

Alan Gilbert and Isabelle Faust: Brett Dean and Schumann's Second Symphony

Thursday, June 17, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Alan Gilbert, conductor · Isabelle Faust, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEAN b. 1961 <i>The Lost Art of Letter Writing</i>	38'
2	SCHUMANN 1810–1856 <i>Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61</i>	38'
TOTAL MUSIC		76'

Brett Dean

b. 1961

The Lost Art of Letter Writing

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's violin concerto began with a worry about handwriting. In the note he wrote for the score he observes that the art of letter writing is disappearing, and that writing by hand may itself be an endangered skill. Watching his daughters grow up surrounded by screens persuaded him that we are losing touch with the tactile side

38 minutes

of written communication. He cites an Australian newspaper report that personal letters had fallen from half of all the mail handled by Australia Post in 1960 to 13 per cent. We are in contact with one another more than ever, he concedes, but the nature of that contact has changed.

The concerto, completed in 2006, was commissioned jointly by the Cologne Philharmonie and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra for Frank Peter Zimmermann, to whom it is dedicated. Zimmermann gave the first performance in Cologne on 8 March 2007 with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. In 2009 the piece won the Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition, awarded by the University of Louisville.

Each of its four movements is headed by a few lines from a nineteenth-century letter, and each title gives the place and year in which that letter was written. The letters range from private declarations to a public manifesto. Dean explains that the violin acts as both writer and recipient, and that the solo part is meant above all to catch the mood of each letter.

‘Hamburg, 1854’ draws on what Dean calls one of the great secret romances of classical music: Johannes Brahms writing to Clara Schumann. ‘The Hague, 1882’ comes from Vincent van Gogh, who tells a fellow painter that the lasting beauty of nature is the one constant in his troubled and unsettled life. ‘Vienna, 1886’ quotes the composer Hugo Wolf, in a frank outpouring of feeling to someone close to him. ‘Jerilderie, 1879’ takes its cue from the Jerilderie Letter of Ned Kelly, the Australian outlaw, who set down in that small country town a public statement pleading the innocence of his family and of other poor Irish settlers in north-eastern Victoria, and demanding justice.

Two of the four correspondents were composers, and Dean lets their music into his own. The first movement borrows a texture from Brahms and threads part of one of his early works through the orchestra. The third grew out of a movement of Dean’s song cycle *Wolf-Lieder*, in which he had set the same passage from Wolf’s letter.

The piece is a full-scale concerto of more than half an hour, with a large orchestra that includes four percussionists, harp and two pianos, one of them prepared.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

‘Hamburg, 1854’. The opening bars are a murmur of rapid, oscillating notes. Dean took the figure from a brief passage in the slow movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony, an orchestral

texture he says has always fascinated him. It makes a rippling background against which the violin enters like someone sitting down to write, spinning a long, passionate line to a person who cannot return the feeling. Listen also for traces of Brahms's early Variations on a Theme of Schumann, which surface during the movement.

'The Hague, 1882'. This is the slow movement, broad and prayer-like, and the longest stretch of calm in the piece. The violin sings over quiet, slowly shifting harmonies, the musical counterpart of van Gogh's thought that nature stays beautiful whatever happens to the person looking at it.

'Vienna, 1886'. A short intermezzo, and the most song-like of the four, since it began life as a setting for voice. The solo violin takes over the singer's part.

'Jerilderie, 1879'. The finale is a desperate perpetuum mobile: the soloist hardly stops, and the music hurtles through passages of great virtuosity. Dean notes that for all its brilliance the movement never loses the sense of approaching catastrophe that hangs over Kelly's document.

Robert Schumann

38 minutes

1810–1856

Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61

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 sketched his C major symphony in about two weeks, in the second half of December 1845. Finishing it took most of the following year. The work of orchestration was interrupted again and again by poor health, including low spirits and a ringing in his ears, and the score was not ready until October 1846. Felix Mendelssohn conducted the first performance at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 5 November. It was received coolly, and did better when it was repeated some ten days later. Published in 1847 as Symphony No. 2, it was in fact the third symphony Schumann had completed.

It was also the first large work he wrote after a severe breakdown in 1844, which for a long time had left him unable to compose at all. Schumann himself linked the symphony to his illness. Three years later he told the Hamburg musician D. G. Otten that he had written it in December 1845 while still half sick, that he feared this could be heard in the music, that he began to feel himself again only while working on the finale, and that the piece reminded him of a dark time. Alan Gilbert, according to the Berliner Philharmoniker, calls the symphony a “musical autobiography”, shaped by Schumann’s love for his wife Clara and by his reverence for Bach.

Bach matters here. In 1845 Robert and Clara Schumann had worked their way through an intensive course of counterpoint together, studying fugues and writing their own, and Schumann said that from this year he began to compose in a different way, working ideas out in his head. The symphony shows it. Its themes are often conceived as two lines sounding together, and ideas from one movement turn up, transformed, in another.

The darkness Schumann heard in the piece is real but it does not win. The annotator John Daverio pointed out that for a work supposedly marked by sickness, the Second is fundamentally affirmative, and that its sombre moments serve mostly to set off the brighter music around them.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Sostenuto assai. Allegro, ma non troppo. The symphony begins quietly, with a solemn call in the brass over a slowly flowing line in the strings. Keep that brass motto in your ear: it returns at key moments later on. The fast music that grows out of the introduction is restless and driven, full of sharp dotted rhythms.

Scherzo: Allegro vivace. Schumann places the scherzo second. It is a whirl of rapid violin figuration, notoriously awkward to play, relieved by two calmer trio sections. At the very end the brass motto from the opening bursts in.

Adagio espressivo. The slow movement, in C minor, is the emotional centre: a long, aching melody introduced by the strings and taken up by the woodwinds. Schumann singled out the “melancholy bassoon” here as a sign of the dark period in which he wrote. Listen also for the high violin trills and for a contrapuntal middle passage, a trace of the Bach studies.

Allegro molto vivace. The finale sets off like a march, and soon sweeps up the melody of the Adagio in its rush. Partway through, the march gives way to a new, gentler theme, in which many listeners hear an echo of the last song of Beethoven’s cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved). In the closing pages Schumann combines this song-like theme with the brass motto from the very opening, and the symphony ends in a blaze of C major.

Tonight's artists

Isabelle Faust *violin*

Isabelle Faust plays Brett Dean's concerto on 17, 18 and 19 June, in the season in which Dean is the orchestra's Composer in Residence. The orchestra quotes the composer calling it a "pretty tricky piece" and describes it as tailor-made for Faust's precision and clarity. The solo part needs more than accuracy, though: the violin has to speak as the writer of four very different letters, from the private passion of the first movement to the headlong finale.

Isabelle Faust, born in Esslingen am Neckar in 1972, is a German violinist. She had her first lessons at five and later studied with Christoph Poppen and Dénes Zsigmondy. She won the Leopold Mozart Competition in Augsburg in 1987 and the Paganini Competition in Genoa in 1993, then spent nine years in Paris, where she made her first recording, of music by Bartók. Her repertoire is unusually broad. She plays Bach and Mozart, at times on Baroque-style instruments and bows, as readily as the concertos of Brahms and Berg or the music of Ligeti and Kurtág, and she has given the first performances of works by composers including Jörg Widmann and Péter Eötvös. The pianist Alexander Melnikov is her regular recital partner, and her many recordings for Harmonia Mundi have been widely honoured. She has been a professor of violin at the Berlin University of the Arts since 2004 and plays the 'Sleeping Beauty' Stradivarius of 1704.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Schumann: The Faces and the Masks**

Judith Chernaik, Vintage 2019

A lively recent life of Schumann for general readers, which follows him through the breakdown of 1844 and the slow recovery out of which the Second Symphony came.

ACCESSIBLE **Johannes Brahms: A Biography**

Jan Swafford, Vintage 1999

Brett Dean's concerto opens with the young Brahms writing to Clara Schumann in 1854. Swafford's biography tells the story of that attachment, and of Brahms's place in the Schumann household, at length.

DEEPER **Robert Schumann: Herald of a "New Poetic Age"**

John Daverio, Oxford University Press 1997

The standard scholarly study of Schumann's life and music in English, by the author of one of the programme notes drawn on here; it covers the counterpoint studies of 1845 and the Second Symphony.

SOURCES

1. Alan Gilbert and Isabelle Faust, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/57182/>
2. Brett Dean: The Lost Art of Letter Writing, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/music/Brett-Dean-The-Lost-Art-of-Letter-Writing/51444>
3. The lost art of letter writing: for violin and orchestra, by Brett Dean, Australian Music Centre. <https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/product/the-lost-art-of-letter-writing-for-violin-and-orchestra>
4. Brett Dean wins 2009 Grawemeyer Award, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/cr/news/Brett-Dean-wins-2009-Grawemeyer-Award/11711>
5. Brett Dean, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brett_Dean
6. Symphony No. 2 (Schumann), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Schumann\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Schumann))
7. Schumann: Symphony No. 2, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/symphony-no-2-schumann>
8. Robert Schumann: Symphony No. 2 in C major, op. 61, Aspen Music Festival and School. https://www.aspenmusicfestival.com/program_notes/view/schumann-symphony-no.-2-in-c-major-op.-61
9. Schumann's Symphony No. 2, The Orchestra Now (Bard College). <https://ton.bard.edu/schumanns-symphony-no-2/>
10. Schumann: The Faces and the Masks, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781101974254>
11. Johannes Brahms: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780679745822>
12. Robert Schumann: Herald of a "New Poetic Age", Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195091809>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-06-17-gilbert>

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