

Sakari Oramo and Vilde Frang: Dean, Britten and Sibelius

Thursday, February 11, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Sakari Oramo, conductor · Vilde Frang, violin

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	DEAN b. 1961 <i>Phantoms: Scenes for Orchestra(s)</i>	
2	BRITTEN 1913–1976 <i>Violin Concerto, Op. 15</i>	32'
3	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82</i>	30'
	TOTAL MUSIC	62'

Brett Dean

b. 1961

Phantoms: Scenes for Orchestra(s)

THE COMPOSER

Brett Dean is an Australian composer, violist and conductor, born in Brisbane in 1961. After studying in Australia he moved to Germany, and from 1985 to 1999 he played the viola in the Berliner Philharmoniker. He began composing in 1988, at first as an arranger and through improvised work for radio and film projects, and his reputation grew with the ballet *One of a Kind* for the Nederlands Dans Theater and the clarinet concerto *Ariel's Music*. Since 2000 he has worked as a freelance composer. His best-known pieces include *Carlo* for strings and sampler, which takes the music of Carlo Gesualdo as its starting point, the orchestral work *Beggars and Angels*, the violin concerto *The Lost Art of Letter Writing* and the opera *Hamlet*. Many of his scores respond to literature or to visual art, among it the paintings of his wife, Heather Betts. He continues to perform as a violist and conducts his own music.

ABOUT THE WORK

Phantoms is new, and these concerts are its first performances. It was commissioned by the Berliner Philharmoniker Foundation from Brett Dean, who is the orchestra's Composer in Residence for the 2026/27 season. The connection is an old one. Dean played the viola in this orchestra for fourteen years before leaving in 1999 to compose full

time, and the orchestra says he likes to write pieces that are tailored to his former colleagues. *Phantoms* is the second of two scores commissioned for the residency. The first, *Conversations with Schumann* for soprano and orchestra, opened the season in September with the composer conducting.

The subtitle, *Scenes for Orchestra(s)*, explains the title. The piece is written for orchestra and electronics, and according to Dean's publisher, Boosey & Hawkes, the live Berliner Philharmoniker plays against an electronic "phantom" version of itself. Dean has worked on it with the Australian sound designer Bob Scott, who is credited in the programme with compositional assistance and sound design. The publisher's announcement describes Scott as recording an electronic double of the orchestra, devising the sound design and directing the live sound projection in the hall. The stated aim is the illusion of a concerto for two orchestras, one of them present and one of them not.

The Philharmonie itself is part of the plan. Loudspeakers, and some of the live players, are to be placed around the auditorium, whose terraces surround the stage on every side, so that sound reaches the listener from many directions and the two orchestras can answer each other across the room.

No further description of the music had been published when this guide was written, and what follows relies on those two announcements, not on the score.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The publisher says that *Phantoms* falls into four sections and that each of them, in the spirit of a concerto for orchestra, concentrates to some degree on a different family of instruments. The orchestra's own description speaks of a wild journey through the instrumental sections that gives the musicians plenty of chances to show what they can do. So one way to follow the piece is to notice which group has the foreground at any moment, and when the spotlight moves on.

The other thing to listen for is where the sound is coming from. With an electronic double of the same orchestra in play, there may be moments when it is hard to say whether a phrase was played on the stage or came from the speakers, and others where the two are deliberately set apart. The seat you are in will shape what you hear more than it does in most concerts.

Benjamin Britten

1913–1976

Violin Concerto, Op. 15

THE COMPOSER

Benjamin Britten, born in Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast in 1913, was the most important English composer since Purcell and the figure who, more than any other, restored opera to the centre of British musical life. A precocious talent who studied at the Royal College of Music, he found his early voice in collaboration with the poet W. H. Auden, and a lifelong subject in the loss of innocence. A committed pacifist and conscientious objector, he spent the first years of the Second World War in the United States before returning home in 1942 and seeking recognition as a conscientious objector, which he won on appeal; his convictions run like a thread through his music, from the early settings to the War Requiem. His breakthrough came in 1945 with the opera *Peter Grimes*, whose outsider hero and surging sea interludes made Britten's name overnight and announced a new era for English opera. To stage his subsequent works he and Pears set up what became the English Opera Group, and in 1948, with Pears and Eric Crozier, he founded the Aldeburgh Festival, which turned his small Suffolk town into one of the world's notable musical centres. His partnership with Pears, both personal and artistic and lasting nearly forty years, shaped a vast body of song, opera, and concert music written for that singular voice. In 1976 he became the first composer to be made a life peer, and he died at Aldeburgh that December.

ABOUT THE WORK

Benjamin Britten was in his mid-twenties when he wrote his only violin concerto, and the world it came out of was falling apart. He composed it in 1938 and 1939 for the Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa, a friend with whom he had played his *Suite for violin and piano* at the festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in Barcelona in 1936. Within months of that visit Spain was at civil war. Britten was a convinced pacifist, and commentators have long heard that war in this score: the Boston Symphony Orchestra's programme note calls the concerto his reaction to the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War.

By the time he finished it he had left England. In 1939 Britten left for North America with the tenor Peter Pears, and he completed the concerto in Quebec that year. The orchestra's own note dates the finished score to 29 September 1939, four weeks after the German invasion of Poland. Brosa gave the first performance at Carnegie Hall in New York in late March 1940, with the New York Philharmonic under John Barbirolli. The score is dedicated to Henry Boys, a friend from Britten's student years at the Royal College of Music.

The layout is unusual. There are three movements, played without a break, but the fast music sits in the middle and the weight falls on a slow finale. Prokofiev had used a similar plan in his First Violin Concerto. The finale is a passacaglia, a set of variations over a repeating bass line, and it is the first time Britten used a form he would return to for some of his most serious music. He looked at the concerto again in later years and made revisions, including changes to the solo part, without altering its structure.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Moderato con moto. The concerto begins with the timpani alone, tapping out a short rhythmic figure answered by a cymbal. That rhythm passes to the bassoon and never really leaves the movement. Over it the violin enters high up with a long, singing melody that keeps slipping between major and minor. A second idea is hard and martial, with the soloist striking out chords. The most striking moment comes when the roles are exchanged: the orchestral strings take over the opening melody, hushed, while the soloist plays the drum rhythm in plucked and strummed chords.

II. Vivace. A fierce, driving scherzo, one of several pieces from these years that Britten cast as a dance of death. In the quieter middle section listen for a strange passage in which piccolos whistle at the very top of the orchestra while a solo tuba climbs up from the bottom, with nothing in between. The movement ends in a long cadenza for the violin alone, which recalls the drum rhythm and the opening melody and leads straight into the finale.

III. Passacaglia: Andante lento. The trombones, silent until now, enter as the cadenza ends with the slow, rising and falling theme on which the finale is built. The variations that follow change character constantly: restless, biting, dance-like, then a broad march. At the close the music settles towards D, and the violin is left trilling between the two notes that would make the harmony major or minor. Britten leaves the question open, and the concerto ends on that uncertainty.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82

THE COMPOSER

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) is Finland’s greatest composer and one of the supreme symphonists of the twentieth century. His music, above all the seven symphonies and tone poems such as *Finlandia* and *Tapiola*, became inseparable from Finland’s emerging national identity during its struggle against Russian domination, and he was revered as a national hero in his own lifetime. His style evolved from late-Romantic richness toward an increasingly concentrated, organic and original conception of symphonic form, in which themes seem to grow and fuse like living things, shot through with the cold light and vast spaces of the Nordic landscape. Famously, after completing the Seventh Symphony, the incidental music to *The Tempest* and the tone poem *Tapiola* in the mid-1920s, he fell almost completely silent for the last thirty years of his life: the ‘silence of Järvenpää’.

ABOUT THE WORK

Jean Sibelius conducted the first performance of his Fifth Symphony in Helsinki on 8 December 1915, his fiftieth birthday, which Finland celebrated as a national occasion. The audience loved it. The composer did not, and what is played today is a different piece from the one heard that night. He withdrew the score, brought out a revised version exactly a year later, withdrew that too, and only reached the final form in 1919, when he conducted it in Helsinki on 24 November. In a letter of 1918 he described the symphony as “practically composed anew”.

The ideas had come to him in a rush in the autumn of 1914, in the first months of the First World War, which left him isolated and short of money. His diary from these months swings between despair and elation. “In a deep dell again,” he wrote that autumn, “but I already begin to see dimly the mountain that I shall certainly ascend. God opens his door for a moment and His orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony.” The following April he compared the work of sorting his sketches to being handed pieces of a mosaic thrown down from the floor of heaven and asked to work out the pattern.

The most famous diary entry is from 21 April 1915. Sibelius saw sixteen swans in flight, called it one of the great experiences of his life, and wrote down the theme that became the centre of the finale.

The revisions changed the shape of the whole. In 1915 the symphony had four movements. By 1919 Sibelius had fused the first two into one, so that a slow opening grows without a seam into a quick scherzo, and he had tightened the finale and rewritten its ending.

Around him, composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky were taking music apart. After the austere Fourth Symphony, Sibelius chose another route: the harmony of the Fifth is broadly traditional, and the novelty is in the way the form grows. The scholar James Hepokoski has described him at this time as sensing his own eclipse as a modernist.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Tempo molto moderato, Allegro moderato. The symphony opens with a soft horn call over a drum roll, answered by woodwinds in chirping thirds. Most of what follows can be traced back to these first bars. The music builds in long waves, darkens in a passage for solo bassoon over murmuring strings, and then, at a great brass climax, changes gear: the pulse shifts into a lilting three-in-a-bar and what was a slow movement has become a scherzo. This is the join Sibelius made in his revision. From here the tempo increases step by step to a headlong finish.

II. Andante mosso, quasi allegretto. A calm set of variations on a simple theme, first heard in plucked strings and flutes. It sounds artless, but partway through, in the background, there is a brief hint of the swinging figure that will dominate the finale.

III. Allegro molto. A rush of whispering strings sets the finale going. Then the horns begin a broad, tolling pattern of rising and falling notes, the theme Sibelius linked to his swans, and over it the woodwinds and strings sing a long melody. The swinging theme returns at the end, slower and grander, in the home key. The close is one of the strangest in any symphony: six separate chords, each followed by silence.

Tonight's artists

Vilde Frang *violin*

Vilde Frang knows this concerto from the inside: she recorded it for Warner Classics, paired with Korngold's concerto, with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony under James Gaffigan. Britten's solo part asks for more than brilliance. Much of it lies very high and very quiet, and the long final pages depend on a player who can hold a line at the edge of silence, which is the kind of playing Frang is admired for.

Vilde Frang is a Norwegian violinist, born in 1986. She was twelve when Mariss Jansons engaged her to play with the Oslo Philharmonic. She studied at the Barratt Due Institute of Music in Oslo, then with Kolja Blacher in Hamburg and with Ana Chumachenco at the Kronberg Academy, and she was a scholarship holder of the Anne-Sophie Mutter Foundation. A Borletti-Buitoni Trust fellowship in 2007 led to work with the pianist Mitsuko Uchida. In 2012 she received the Credit Suisse Young Artist Award, which brought her debut with the Vienna Philharmonic under Bernard Haitink at the Lucerne Festival. She now appears with the leading orchestras of Europe and the United States and is a frequent chamber musician at festivals such as Salzburg, Verbier and Lockenhaus. She records exclusively for Warner Classics, and her albums have won awards including the Edison Klassiek, the Diapason d'Or and the Gramophone Award. She plays the 1734 "Rode" Guarneri del Gesù.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century**

Paul Kildea, Allen Lane 2013

A full modern life of Britten that follows him through the late 1930s, the friendship with Antonio Brosa and the years in North America in which the Violin Concerto was finished and first played.

ACCESSIBLE **Sibelius**

Andrew Barnett, Yale University Press 2010

A clear, chronological life and works that sets out the three versions of the Fifth Symphony and the wartime circumstances in which Sibelius kept rewriting it.

DEEPER **Sibelius: Symphony No. 5**

James Hepokoski, Cambridge University Press 1993

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to this one symphony: its long revision, its form and Sibelius's place among the modernists of his day.

SOURCES

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11. Symphony No. 5 (Sibelius), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Sibelius\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Sibelius))
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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-02-11-oramo>

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