

On Tour in Boston: Beethoven's Violin Concerto with Maxim Vengerov, and Ein Heldenleben

Thursday, March 11, 2027 · 19:30 · Symphony Hall
Antonio Pappano, conductor · Maxim Vengerov, violin

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61</i>	42'
2	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		87'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61

42 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven composed his only violin concerto in 1806. He wrote it for Franz Clement, one of the leading violinists in Vienna, who had given him useful advice on his opera *Fidelio*. Clement played it at the Theater an der Wien on 23 December 1806, at a benefit concert for himself.

By all accounts the score was finished at the last minute, so late that Clement is said to have played part of the solo more or less at sight. Stories also survive of the entertainment he added to the evening, a piece of his own played on one string with the violin held upside down; the accounts differ on whether this came between the movements of the concerto or at the end of the concert. Whatever happened, the premiere made little impression, and for nearly forty years the concerto was seldom played. It was on a larger scale than any violin concerto before it, a good deal longer than Mozart's, and its solo part, for all its difficulty, offers the player few chances for display.

Its fortunes changed in London in 1844, when the twelve-year-old Joseph Joachim performed it with the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society under Mendelssohn. Joachim kept it in his repertoire for the rest of a long career, and since then it has stood at the centre of the violin repertoire.

What sets the concerto apart is its calm. Beethoven's middle-period works are often thought of as music of struggle, but here the prevailing mood is spacious and lyrical, and the soloist spends much of the time decorating the orchestra's themes with scales, arpeggios and trills high above them. Commentators have traced some of its features, including the drum-taps of the opening, to the French violin school of Viotti, Rode and Kreutzer that Beethoven admired. He left no cadenzas for the violin. Many players have supplied their own, and those by Joachim and by Fritz Kreisler are the ones most often heard.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement. Four soft taps on the timpani, alone, begin the concerto, and the woodwind answer with a serene hymn-like phrase. That drum rhythm is the seed of the whole movement: listen for it passing to the violins, the horns and the trumpets, sometimes as a whisper and sometimes with the full orchestra's weight. The orchestra sets out all the themes before the soloist plays a note. When the violin does enter it rises from the depths in broken octaves, as if improvising, and climbs to the top of its range. The quietest and most affecting passage comes in the middle of the movement, where the violin muses in the minor over soft drum-taps from the horns. After the cadenza the soloist plays the second theme very simply, low on the instrument, over plucked strings.

Second movement. Muted strings state a short, grave theme, and what follows is a set of variations in which the theme mostly stays with the orchestra while the violin embroiders around it. Midway the soloist introduces a new melody of its own, one of the stillest moments in Beethoven. The movement does not end: a sudden loud gesture from the strings and a brief cadenza lead straight into the finale.

Third movement. The violin announces the rondo theme on its lowest string, a bouncing tune like a hunting call, and repeats it at once two octaves higher. The episodes between its returns include a plaintive minor-key melody shared with the bassoon. After the final cadenza Beethoven plays games with the theme, sending it through distant keys before two abrupt chords end the piece.

Richard Strauss

45 minutes

1864–1949

Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40

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

Ein Heldenleben ('A Hero's Life') is the largest of the tone poems Richard Strauss wrote in the 1890s, and he was 34 when he finished it. In July 1898 he wrote from a Bavarian mountain resort that, since Beethoven's 'Eroica' was so unpopular with conductors and so rarely played, he was filling the gap with a long tone poem on a similar sub-

ject: ‘It is entitled A Hero’s Life, and while it has no funeral march, it does have lots of horns, horns being quite the thing to express heroism.’ The joke tells you a good deal about the tone of what followed. He completed the score at the end of December and conducted the first performance himself in Frankfurt on 3 March 1899. The dedication went to the young Willem Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam.

Strauss worked on the piece alongside Don Quixote and thought of the two as companions: one a comic study of a deluded knight, the other a portrait of a hero taken, at least on the surface, at his own valuation. Who that hero is has been argued over ever since. Strauss gave no programme beyond titles for the six sections, and he was evasive when asked whether he had painted himself. The music is less discreet. The hero’s companion is a portrait of the composer’s wife, Pauline; his adversaries are plainly the critics; and when the hero looks back on his ‘works of peace’, what we hear are themes from Strauss’s own earlier scores. Early reviewers took the point and some were furious, one calling the piece ‘as revolting a picture of this revolting man as one might ever encounter’. Later writers have been more inclined to hear irony in it, and to notice that this hero ends by turning away from the world towards private life.

It asks for an enormous orchestra, with eight horns, five trumpets, two tubas and two harps, and it plays without a break for about three quarters of an hour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The six sections run into one another, but each has a clear character.

The Hero. The piece opens with its main theme, a long, striding melody for horns and cellos that climbs through nearly three octaves in E flat major, the key of the ‘Eroica’. Other ideas pile up around it until the whole orchestra stops on an expectant, unresolved chord, followed by silence.

The Hero’s Adversaries. Into the silence come the critics: thin, chattering woodwind, each instrument carping in its own register, with two tubas grumbling in the parallel fifths that students of harmony are taught to avoid. The hero’s theme sinks into the minor before he shakes them off.

The Hero’s Companion. A solo violin, played by the orchestra’s leader, enters with a long sequence of cadenzas, by turns flirtatious, tender, sulky and scolding. The hero answers in the

low strings and horns. Eventually the two come together in a broad love scene, the most richly scored music in the work, with the critics briefly audible in the distance.

The Hero's Deeds of War. Trumpets sound from offstage and the battle begins. Percussion drives the music on, and the hero's theme fights its way through against the adversaries' music, with the companion's at his side. It ends with the opening theme returning in triumph.

The Hero's Works of Peace. Here Strauss quotes himself. Fragments of Don Juan, Also sprach Zarathustra, Death and Transfiguration, Don Quixote and Till Eulenspiegel, among others, drift past, woven together so smoothly that they can be hard to pick out one by one.

The Hero's Retreat from the World and Fulfilment. After a last outburst of anger the music settles. The hero's rising theme is reshaped into a slow, falling melody for the strings, the most touching passage in the score, and the work closes quietly in E flat major, a long way from the swagger with which it began.

Tonight's artists

Maxim Vengerov *violin*

The LSO's visit to Symphony Hall is its first to Boston since 2009. Maxim Vengerov has been playing the Beethoven concerto with Sir Antonio Pappano and the orchestra since February, in the bicentenary year of the composer's death; elsewhere on the tour it is followed by Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony, but in Boston the second half is Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*. The two fit together more closely than they might seem to: Strauss conceived his tone poem as an answer to Beethoven's 'Eroica', and it has a solo violin part of its own, played from the leader's chair.

Maxim Vengerov, born in Novosibirsk in 1974, is a Soviet-born Israeli violinist and conductor. The son of an oboist and a choir director, he began the violin at five with Galina Turchaninova and went on to study with Zakhar Bron. At ten he won the junior Wieniawski competition, and in 1990, at fifteen, the Carl Flesch Competition in London, which opened the way to an international career and a long series of recordings; these have brought him a Grammy and two Gramophone Awards among other prizes. In 1997 he became the first classical musician to be named an International Goodwill Ambassador by UNICEF. He has also built a second career as a conductor, becoming the first chief conductor of the Menuhin Festival Gstaad Orchestra in 2010. Teaching occupies much of his time: he is a professor at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg and, since 2016, Polonsky Visiting Professor of Violin at the Royal College of Music in London.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

A full and readable life of Beethoven that sets the Violin Concerto among the extraordinary run of works he completed in 1806.

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Richard Strauss**

Bryan Gilliam, Cambridge University Press 1999

A short, clear biography by a leading Strauss scholar, good on the Berlin years around Ein Heldenleben and on why the piece is more than self-advertisement.

DEEPER **Beethoven: Violin Concerto**

Robin Stowell, Cambridge University Press 1998

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the concerto alone: its origins with Franz Clement, the tangled textual history, the cadenzas and two centuries of performance.

SOURCES

1. London Symphony Orchestra, 11 March 2027, Vivo Performing Arts. <https://www.vivoperformingarts.org/productions/london-symphony-orchestra/>
2. Press Release: The LSO announces its 2026/27 season, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/press-release-the-lso-announces-its-2026-27-season/>
3. Beethoven and Shostakovich: Sir Antonio Pappano and Maxim Vengerov, 21 February 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/beethoven-and-shostakovich-21-feb-27/>
4. Violin Concerto (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violin_Concerto_(Beethoven))
5. Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61, LA Phil. <https://www.laphil.com/works/violin-concerto-in-d-major-op-61>
6. Ein Heldenleben, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein_Heldenleben
7. Strauss: Ein Heldenleben, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/strauss-ein-heldenleben>
8. Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/323/ein-heldenleben-op-40>
9. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
10. The Life of Richard Strauss, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521570190>
11. Beethoven: Violin Concerto, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521457750>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-03-11-pappano>

Version 1, 7 October 2026