

Nosedá Conducts Schnittke's First Cello Concerto and the Complete Firebird

Sunday, May 16, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Gianandrea Nosedá, conductor · David Cohen, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	SCHNITTKE 1934–1998 <i>Cello Concerto No. 1</i>	38'
2	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>"L'Oiseau de feu" (The Firebird), Ballet Music (complete)</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		83'

Alfred Schnittke

1934–1998

Cello Concerto No. 1

THE COMPOSER

Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998) was a Russian composer of German and Jewish descent, born in Engels on the Volga. He had his first music lessons as a boy in Vienna, where his father was posted after the war, studied at the Moscow Conservatory and taught there until 1972, and for years earned much of his living writing film scores. From the First Symphony and the first Concerto Grosso onwards he became known for polystylism, his term for music that sets clashing historical styles against one another. He wrote symphonies, string quartets, operas and a long series of concertos for the leading Soviet string players. A stroke in 1985 was the first of several. He moved to Hamburg in 1990 and died there.

ABOUT THE WORK

In the spring of 1985 Alfred Schnittke began a cello concerto for Natalia Gutman, on a commission from Munich, where the new Gasteig cultural centre was about to open. He had sketched a work in three movements when, in July, he suffered a severe stroke. He was fifty. He spent weeks in hospital and came close to death; when he recovered, with his health permanently damaged, he took the concerto up again

38 minutes

where he had left it. It was finished the following year and first played in Munich on 7 May 1986 by Gutman, its dedicatee, with the Munich Philharmonic under Eri Klas.

The piece that came out of the illness was not the piece he had planned. The third movement, intended as a broad finale, turned out short, and a fourth movement was added after it: a long, slow song for the cello that Schnittke had not foreseen and that now gives the whole concerto its meaning. It is hard to hear the work without that story, and there is no need to try.

Schnittke was by then one of the best known Soviet composers of the generation after Shostakovich, famous for what he called polystylism, music that set Baroque gestures, tangos, hymns and modernist noise side by side. This concerto belongs to a later, plainer manner. It is a drama for one voice against many, lasting close to forty minutes, with an orchestra that includes piano, celesta, harpsichord and a large percussion section.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The concerto opens with the cello alone, heavily (the marking is *Pesante*), turning over a short questioning figure. The orchestra enters like an echo of the soloist's line and slowly grows independent of it. This is the pattern for the first movement: the cello leads, the orchestra follows, swells, and at the peaks of its great waves simply drowns the soloist. A cadenza builds to a climax in which the opening question returns as a shout, and the movement breaks off.

The second movement, a *Largo*, looks for a way out through stillness. The orchestra offers chorale-like themes and the cello, in its most vulnerable voice, joins one of them before climbing to the top of its range. The third is fast and sounds at first like a finale: a sharp-edged march and a whirl of dance figures with a grotesque tinge that recalls Shostakovich. It does not last. The chorale from the slow movement crashes in at the height of the noise and the soloist is swept away.

Then the cello begins again, quietly, feeling its way towards a melody. This last *Largo* is the true finale. The tune is simple and hymn-like, and it climbs by steps, repeated and reinforced as more and more of the orchestra joins. The score calls for the cello to be amplified, which lets the line carry over the full en-

semble. Whether the ending is a triumph or something more hard-won and exhausted is left open, and good performances keep it open.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

45 minutes

"L'Oiseau de feu" (The Firebird), Ballet Music (complete)

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his "neoclassical" period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Firebird was the first score Stravinsky wrote for Sergei Diaghilev, and the one that made him famous. Diaghilev wanted a new ballet on Russian fairy-tale subjects for the 1910 Paris season of his Ballets Russes. His first choice of composer was Anatoly Lyadov; when that came to nothing he turned to a 27-year-old pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov whose short orchestral pieces he had heard in St Petersburg. Stravinsky wrote the music over the winter of 1909 to 1910, working closely with the choreographer Michel Fokine. The first performance, at the Paris Opéra on 25 June 1910, was conducted by Gabriel Pierné, with Tamara Karsavina as the Firebird and Fokine himself as Prince Ivan. It was an immediate success.

The scenario stitches together several Russian tales. Prince Ivan strays into the enchanted garden of the sorcerer Kashchei the Deathless and catches the Firebird, who buys her freedom with a magic feather. He meets a group of captive princesses and falls in love with one of them. Captured by Kashchei's monstrous retinue, he summons the Firebird, who forces the whole court into a frenzied dance and

then lulls it to sleep. Ivan destroys the egg that holds Kashchei's soul; the spell breaks, the petrified knights return to life, and the ballet ends with a wedding.

Most concerts offer one of the suites Stravinsky later made, usually the one of 1919, which lasts about twenty minutes. This performance is of the complete ballet as it was danced in 1910, roughly twice as long, with the very large original orchestra. It includes the connecting scenes and pantomimes that the suites leave out, and they contain some of the score's most inventive pages.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Stravinsky took from Rimsky-Korsakov a simple way of telling two worlds apart. The human characters, Ivan and the princesses, have music built on plain scales and folk melody. The supernatural ones, Kashchei and the Firebird, have slithering chromatic harmony based on interlocking thirds. The opening, low in the basses and cellos, is Kashchei's garden at night. When the Firebird appears the orchestra breaks into glittering fragments: flutes, harps, celesta, string harmonics.

The princesses' round dance (Khorovod) is built on a Russian folk-song and brings the first sustained melody of the evening, on the oboe. The Infernal Dance is the showpiece: a syncopated, stamping theme hurled between sections of the orchestra, the clearest sign of the composer who would write *The Rite of Spring* three years later. The Berceuse that follows gives a drooping tune to the bassoon over muted strings and harp.

The ending is the famous part. Out of near silence a solo horn plays another folk melody, quietly. It is passed to the strings, then the full orchestra, and finally transformed into a pealing hymn in an uneven seven-beat metre with the brass in full cry. In the complete ballet that apotheosis arrives after three quarters of an hour of preparation, and it lands accordingly.

Tonight's artists

David Cohen *cello*

The soloist comes from inside the orchestra: David Cohen is the LSO's Principal Cello, and this concert is one of the season's showcases for its own principals. Schnittke's concerto is seldom programmed, and the orchestra's season announcement singles it out as a rarity. Gianandrea Nosedà, the LSO's Principal Guest Conductor, pairs it with the complete Firebird in the second of his two Barbican programmes this month, a single concert on Sunday 16 May 2027.

David Cohen is Principal Cello of the London Symphony Orchestra, a post he took up in 2022. He made his solo debut with the Belgian National Orchestra at the age of nine and studied at the Yehudi Menuhin School and then at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama with Oleg Kogan, winning the Guildhall's Gold Medal. In 2001 he became Principal Cello of the Philharmonia Orchestra, the youngest principal in its history, and held the post until 2009. He teaches at the Conservatoire Royal in Mons and at Trinity Laban in London, founded the chamber music festival Les Sons Intensifs in Lessines, and plays a cello by Domenico Montagnana of about 1735.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Igor Stravinsky**

Jonathan Cross, Reaktion Books 2015

A short, sharp life of Stravinsky that puts The Firebird in its place: the last ballet of the Russian nineteenth century and the first step towards Petrushka and The Rite.

ACCESSIBLE **Alfred Schnittke**

Alexander Ivashkin, Phaidon Press 1996

A life of Schnittke in Phaidon's 20th-Century Composers series, and the place to start for the composer of the cello concerto on this programme.

DEEPER **Stravinsky: A Creative Spring**

Stephen Walsh, University of California Press 2002

Walsh's first volume gives the fullest account in English of the commission, the collaboration with Fokine and the St Petersburg training that the score both uses and outgrows.

SOURCES

1. Schnittke and Stravinsky: Gianandrea Noseda and David Cohen, 16 May 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/schnittke-and-stravinsky-16-may-27/>
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. Schnittke: Cello Concerto No. 1 (booklet for BIS-507), BIS Records. https://eclassic-al.textalk.se/shop/17115/art87/4443287-84dcba-BIS-507_booklet.pdf
4. Alfred Schnittke: Concerto n° 1 pour violoncelle et orchestre (1985-1986), IRCAM. <https://brahms.ircam.fr/work/concerto-n-1>
5. Schnittke: Cello Concerto No. 1 (Matt Haimovitz, MDR Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra, Dennis Russell Davies), Pentatone. <https://www.pentatonemusic.com/?p=37897>
6. Alfred Schnittke, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Schnittke
7. Alfred Schnittke, Boosey & Hawkes. <https://www.boosey.com/composer/Alfred+Schnittke>
8. The Firebird, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Firebird
9. Igor Stravinsky: L'Oiseau de feu (programme notes), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/igor-stravinsky-loiseau-de-feu-the-firebird-ballet-music/>
10. David Cohen, Principal Cello, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/bio/david-cohen/>
11. David Cohen appointed principal cello of LSO, The Strad. <https://www.thestrاد.com/news/david-cohen-appointed-principal-cello-of-lso/14067.article>
12. David Cohen (cello), Owen White Management. <https://www.owenwhitemanagement.com/artist/david-cohencello/>
13. Igor Stravinsky, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781780234946>
14. Stravinsky: A Creative Spring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520227491>
15. Alfred Schnittke, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780714831695>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-05-16-noseda>

Version 1, 8 October 2026