

Dima Slobodeniouk and Yo-Yo Ma: Dean, Schumann and Mendelssohn

Thursday, June 3, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Dima Slobodeniouk, conductor · Yo-Yo Ma, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEAN b. 1961 <i>Locket (version for chamber orchestra)</i>	
2	SCHUMANN 1810–1856 <i>Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 129</i>	25'
3	MENDELSSOHN 1809–1847 <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream, Op. 61: Excerpts</i>	
TOTAL MUSIC		25'

Brett Dean

b. 1961

Locket (version for chamber orchestra)

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

Brett Dean, the Berliner Philharmoniker's Composer in Residence this season and a former violist of the orchestra, opens the evening with a short piece about remembering. The orchestra's programme lists it as

Locket, in a version for chamber orchestra, and its introduction to the concert calls it *Recollections: Locket*, a nostalgic work in which Dean quotes a theme by Clara Schumann.

Recollections is a set of six short movements that Dean wrote in 2006 for an ensemble of eight players: clarinet, horn, percussion, violin, viola, cello, double bass and piano. It was commissioned for the 2006 edition of the festival “Spannungen”, which is held in the power station (Kraftwerk) at Heimbach in Germany, and is dedicated to Lars Vogt and the festival’s musicians. The first performance took place there on 18 June 2006. *Locket* is the last of the six.

In his own note on the work, Dean says that *Recollections* is about aspects of memory, and about how fickle and misleading memory can be, making things rosier or bleaker than they were. Each title points to a different kind of reminiscence. Two of the movements, *Relic* and *Locket*, stand for older and more distant memories. In *Locket* he quotes a piano piece by Clara Schumann, which he identifies as a Romanza in A minor, and he describes the quotation as an artefact found beneath a layer of dust, in an attic perhaps, something that carries you back in time.

The choice of this movement suits the programme: Clara Schumann’s music is heard, at one remove, just before her husband’s Cello Concerto. We have found no published description of the chamber orchestra version beyond the orchestra’s own listing, so what follows describes the movement as Dean and its first reviewers present it.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the moment when an older music comes into focus. A critic at the first performance wrote that the last movement lets the quotation from Clara Schumann hover behind a veil of new sounds. Her melody is not presented plainly, the way a set of variations would state its theme. It is glimpsed through Dean’s own textures, as a keepsake might be recognised under the dust he mentions.

The title fits that image. A locket holds something small and private from the past, and the music treats its borrowed melody the same way, as something kept and briefly opened.

Robert Schumann

1810–1856

Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 129

THE COMPOSER

Robert Schumann was born on June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Saxony, into a literary household. His father was a publisher and bookseller, and throughout his life, Schumann remained as devoted to literature as to music, editing an influential music journal and writing eloquent criticism that championed Chopin, Berlioz, and the young Brahms.

After abandoning law studies in Leipzig, Schumann pursued a career as a concert pianist, but a growing weakness in the fingers of his right hand forced him to focus on composition. His piano works of the 1830s, including *Carnaval*, *Kreisleriana*, and *Kinderszenen*, established him as a leading voice of musical Romanticism. In 1840, after a long legal battle with her father, he married the celebrated pianist Clara Wieck, and their union sparked an extraordinary creative outburst: more than half of all Schumann's songs date from that single year.

Schumann's later years were shadowed by mental illness, which had plagued him intermittently since youth. In 1854, after attempting suicide, he was confined to an asylum near Bonn, where he died on July 29, 1856, at the age of forty-six.

ABOUT THE WORK

Schumann wrote his Cello Concerto in the autumn of 1850, very quickly, soon after he and his family had moved to Düsseldorf, where he had taken up the post of municipal music director. The first months there were productive ones. The “Rhenish” Symphony belongs to the same period.

He never heard the concerto. No performance could be arranged in his lifetime, and it was first played in 1860, four years after his death, with Ludwig Ebert as the soloist. For decades afterwards it remained little known. Part of the reason lies in what the piece declines to do. Schumann had no taste for display for its own sake, and although the solo part uses the whole instrument, it gives the cellist very little of the brilliant passagework that audiences of the time expected from a concerto. The music is inward and lyrical, and it asks to be listened to closely.

It is also unusual in shape. The three movements are short and run into one another without a break, so that the concerto unfolds as a single span of about twenty-five minutes. Ideas from the opening return later in new moods. The orchestra is modest in size, with pairs of woodwinds, horns and trumpets, timpani and strings, and it often plays like an enlarged chamber group around the soloist.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Nicht zu schnell (Not too fast). There is no long orchestral introduction. A few quiet chords in the woodwinds, and the cello enters at once with the main theme, a long, rising and falling melody. Much of the movement has the feeling of an improvised fantasy, with the soloist leading and the orchestra answering.

Langsam (Slowly). The brief slow movement is the heart of the concerto. The soloist sings over plucked strings and occasionally plays two notes at once. Listen for a second cello voice: Schumann has the orchestra's principal cellist join the soloist in a duet, an unusual and very tender touch.

Sehr lebhaft (Very lively). The finale is lighter and more resolute, with a march-like main theme. Near the end comes the concerto's only cadenza, and it too is unconventional, because the orchestra goes on accompanying the soloist instead of falling silent. It leads straight into the coda, where the music turns from A minor to a bright A major.

Felix Mendelssohn

1809–1847

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Op. 61: Excerpts

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

Mendelssohn wrote music for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* twice, at either end of his career. In 1826, aged seventeen, he composed an overture. It was a concert piece, complete in itself and not tied to any staging of the play.

Many years later the overture found its play. King Frederick William IV of Prussia commissioned him to write music for the whole play. The result was the incidental music Op. 61, composed for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that opened at Potsdam on 14 October 1843. Mendelssohn took his youthful overture as the starting point and added thirteen further numbers: interludes to be played between the acts, settings of the songs in the play, and short passages of music to accompany the action and the spoken text. He bound the new pieces to the old by drawing on themes from the overture throughout, so that music written by a boy of seventeen and music written by a man in his thirties sound like a single work.

The score calls for two solo women's voices and a women's chorus as well as the orchestra. The Berliner Philharmoniker perform excerpts, with a soprano, a mezzo-soprano and a choir; at the time of writing the orchestra had named neither the singers nor the numbers chosen. The notes below describe the movements most often heard in concert.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Scherzo. The first interlude, played after Act I. The first act is set in Athens, by day and among humans; this music opens the door to the forest, the night and the fairies. It is quick, light and dominated by chattering woodwinds.

"Ye spotted snakes". The song with chorus with which the fairies sing their queen, Titania, to sleep. This is one of the numbers that needs the singers.

Intermezzo. Played after Act II, as Hermia, abandoned in the wood, goes anxiously in search of Lysander. A restless little figure is passed between woodwinds and violins over trembling strings. Then the mood changes and a rustic march brings on Bottom and his fellow tradesmen.

Nocturne. Music for the sleeping lovers at the end of Act III. The melody is given to a solo horn, supported by the bassoons.

Wedding March. The interlude between the last two acts, and by a wide margin the most familiar music Mendelssohn wrote: it has accompanied weddings around the world ever since.

Finale. “Through this house give glimmering light”, for soprano and women’s chorus, in which the fairies bless the house. If the performance includes it, listen at the very end for the four woodwind chords that began the overture, which return to close the circle.

Tonight’s artists

Yo-Yo Ma *cello*

Yo-Yo Ma plays the Schumann concerto on all three evenings, 3, 4 and 5 June. The orchestra notes that he returns to the Berliner Philharmoniker after a long absence. The concerto gives its soloist little outward display. Its finest pages are a long song for the cello and, in the slow movement, a quiet duet with the orchestra’s own principal cellist.

Yo-Yo Ma is an American cellist, born in Paris in 1955 to Chinese parents. He began to learn the cello with his father at the age of four and moved with his family to the United States three years later. He studied at the Juilliard School in New York and then took a liberal arts degree at Harvard. He has appeared as a soloist with orchestras around the world and has made a very large number of recordings, among them recordings of Bach’s cello suites and chamber music with the pianist Emanuel Ax, a frequent partner. His curiosity reaches well beyond the classical repertoire: he founded the Silkroad collective, which brings together musicians from many traditions, and he has recorded with artists such as Bobby McFerrin and the bluegrass players of the Goat Rodeo Sessions. His honours include the Avery Fisher Prize (1978), the National Medal of Arts (2001), the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Polar Music Prize (2012) and the Birgit Nilsson Prize (2022), and he is a United Nations Messenger of Peace.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician**

John Worthen, Yale University Press 2010

A clear, sympathetic life of Schumann that follows him to Düsseldorf in 1850, the months in which the Cello Concerto was written, and through the years in which it went unperformed.

ACCESSIBLE **Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman**

Nancy B. Reich, Cornell University Press 2001

The standard life of Clara Schumann, pianist and composer: the right companion for an evening that begins with Brett Dean quoting one of her piano pieces and continues with her husband's concerto.

DEEPER **Mendelssohn: A Life in Music**

R. Larry Todd, Oxford University Press 2003

The fullest scholarly biography of Mendelssohn in English, with detailed accounts of both the 1826 overture and the music for the Potsdam production of 1843.

SOURCES

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4. Dean: Recollections (programme note by the composer), Yellow Barn. <https://www.yellow-barn.org/node/2369>
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13. Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300163988>
14. Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780801486371>
15. Mendelssohn: A Life in Music, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195110432>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-06-03-slobodeniouk>

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