express such feeling more freely than words. These purely orchestral movements are the core of the work, and they are often played on their own, as they are here.

The first of them carries a long title that amounts to a programme: *Roméo seul. Tristesse. Bruits lointains de concert et de bal. Grande fête chez Capulet* (Romeo alone. Sadness. Distant sounds of music and dancing. Great festivities at the Capulets’).

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The movement begins with the violins entirely alone, playing a slow, wandering, chromatic line: Romeo by himself, restless and melancholy. Other instruments join gradually, and from far away come fragments of a quick dance. Then a solo oboe sings a long, tender melody over a quiet pulse from the percussion, which keeps the rhythm of the distant ball going underneath. Berlioz had written this tune years earlier for one of his Prix de Rome cantatas and saved it for a better use.

The dance music draws closer and the tempo changes to *Allegro*: we are inside the Capulets’ ballroom, with the full orchestra in brilliant colours. The high point comes when Berlioz brings back the oboe’s melody, now given out at full volume by the wind and brass, and sets it on top of the whirling dance tune. Combining two themes in this way was a favourite device of his. The movement drives on over a repeating figure in the bass, pauses for a last, brief memory of the solo oboe, and ends in a blaze.

Hector Berlioz

1803–1869

Roméo et Juliette, Op. 17: La Reine Mab, ou la Fée des Songes

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ABOUT THE WORK

In Act One of Shakespeare's play, Romeo's friend Mercutio teases him with a long speech about Queen Mab, the fairies' midwife, who rides by night in a tiny chariot through the minds of sleepers and brings each of them the dream that suits them. Berlioz had wanted to turn this speech into an orchestral scherzo long before he wrote *Roméo et Juliette*. In his Memoirs he recalls mentioning the idea to Felix Mendelssohn in Rome in 1831, and then worrying that Mendelssohn, who had already written his overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, would get there first.

In the symphony the scherzo comes straight after the love scene, as a complete change of air. It is among the most difficult pieces Berlioz ever asked an orchestra to play, and he went on refining it: after hearing the symphony from the audience in Vienna in 1846 he gave the movement a new and longer ending.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The marking is *Prestissimo*, and almost everything is quiet. The strings play with mutes, divided into many parts, while the double basses are silent for long stretches, so that the music seems to have no weight at all. Short phrases dart between strings and woodwinds, break off in sudden silences and start again.

In the middle the pace relaxes. A plaintive melody floats over high, glassy harmonics from the violins and the harps. When the fast music returns it brings new colours with it. Listen near the end for a faint, bell-like chiming: these are antique cymbals, a pair of very small tuned cymbals that Berlioz specified for this movement. The scherzo vanishes as lightly as it arrived.

Lili Boulanger

30 minutes

1893–1918

Faust et Hélène

THE COMPOSER

Lili Boulanger was born in Paris in 1893 into a family of musicians. Her father, Ernest Boulanger, was a composer who taught singing at the Paris Conservatoire, her mother was a Russian singer, and her elder sister Nadia became one of the most influential composition teachers of the twentieth century. An illness in early childhood left Lili's health permanently damaged, and she worked for the rest of her life against chronic sickness. Gifted from the start, she sang for Gabriel Fauré as a small child, studied at the Conservatoire, and in 1913, at nineteen, became the first woman to win the Prix de Rome for composition, with the cantata *Faust et Hélène*. The prize brought a contract with the publisher Ricordi and a stay at the Villa Medici in Rome, cut short by illness and by the First World War, during which she and Nadia organised support for Conservatoire students serving at the front. Her music, which includes three psalm settings for chorus and orchestra, the song cycle *Clairières dans le ciel* and the paired orchestral pieces *D'un soir triste* and *D'un matin de printemps*, learned from Fauré and Debussy but has a dark intensity of its own. She died in 1918, aged 24.

ABOUT THE WORK

Faust et Hélène is the piece with which Lili Boulanger, aged nineteen, won the Prix de Rome in 1913. The prize was France's highest award for a young composer, with a list of winners that included Berlioz, Gounod, Bizet and Debussy, as well as her own father. No woman had ever taken the first prize. Her elder sister Nadia had tried several times without success, and Lili herself had entered in 1912 and had to withdraw because of illness.

The final round followed a fixed ritual. The competitors were shut away for about four weeks, each to set the same text as a cantata for three solo voices and orchestra. In 1913 the text was by Eugène Adenis, after the episode in the second part of Goethe's *Faust* in which Faust calls up the shade of Helen of Troy. Boulanger's setting won decisively. The jury praised its intelligence, feeling and orchestration,

and Claude Debussy, reviewing it, wrote that she was only nineteen but that her command of technique made her seem much older. The Italian firm Ricordi offered her a publishing contract.

The cantata lasts about half an hour. Its language is that of late Romanticism: there are clear echoes of Wagner, and the influence of Debussy and of her mentor Fauré in the harmony and the orchestral colour. What is striking is how assured it sounds, and how far it goes beyond the requirements of an examination piece. Boulanger had less than five years left to live. She died in March 1918, at 24.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The story is told in a single span. It begins with an orchestral prelude: Faust lies in troubled sleep, and Méphistophélès (baritone) sets spirits to watch over him. When Faust (tenor) wakes, he can think only of Helen, the most beautiful woman who ever lived, and demands that Méphistophélès bring her back from the dead. Méphistophélès complies.

Hélène (written for mezzo-soprano, sung here by a soprano) appears. At first she resists Faust: too many men have already died for her. The duet in which he wins her over is the centre of the work.

The ending is swift. Méphistophélès breaks in to say that Helen must return to the grave. The orchestra darkens as the ghosts of the Trojan War rise up, with Paris at their head, to claim her. Faust tries to fight for her, and is struck down.

Tonight's artists

Véronique Gens *soprano*

Véronique Gens sings Hélène in Boulanger's cantata, the shade of Helen of Troy called back from the dead.

Véronique Gens, born in Orléans in 1966, is a French soprano. She studied at the Paris Conservatoire and began her career in the 1980s in Baroque music with William Christie and Les Arts Florissants, going on to work with Marc Minkowski, René Jacobs, Christophe Rousset and Philippe Herreweghe. From that base she widened her repertoire to Mozart, notably Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, and then to the French repertoire, where she is known both on stage and as a singer of orchestral songs and *mélodies* by Berlioz, Fauré and Debussy. Her many recordings include Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été* and Canteloube's *Chants d'Auvergne*. She is a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur.

Julien Behr *tenor*

Julien Behr sings Faust.

Julien Behr is a French tenor. He took a master's degree in business law at the University of Lyon III before entering the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique in Lyon in 2005, graduating five years later with a first prize. In 2009 the French artists' society ADAMI named him its lyric revelation of the year, and he made his stage debut at the Aix-en-Provence Festival in the title role of Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers*. Mozart roles such as Tamino, Don Ottavio and Ferrando brought his first engagements, followed by bel canto parts and the French repertoire, including *Pelléas*, which he recorded with Les Siècles under François-Xavier Roth. He sang his first Alfredo in *La Traviata* in Turin in 2021 and released a solo album, *Confidence*, with the orchestra of the Opéra national de Lyon in 2018.

Jean-Sébastien Bou *baritone*

Jean-Sébastien Bou sings Méphistophélès, who summons Helen for Faust and then takes her away again.

Jean-Sébastien Bou is a French baritone. He studied with the soprano Mady Mesplé and at the Paris Conservatoire, and quickly made his name in the French repertoire, above all as Debussy's Pelléas, a role he first sang in 2000 and has performed on many stages since. His other parts range from Valentin in Faust and Escamillo in Carmen to Mozart's Don Giovanni and Rossini's Figaro, and he is a committed performer of new music, having taken part in operas by Pascal Dusapin, Philippe Boesmans and Thierry Escaich, including the title role of Escaich's Claude. He has appeared at the Opéra-Comique, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Opéra national du Rhin and the Aix-en-Provence Festival.

FURTHER READING

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

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2006

Kennedy's biography is especially good on Strauss's last years, the destruction of the opera houses and the writing of *Metamorphosen*.

ACCESSIBLE **The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz**

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

Berlioz tells the story himself: the night he discovered Shakespeare and Harriet Smithson, Paganini's gift, and the months in which he wrote *Roméo et Juliette*.

DEEPER **Nadia and Lili Boulanger**

Caroline Potter, Routledge 2016

A scholarly study of the two sisters and their music, with close attention to Lili's Prix de Rome and the style of *Faust et Hélène*.

SOURCES

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8. Program Notes: O Roméo, Roméo!, The Santa Fe Symphony. <https://santafesymphony.org/program-notes-o-romeo-romeo/>
9. Faust et Hélène, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faust_et_H%C3%A9l%C3%A8ne
10. Not of this world: A portrait of the composer Lili Boulanger, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/stories/portrait-of-the-composer-lili-boulanger>
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18. Véronique Gens, Lucerne Festival. https://www.lucernefestival.ch/en/program/directory-of-artists/veronique_gens/587
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25. Nadia and Lili Boulanger, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781138263512>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-01-21-roth>

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